

European Elections

22 May 2014

Resource for Churches

On 22 May 2014, voters in the United Kingdom will be going to the polls for the European Parliament elections.

European Parliament elections have often attracted a low turnout of voters in the UK. Only a third of voters participated in the 2009 European elections, compared to two thirds who voted in the 2010 General Election.

Opinion may be divided about the benefits of being a part of the European Union (EU), but our daily lives are affected by the decisions taken there and Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) are key to this process. Yet 95% of the British public cannot name a single MEP representing their area and few understand how the European Parliament functions. For many people the European Union is distant and complex.

This briefing outlines some of the issues for the election, why it is important to us, and what we can do.

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Prayer

God of Justice, you have given us the chance to vote.

Help us to reflect and use our votes wisely to tackle injustice where we see it,
And to pray for countries where people do not have the opportunity to vote.

God of Love, you tell us to love our neighbours as ourselves.
Help us to participate in elections in ways which demonstrate our love for our neighbour
And to wrestle with what the Common Good means for us today.

God of Transformation, you have called some people to put themselves forward as candidates.

Help them as we debate their ideas for a better world
And support them as they experience the strain and privilege of election.

We ask these things in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ

Amen

Why should we care about the European elections?

As Christians, we are called to live and work for a better society. There are many ways to achieve this including voting in elections. Jesus said, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind' and 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself' (Matthew 22:37-39). For a Christian, being in a right relationship with God leads to right relationships with others (that is our 'neighbour'), based on love.

Living in a democracy as disciples of Jesus, we are called to discern whether there are policies that better accord with the love that God wishes us to share in our communities, and to decide how to vote on that basis. Naturally, this briefing does not support a particular party programme. Whilst no political programme can be equated with the coming kingdom of God, Christians are called to engage with the political process and parties' manifestos to seek justice, transformation and love of our neighbour.

As we vote in European elections, it is valuable to remember the people of various nations and denominations in Europe who lived and died so that we might enjoy the rights and responsibilities of democracy.

There are also specific reasons for Christians to care about voting in the coming European elections.

- The combination of proportional representation and low turn-outs at elections increases the potential for extremist and racist political parties to have their candidates elected.
- The current structure of the EU reflects its founders' concern to cement a lasting peace between countries that had almost destroyed each other through two World Wars. For this reason, values which are important to Christians such as international co-operation, human rights and peaceful resolution of conflict were central to the original concept of the EU.
- Some contemporary issues which Christians are most concerned about can only be addressed effectively across national borders, for example, the environment and climate change; international crime, drug and people trafficking; some issues around peacemaking. The EU is also a crucial player in the provision of food aid to alleviate drought and famine.

This briefing shows the important ways in which the European Parliament affects all our lives. European laws affect things such as energy security, immigration and justice.

MEPs have an important job to do in shaping the laws of the society we live in and it is important to remember that these elections are for people to represent us in the European Parliament and not an opinion poll on the EU, or a warm up for the next General Election.

What are the issues?

There are a number of key issues that MEPs may grapple with during their five year term. You may want to consider these issues as you find out more about the different political parties are saying or if you are contacting candidates and current MEPs.

The EU and Human Rights

The EU plays a strong role in promoting a culture of human rights, particularly in former communist countries and further afield. The Charter of Fundamental Rights, working alongside the European Parliament's Human Rights sub-committee, covers a wide range of areas, from gender equality and the rights of children to workers' rights and education, and it helps to further human rights and give a voice to those whose rights are infringed around the world. Last year the EU adopted new guidelines on protecting freedom of religion and belief, and continues to promote equality for all.

There has been controversy over how much influence Europe should have over the UK's ability to legislate, especially in the area of human rights. Some are unhappy that decisions made by British courts can be overturned by the European Court of Human Rights, an issue highlighted by recent cases regarding votes for prisoners and deportation of immigrants and 'foreign criminals'. There are calls for the UK to withdraw from the European Convention on Human Rights and establish a 'British Bill of Rights'. While the European Court of Human Rights and the European Convention of Human rights are not part of the EU institutions, they are often lumped together when people talk about 'Europe'.

Personal Reflections

What would be the positive and negative implications of the UK withdrawing from the European Convention on Human Rights and introducing a 'British Bill of Rights'?

Questions for Candidates

How much influence do you think the EU should have over human rights law in member states?

Do you think the EU has enriched or weakened our understanding of human rights and justice in the UK?

