

European Parliament elections – lessons learned

**Mr. Michal Meduna
Administrator**

European Commission, Directorate-General Justice and Home Affairs

There are two basic reasons why the European Union is active in electoral matters. First, it is a requirement that even those Union citizens who move to another Member State should be given a set of electoral rights in order to enhance their integration. Secondly, the European Parliament is the only one of the European institutions elected directly by the citizens of the EU Member States. The European Commission is not an electoral body, however it works together with the competent authorities of the Member States in electoral matters. The reason for it is that, during the elections to the European Parliament, the Commission's competence is limited to observe compliance with framework legislation as the electoral management is carried out by the member States according to the national legislation.

The European parliament is the biggest multinational parliament of the world. It is composed of 732 deputies representing 455 million citizens (about 350 million eligible voters) in 25 Member States. The first election to the Parliament was in 1979 and now we are in the sixth legislative term (for five years). The European Parliament was established with an aim to bring the Union closer to the citizens and succeeded in that. Its powers have significantly increased over the time:

- Participation in legislative procedure
- Control over the EU budget
- Approves and/or rejects the proposals of the European Commission
- A range of consultative powers.

The main principles of the elections to the European Parliament are the same in all the Member States as follows:

- Direct and universal national suffrage to a supranational body
- Free elections and secret voting
- Proportional representation
- Voting for national and/or regional lists
- Equality of voters (e.g. women and men).

The elections are not conducted by the European union itself but they are arranged by the Member States which also decide on detailed electoral procedures. For example the lists of candidates are composed on regional basis in the United Kingdom, France, Italy, Poland, and Belgium. Voters give their polls for national lists in Austria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Denmark, Luxembourg, and Spain. In Germany there is a mixed basis. In most Member States the participation in the voting process depends on the free will of the voters. However, in some countries – like Belgium, Greece or Luxembourg – voting is compulsory.

Despite the common principles there are significant differences among the election systems of the Member States:

- Member States are free to choose a fixed list, a preferential list or a single transferable vote system and/or a threshold for obtaining a seat. (The threshold should have not exceeded 5% of the votes cast at national level).
- Elections are not carried out at the same time but within a period of time (in 2004 from 10 June to 13 June).
- A vast diversity is among the Member States in the number of votes required to obtain a seat (ranging from 70.000 in Luxembourg to 830.000 in Germany.)

The reason for this diversity is that the Act on the EP elections (adopted in 1996 and amended in 2002) lays down only the basic principles and rules of these elections and the detailed regulations are adopted by the Member States. There is one more EU directive (93/109 EC Directive) that provides for equal access of Community voters residing in another Member State to the right to vote and to stand as a candidate.

It is worth mentioning that elections turnout is generally decreasing:

- 1979: 63%
- 1984: 61%
- 1989: 58,5%
- 1994: 56,8%
- 1999: 49,8%
- 2004: 45,7%

It is a great challenge to find reasons for this tendency and increase the participation of voters in the elections. There are other problems and challenges to be solved in the future elections. One of them is the date of the publication of results. The Act on the elections provides that Member States may not officially make public the results of their count until after the close of polling in the Member State as early publication could influence voting patterns in the Member States. However, as elections are held in different days the results published in a Member State may influence the voters of those States where elections are held later.

Another problem is the uniform application of the suffrage right. As there is no uniform Community definition of a person entitled to vote, Member States have adopted diverse policies ranging from the United Kingdom (where there is suffrage for certain categories of non-Union citizens and hold outside the Union territory) to the Baltic countries where “non-citizens” (those who live in these countries but have no full citizen’s right) do not have the suffrage.

The alliances of political parties in the European Parliament arise a problem as well. The national parties are not obliged to announce before the elections which political fraction in the Parliament they would align. For this restriction voters cannot make an informed choice.

Until recently, the remuneration of the representatives was up to each Member State. For this reason there was a tenfold difference between the least and the best paid members of the European Parliament. New rules were adopted in 2005 in order to cease this disproportion.

The regulations on voter's registration need modification. The possibility of Union citizens to vote either in the state of origin or in the state of residence makes it difficult to eliminate potential double voting. That is also a problem that sufficient information is not available for all Union citizens residing in another Member State.