

Euro Elections Results Night 2009

Make Votes Count Talking Points and Briefing:

Here are some of the many questions / myths that may need to be challenged:

1) The voting process was complicated and difficult for voters to understand

No. For voters across England, Scotland and Wales it was actually very straightforward. Voters simply had to vote for the party they preferred – put an X in the column next to that party's name. That's it, job done! Their vote was then added together with everyone's across your region to elect the MEPs, working down from the top of a list of candidates from each party. The more people who voted for a party, the more of its candidates in that region were likely to be elected. Thanks to the proportional system used, every vote counted and could really make a difference to the result.

The Government's own review of voting systems (published 2008) stated that "we do not find, on balance, any evidence to suggest that voters find one voting system easier or more confusing than another voting system."

2) Ballot paper problems are the fault of the PR system

There have been some complaints, especially from UKIP, about the way the European ballot papers were folded and then left in that folded state when handed to voters. They claim this has led to people not seeing the whole of the ballot, especially those parties and candidates at the bottom of the list.

Whatever the problems, these were issues to do with electoral administration and the initial instructions given by the returning officers of each Council or region. These instructions were later clarified in a message sent by the Electoral Commission mid-way through Thursday. There are plenty of examples of good practice, where councils got it right, from the start. In South Derbyshire, for example, there was a decision not to order pre-folded ballot papers and that ensure that the area avoided any concerns at all.

Bad ballot paper design & electoral administration problems can affect any electoral system.

3) All the extra candidates & parties standing in a PR system causes problems

There were some complaints about the length of the European Parliamentary ballot paper and the number of candidates standing. In 2004, with the same voting system, there were very few reported problems; apart from even then a few jokes about the length of the ballot paper.

In most regions, there are only one or two more parties / independent candidates standing than last time. This should make no discernible difference.

In only a couple - London and the South West - has there been a significant rise in parties standing: up 9 in both regions. If there was to be any increase in spoilt ballot papers this time, you would expect it to be most apparent in those two regions, if at all.

Voters are often used to coping with long ballot papers, especially at parliamentary by-elections. At last year's Haltemprice and Howden by-election, there were 26 candidates for the electorate to choose from. They seemed to manage it fine.

4) PR lets in extremists, but FPTP doesn't

Answer (i) with respect to Thursday's county council results:

BNP won 3 county council election seats in Thursday's elections, under a First-Past-the-Post system.

- BNP gained a seat in Lancashire (Padiham and Burnley West), on 30.7 per cent of the vote.
- BNP gained a seat in Hertfordshire (South Oxhey, a council estate ward near Watford) on 29.2 per cent of the vote.
- BNP secured a seat on Leicestershire county council (Coalville ward) based on a paltry 27.7 per cent of the vote.

The truth is systems don't elect candidates; it is the actions of parties and voters who do.

The actions of voters in Padiham and Burnley West has led to the election of a BNP candidate to represent them on Lancashire county council. Well, actually it was the actions of 30.7% of people who voted which did. The BNP only won 30.7% of the vote, but that was enough for them to get the sole county councillor elected for that area. Labour got 25.4%, LibDems 24.6%, Conservative 19.3%.

I wonder how the over 2/3 of people who voted for a party other than the BNP feel now they are being represented at a county council level solely by a BNP member? One of the weaknesses of the current FPTP system is that it is very difficult to avoid the vote-splitting that has gone on in this ward, allowing a candidate (the BNP guy) to win who I suspect is opposed by the vast majority of other voters.

The BNP gained 20% of votes across the 6 seats in the Burnley area. We need to ask what is it that has made 20% of voters across the whole of Burnley cast their ballot for an extremist party? Part of the reason that the BNP seems to have done well is that for too long voters in those areas have felt that mainstream political parties weren't listening to them or putting policies in place that would benefit them. This has created the political space for the BNP to come in and exploit the disaffection. The main parties need more incentive year-in-year-out to campaign and speak to more areas, not just the few marginals they are targeting at general or local election time.

Answer (ii) – more general response:

Proportional systems reflect the strength of voter feeling: if enough people vote for a particular party, that party gains some representation. This applies to small parties with democratic values and something to contribute, such as the Greens, but also to extreme parties if they get sufficient support.

Representation; not power. While obnoxious parties can get represented under PR, it is virtually impossible for them to gain control; even in March 1933 the Nazi party did not obtain an overall majority in the German Reichstag.

Voters in Barking and Dagenham, Epping Forest and Stoke-on-Trent are already keenly aware of how the BNP has got a monopoly of power in some wards, despite only 30% of the vote – such is the way the current First-Past-the-Post system for council elections works. Who can residents there turn to if they do not want any dealing with the party?