Migration

With very limited exceptions all people in the EU have the right to live and work in any other EU member state. Around 2.2 million UK citizens live in other parts of the EU and 2.3 million EU citizens live in the UK. The movement of people throughout the EU comes with both opportunities and challenges. It is, however, important to note that the much talked about problems of 'benefit tourism' or 'health tourism' has never been supported by serious evidence – and both UK Government and EU studies have found no reason to believe that this is a problem.

What are the duties of an MEP?

While MEPs are sometimes portrayed in the media as underemployed and unreachable, they are expected to be fully accountable and available to their nations and constituencies.

Although most of their work requires them to be in Brussels, European Parliamentary business incorporates time for MEPs to return to their native countries to meet politicians, colleagues and their constituents. They are also governed by a code of conduct to prevent financial misconduct and conflict of interest.

Who can vote?

Citizens of EU member states (not Channel Islands or Isle of Man) aged 18+ on 22 May 2014

To get a vote, register with your local authority. If you've not yet done this, fill in the form at www.aboutmyvote.co.uk or ring your local electoral registration office.

Register by 6 May 2014.

You can also apply for a postal or proxy vote if required.

How do the elections work?

We will be voting for who we want to be our MEPs. In total, the UK elects 73 MEPs across 12 regions. Each region has between 3 and 10 MEPs. Once elected, MEPs serve for five years.

Unlike other UK elections, you vote for a party and not an individual. Each party ranks their candidates in the order they would like them to be elected, in what is known as a 'closed list'. On polling day, you get a single vote, which you cast for your party of choice and the seats are divided up in proportion to the number of votes cast for each party.

One drawback of the closed list system is that, in voting for a party rather than particular candidates, it is harder for voters to be able to question particular candidates and impossible to show your preference for a particular candidate within a list.



Because EU migrants tend to be younger and healthier than average, they contribute more in tax than they take out in benefits and services. The effects of EU migration on unemployment and wages are contested but most studies suggest the overall effects are small. An important concern is not around economics but identity. Some feel that their country is changing around them – as evidenced by people they see running shops, employed in local businesses or attending schools – and believe that that our country is losing its essential 'Britishness'.

Personal Reflections

What do you believe migration has done for the UK? Does it have a positive or negative impact?

Questions for Candidates

How will you challenge half truths and popular beliefs about immigration so that the debate can focus on the real questions?

EU: in or out?

Much of the debate around the European elections will focus on Britain's role in Europe and specifically whether we should remain in the EU or not. MEPs have no direct role in determining this but an MEP's views on the extent to which rules should be determined at a national rather than an EU level are important.

Britain's main political parties have endorsed broadly 'pro-Europe' options, though there are those within each party who oppose the EU. The increasing popularity of the UK Independence Party (UKIP), which promotes Britain's exit from the EU, has led to increasing discussion of an in/out referendum. The Conservatives have promised to 'negotiate a new settlement for Britain in Europe and then hold an in-out referendum to let the British public decide' by 2017. Labour has said there is an 'overwhelming economic case' for EU membership, but they 'would guarantee an in-out referendum if the UK was being asked to transfer more powers to Brussels'. The Liberal Democrats say they would back a referendum 'to approve any further significant transfer of powers from London to Brussels'. UKIP would hold an immediate referendum as to whether the UK would remain in the EU.

Personal Reflections

What is your experience of how the EU affects UK voters?

Which aspects of the EU benefit the UK, and which are less helpful?

How can you find out more?

Questions for Candidates

What has the UK gained through membership of the EU? And what are the disadvantages? Where does your party think the balance lies?

Financial Crisis

The effects of the 2008 international banking crisis continue to reverberate around Europe. The Eurozone, with a shared currency but made up of countries in very different economic circumstances, has had great difficulties mounting an effective response to the crisis. Poorer Eurozone nations are experiencing problems with debt, austerity and unemployment and the social problems that flow from them. The UK has been protected from some of these effects through not being a part of the Eurozone, although the consequences of the crisis affect still affect us.

The Eurozone financial crisis matters to the UK partly because we are affected by the economic climate of our major trading partners, but also because our concern for others should not end at our borders. We are witnessing extreme unemployment and poverty in nearby countries. This is a humanitarian issue; it can also impact on immigration and the rise of politically extreme parties across Europe. We should not underestimate the rise of political extremism at the present time, nor the seriousness of its potential to threaten the peace and stability of Europe.

Personal Reflections

How do you think the Eurozone crisis is affecting EU member states? What role do you think the UK should play in helping other members of the EU who have been more seriously affected by this crisis?

Questions for Candidates

What, if anything, do you think the UK should be doing to help tackle the Eurozone financial crisis? What contributions can the EU make to tackle the rise of racism and political extremism?

