

What are European elections for?

Executive Summary

Stuart Wilks-Heeg and Andrew Blick

A democratic paradox?

British voters have rarely shown much enthusiasm for European elections. In the first five sets of European elections, held from 1979-1999, turnout in the UK was firmly at the bottom of the European Union (EU) league table. In autumn 2008, 79 per cent of British citizens polled by Eurostat said that they would be unlikely to vote this time around.

Since the Eurostat research was carried out, UK domestic political debate has shifted quite radically in light of the accusations of British MPs abusing the system of parliamentary expenses. The potential implications of these events for the outcome of the June 2009 elections have been widely debated, including the possibility that smaller parties could gain significantly from any loss of support for the main three UK political parties.

This course of events points to a possible democratic paradox. If the UK's current domestic politics prompts greater than usual voter interest in the 2009 European elections, the potential message being sent from UK voters to EU decision-makers could prove highly misleading at best. This report therefore poses a simple question: 'what are European elections for?'

The democratic deficit

In seeking to answer this question, the report highlights the continued existence of a democratic deficit in the EU, despite the progressive strengthening of the European Parliament's role in relation to other EU institutions. It suggests that this deficit shows signs of widening as a result of the disjuncture between European and domestic politics, because:

- The issues on which European political parties, sitting MEPs and candidates are seeking a mandate are rarely those which dominate media and public discussion of the elections within the UK;
- Low turnouts and low levels of interest in the European elections in the UK serve to further disconnect British voters from the MEPs who represent them in the European Parliament.

Small parties may gain

Since the introduction of proportional representation (PR) for European elections in the UK in 1999, overall levels of support for the largest two parties have been squeezed. Smaller parties have gained seats, and have proliferated on ballot papers. In 2009, many UK voters will be offered a choice of up to 15 parties, as well as independents.

With voters possibly considering wider voting options than at previous European elections, the report examines the possible electoral outcomes based on five alternative scenarios of changes in voting share in the English regions. These are *hypothetical scenarios*, almost all of which assume that voters could defect from the main parties in large numbers and that support for UKIP may fall compared to 2004. *Should these assumptions apply*, these projections indicate that:

- Among the small parties standing, UKIP, the Green Party and the British National Party (BNP) have a realistic chance of winning seats in the European Parliament;
- Under three of the five different scenarios for which we have projected outcomes, the Greens would gain up to four additional MEPs, and retain their two existing seats;
- Under four of the five different scenarios, the BNP would gain at least one seat in the European Parliament. Under one scenario, there would be BNP candidates returned in up to five separate English regions.

The prospects for the BNP

The possibility of the BNP securing its first seats in the European Parliament has been the most dominant issue in UK media coverage of the elections. In light of these discussions, the report suggests that:

- While the BNP have a sufficient base in 5 or even 6 regions to make a realistic challenge for seats, their core clusters of support dissect the English regional boundaries on which the European constituency boundaries are based;
- As with other small parties, levels of support for the BNP are likely to be underestimated by recent opinion polls;
- Estimated regional thresholds which the BNP will need to reach to secure an MEP do not sufficiently account for the possible collapse of support for larger parties;
- Regional variations in the impact of the recession on manufacturing employment could be the crucial factor in determining levels of support for the BNP.

Small parties in Europe

The report also summarises the financial resources available to MEPs and considers the possible options for small UK parties seeking to cooperate with other 'sister' parties across the EU. Smaller parties which are in a position to join forces with broadly similar political parties elected in other EU member states and establish an official political group in the European Parliament can leverage further resources and potentially make an important impact in the Parliament.



Democratic Audit
Eleanor Rathbone Building
Bedford Street South
Liverpool
L69 7ZA

<http://www.democraticaudit.com>