

Europe's Parliament for Europe's People

The European Parliament is the first directly elected international parliament in history. It forms the first chamber of the legislature of the European Union and holds to account the European Commission, which is the executive arm of EU. The second chamber of the EU's legislature is the Council of Ministers, which represents the governments of the 27 states.

The European Parliament is made up of 751 Members elected from national or regional constituencies in the EU's 27 states. Every EU citizen can vote in the elections to the Parliament, which take place every five years. The next election will be in 2014.

Thanks to the Treaty of Lisbon (2009), the powers of the European Parliament have increased dramatically. The European Union as a whole has emerged much stronger, and now has the competence it needs to tackle the financial and economic crisis, to build a reliable system of security and justice across Europe, and to develop for the future credible common foreign, security and defence policies.

The European Parliament is now proposing to reform its own electoral procedure and to make other changes, all designed to enhance its popular legitimacy.

Parliament's rapporteur or draftsman of the reform package is Andrew Duff, a British Liberal Democrat MEP. Here he answers the most common questions about his proposals.

What's the main change?

In 2014 an extra 25 MEPs will be elected for one pan-European constituency. Lists of 25 candidates will be drawn up by each of the European political parties. The lists will be balanced by gender, and the candidates must come from at least one third of EU states.

What are 'European political parties'?

The European political parties are federations of national political parties enjoying political affinity. The main European political parties, which have existed for some years, are as follows:

European People's Party

European Socialist Party

European Liberal Democrat and Reform Party

Green Party

United European Left

Why have I never heard of these European parties?

Because they have not had to select candidates for the European Parliament or to order them on a transnational list, and, absurdly, because they have not been allowed to campaign for votes and seats. Their 'common programmes' have been almost entirely ignored during the European Parliamentary election campaigns.

So this is big news for these European political parties?

Yes. The introduction of transnational lists will turn these EU parties into real campaigning organisations. Their candidates will be seeking support and recruiting members even in those states where they lack national political affiliates – such as the Liberals in Poland or Portugal and the Christian Democrats in the UK. The fact that their electoral manifestos will be pitched against each other will raise the European dimension of the election. In the past there have been 27 different national elections to the European Parliament: this time the electorate will be offered clearer choices between the policies and values of the European political parties on matters where MEPs really make the difference – such as the programme of the next Commission, the size and shape of the EU budget, the future enlargement of the EU, and so on.

Won't national political parties be miffed?

Possibly. But if we're serious about making a success of post-national parliamentary democracy, Europe's political class has to move with the times. So far national politicians have been rather bad at connecting the citizen with the EU. In fact, there is a growing divide between EU and national politics which can be bridged by the development of European political parties as the essential democratic sinew connecting the electorate with the impressive power now wielded by the EU institutions.

Who will run the transnational election?

A new electoral authority will have to be created at EU level. Its job will be to oversee the election in the pan-EU constituency. New rules will be needed to ensure that the European political parties conduct themselves internally in a democratic and transparent manner, and that they account for all campaign expenditure.

Why 25?

For entirely practical reasons. Lists of 25 candidates can be printed legibly on one sheet of paper. No new office blocks will have to be built in either Brussels or Strasbourg to accommodate another 25 MEPs. And the installation of 25 MEPs based on the patronage of the EU-level political parties will be enough to transform the character of the election campaign and to galvanise those parties.

How will it be for the voter?

When the voter enters the polling station he or she will be offered two ballot papers, the first for the national or regional constituency as is the case at the moment, and the second for the EU wide constituency. National rules will continue to govern the national element of the election. For the transnational element, voters will be able to choose between voting for a party list en bloc as ordered on the ballot paper and voting for an individual candidate on one of the party lists. If enough people vote for one individual as against another, the lucky candidate will move up the rank and have more chance to be elected.

And the counting?

The counting of votes for the transnational lists will be done by the local or regional authorities as is the case at the moment, and the results reported to the EU electoral authority. Seats will be apportioned between the parties according to a very proportional system known as Sainte-Laguë. Seats won will reflect the votes cast in the ballot box – so if the Greens get 12 per cent of the popular vote, for example, they will win 3 extra MEPs.

Who will be these transnational candidates?

It will be up to the European political parties to find, vet, select and order their candidates. As long as their lists are balanced by gender and composed of at least nine nationalities, they will be registered by the electoral authority. I would guess that most of the 25 will be leading European politicians, but some will no doubt be celebrities from other walks of life.