Climate Change

Sadly, the inevitable backdrop to discussions of EU environmental policy is the threat of catastrophic climate change and the challenge of effective international cooperation to meet this threat.

The UK has been a significant force in shaping the EU's international and domestic climate policy over the last two decades. The UK's Climate Change Act (which was supported by churches and campaign agencies) stipulates carbon targets and five-year carbon budgets to reduce emissions. It provides an example for other EU states to follow.

The EU European Trading Scheme (ETS) imposes a cost on the emission of Carbon Dioxide in Europe. But the cost of permits crashed to a record low last year and is currently around £6 per tonne. This has led the present Government introduced a UK Carbon Floor Price. This requires the UK producers to pay more for carbon emission that their counterparts elsewhere in Europe. Not surprisingly there is resistance in the UK to a measure that would



Proportional representation

Proportional representation makes it more likely that smaller parties will gain seats than the 'first past the post' system used in UK General Elections. In many respects this makes for a more democratic and inclusive process and reflects voters' wishes more truly than 'first past the post'. Small parties have the potential to drive a focus on important issues which would otherwise be neglected, and demonstrate the accountability and transparency of the EU.

However, in combination with the low turnout typical of European elections, this means a relatively small number of votes can make a difference. For example, in the 2009 European elections, the last seat in the North West region was won with just 8% of the vote. This can increase the likelihood of racist and extreme political parties getting elected.

Other Resources

European Parliament UK Information Office

The website of the European Parliament Information Office in the UK website contains information about the European Parliament and the 2014 elections

www.europarl.org.uk

European Parliament Elections

The European Parliament's own website has further information on the coming elections and on European political parties

www.elections2014.eu

Conference of European Churches (CEC)

CEC represents 125 member Churches including all the mainstream denominations in Europe. CEC has produced a website with further information and materials to help Christians reflect and engage

www.ecumenicalvoices2014.eu

Christian Aid

Christian Aid has produced a briefing explaining how policies made in the EU plays affect the poor, not just policy focusing on poverty, but also tax and climate change

www.christianaid.org.uk/Images/European-elections-briefing-February-2014.pdf



place UK at a disadvantage to the rest of Europe.

Yet we need to take seriously the requirement to adopt overall carbon targets that were in line with the action that climate scientists suggest is required. The European institutions are currently in the process of negotiating an overall 2030 target (a reduction of 40% is being talked about) and a renewable energy target. Our government is arguing for a more ambitious overall reduction target of 50% by 2030 but is resisting any target for increased investment in renewable energy.

Personal Reflections

Climate change does not stop at any nation's borders and is a classic example of a global problem that needs international cooperation. What do you think your representatives in Europe should be doing?

Questions for Candidates

What action will you take in the European Parliament to ensure that Europe lives up to its pledge to take the necessary action to tackle climate change?

How can the EU ensure that renewable energy becomes a greater part of the fuel mix across the Europe?

Tax Justice

The European Parliament has been influential on a number of developments relating to tax justice. For instance, it has legislated for increased transparency in the way many companies present their accounts, so that it is clear what profits are earned and where. It has taken a strong position calling for public registers of the real owners of companies and organisations, which makes it harder to hide money and dodge tax. Throughout all of this the European Parliament has made the connection between tax and development – that developing country governments need access to information about profits made by businesses investing in their countries so they know if they're receiving the tax they should be getting.

Tax is an international issue where MEP's are able to take a leadership role. Specifically, they can encourage EU national governments to put in place effective public registers of company ownership. More generally they can highlight broader principles of public disclosure so that citizens and governments can see the role companies are playing in our societies. Finally, they are well placed to be a strong voice connecting the struggles for tax justice in both the EU and developing countries.

Personal Reflections

What is your attitude to tax – a contribution to the common good or burden best avoided? Should companies view tax as a social contribution or a cost that should be minimized?

Questions for Candidates

Will you commit to supporting greater transparency in the accounts and ownership of multinational companies to ensure all governments can receive the tax they are owed?

How do the European Parliament and European Union work?

The European Union can have a direct influence over our lives, but power is shared in a range of ways with national governments.

Areas in which the EU has sole power

The running of the EU's Customs Union; Establishing competition rules needed for the EU single market to work; Eurozone monetary policy; Conservation of resources under the Common Fisheries Policy; Common Commercial Policy; Agreeing international agreements relating to the EU.