Voting for extremist parties is often a sign not so much of massive popular support for their values as an indicator that voters want to make a protest against the political system. Designing a system (like FPTP) to make sure that these votes are wasted is only likely to increase cynicism about politics

Getting represented is often a step to the political defeat of extreme parties, as the inadequacy of their politicians and policies is exposed - and once the threat has been seen off the electorate are more wary of parties that offer easy answers in future.

Not all forms of PR are equally susceptible to electing splinter and extreme parties. Most have some sort of threshold to stop tiny parties winning. Where voters rank candidates in order of preference, people can choose to use their lower preferences to help other democratic candidates defeat anti-democratic or extremist candidates.

5) The closed list system gives power to the parties, not the people

There are many different types of PR systems: all with the advantage of making votes count, but each with other particular pluses and minuses. Different systems best fit different situations and elected bodies, depending on what criteria are most important.

No electoral reformer would wish to see the closed list system in place for electing MPs.

Like Cameron we recognise the need to rebuild a strong link between constituents and their MP. But, unlike him, we favour giving voters more choice over candidates. Alternative Vote Plus (the system which was drawn up with public involvement by the Jenkins Commission and is favoured by Alan Johnson) and the Single Transferable Vote do exactly that.

There are some valid criticisms of the closed list system for electing MEPs; especially that you can only vote for the party, not for individuals on the list. You can't as a voter rank the party's candidates in the order you'd prefer. Due to the way the parties organize their lists, sitting MEPs are at the top of the lists and have an advantage over the other candidates from their party – making it much more difficult to kick out incumbents. The lack of much coverage or media profile of MEPs means that name recognition is often low, but this may be made worse at election time by voting for a closed list - with the party promoting its own brand above the identity of any one candidate.

However, the system used for electing MEPs has some major plus points:

- it is simple and quick for the voter to cast their ballot;
- a more diverse set of views and parties gain representation;
- seats won reasonably reflect votes cast;
- there are opportunities for a better gender balance of successful candidates.
- a positive of the large region sizes is that voters will likely have at least one MEP of a party they sympathise with to go to if they have a European-related issue to raise.
- Both during the election and throughout the lifetime of the 5 year Parliament, there are a team of candidates / MEPs which have a diversity of appeal and policy interests and can play to their strengths.

Plus: the system meant the push by extremist parties for an MEP can be opposed by voters throughout each region – so not just those places where there has been lots of recent BNP activity, but also areas with diverse populations or communities with long anti-racist traditions. Students and areas with large ethnic minority populations were given the opportunity to campaign and vote in their own areas, and make that difference, rather than having to always travel to the BNP hotspots.

6) The closed list system was imposed by the EU

Contrary to some reports, the EU never imposed this system on us. All EU countries had to adopt some form of proportional representation for electing MEPs in 1999. But the exact system was left to the individual country to decide. So we had a choice. Recommendations were made to Jack Straw, the Cabinet Minister in charge of the decision. He chose to ignore those recommendations for a more open system that would give voters more choice over candidates and remove some of the party control. Instead he chose the closed list system that we have today. So blame Jack Straw, not Europe or PR advocates. We would like to improve on the system of election of MEPs in the future, to give greater voter choice.

Vote for a Change / PR Referendum Campaign:

The expenses row has exposed the weakness of a system that guarantees MPs in safe seats a life tenure, almost regardless of what they do. Even with new faces that a general election brings, the same lack of accountability, except in the most exceptional circumstances, will continue.

Make Votes Count is backing calls for a referendum on the voting system, to take place on the same day as the next general election. The referendum would be held then as it stops any accusations that it's an attempt to fix the result.

Our message is simple and strong: real change, not just new faces. An end to safe seats and seeming jobs for life for some MPs. Remove the power that MPs have to decide how they are elected ... and give that to the voters instead. Bring in greater accountability for those who represent us; and greater choice at the ballot box in the first place.

The election day referendum would give voters the chance to register their feelings at the ballot box twice: once to get rid of a tainted MP; and once to get rid of a rotten system and change things for good. This is about giving power back to the man and woman on the street; taking that decision away from the party machines who favour the status quo.

For more info see www.makemyvotecount.org.uk or www.voteforachange.co.uk

Malcolm Clark (m) 07733322148 / (t) 020 7928 2076

The Make Votes Count blog www.makemyvotecount.org.uk/blog and twitter feed @makevotescount will be updated through the evening / night with analysis and comment on the Euro results.