Won't small countries be disadvantaged?

The purpose of the reform is to break the monopoly of the states and the national political parties over the composition of the European Parliament. States are represented by their government ministers in the Council who are themselves answerable to national parliaments. MEPs represent citizens not states. It's perfectly clear that under the new scheme voters will be faced with the option of voting for a candidate of another nationality. But what's wrong with that? That's the essence of post-national Europe. That's the case for voters from big states just as it is for those from small states. The idea that all 25 of these new MEPs will be German is nonsense. Already the President of the Commission is a Portuguese, the President of the European Council is a Belgian and the President of the Parliament is a Pole. Has the roof fallen in?

But there'll be two classes of MEP, then, one superior to the other?

No. The European Parliament is a great leveller: already MEPs who are former prime ministers have to rub along with colleagues from diverse backgrounds. All MEPs have the same duties and privileges – and the same salary. Members of the German Bundestag are elected according to two different electoral procedures but once they get to Berlin, everyone's the same. Of course one can expect these transnational MEPs to be top class parliamentarians: it's even possible that the next President of the Commission will be found from among their number.

Will turnout improve?

That's the hope. Certainly the media will be more engaged in reporting the elections as a European event. The competing transnational lists will more faithfully reflect the vitality of the European party politics which exists within the Parliament itself.

What are the chances of this reform happening?

Parliament has the right to initiate a change in its electoral procedure and in its future composition. The main political groups in the Parliament are backing the reforms. After a vote in plenary, the proposals will be sent to the European Council. An amendment to one clause in the Treaty on European Union is required (Article 14(2)), as well as secondary legislation to get the new system up and running in good time for 2014.

Does that mean a Convention?

That depends entirely on Parliament. The change proposed is certainly radical so it needs to be debated widely. But it is also quite straightforward, and could be done quite quickly *if the political will is there*.

But everyone has to agree on the reforms?

Yes. Treaty change needs unanimity (Article 48 TEU); so does a change to the composition of the House (Article 14 TEU); as does the introduction of a uniform electoral procedure (Article 223 TFEU). National parliaments have the right to ratify all these changes. And in all these cases, the European Parliament has the power not only to initiate the changes but also to give its consent to the final decisions.

What the Treaty on European Union says ...

Article 9

In all its activities, the Union shall observe the principle of the equality of its citizens. ... Every national of a Member State shall be a citizen of the Union. Citizenship of the Union shall be additional to national citizenship and shall not replace it.

Article 10

The functioning of the Union shall be founded on representative democracy. Citizens are directly represented at Union level in the European Parliament. ... Every citizen shall have the right to participate in the democratic life of the Union. ... Political parties at European level contribute to forming European political awareness and to expressing the will of citizens of the Union.

Article 14

The European Parliament shall be composed of representatives of the Union's citizens. ... The members of the European Parliament shall be elected for a term of five years by direct universal suffrage in a free and secret ballot.

Other parts of the reform package

- Bringing the date of the election forward from June to May to allow more time for the new Parliament to prepare for the election of the President of the European Commission in July: the earlier date would also avoid the start of the summer holidays in the North;
- Requesting the Commission to come forward with new proposals to make it easier for EU citizens living in an EU state other than their own to participate in the European elections;
- Amending the Protocol on Privileges and Immunities (1965) to give Parliament more autonomy in verifying the credentials of its Members and in protecting their rights;
- Agreeing on a mathematical formula for the redistribution of the existing 751 seats between states in accordance with the principle of degressive proportionality.

About Andrew Duff ...

ANDREW DUFF has been the Liberal Democrat Member of the European Parliament for the East of England since 1999. He is spokesman on constitutional affairs for the ALDE Group. He is President of the Union of European Federalists and a member of the Spinelli Group.



Andrew ran the Liberal caucuses in the Conventions which drafted the Charter of Fundamental Rights and the constitutional treaty, and represented the European Parliament in the drafting of the Lisbon treaty.



Electoral Reform of the European Parliament



FOR MORE INFORMATION

The draft Report of the Parliament can be found at www.andrewduff.eu

For a longer description of the proposals see Andrew Duff's pamphlet, *Post-National Democracy and the Reform of the European Parliament*, Notre Europe, 2010 (EN & FR) at www.notre-europe.eu



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Your Questions Answered