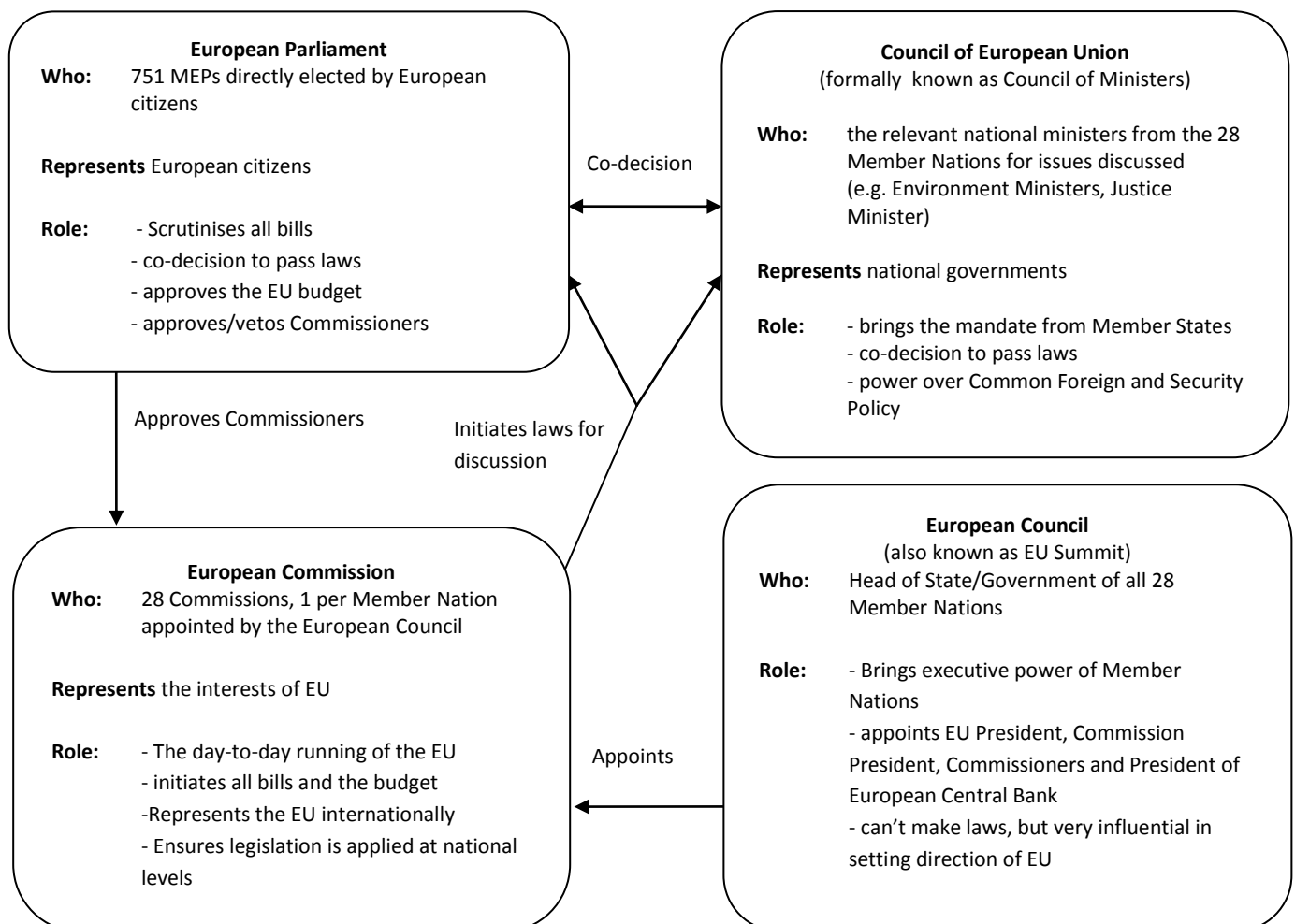
Areas shared by EU & national governments

The single market; Social policy; Economic, Social and territorial cohesion; Agriculture and fisheries (except conservation of fishing resources); Environment, Consumer protection; Transport; Trans-European networks; Energy; Areas of freedom, security and justice; development cooperation and humanitarian aid.

For anything not covered by these areas,

the EU has no authority to legislate, and all power rests with the individual member nations.

There are a number of institutions involved in shaping EU legislation. The European Parliament is the only one that is directly elected by European citizens.



What can I do?

Pray

- Use the prayer on page 2 in the run up to the election
- Pray for your candidates, perhaps by name, in worship, recognising the pressure that elections put on individuals and families
- Pray for the political parties, that they will be guided by a desire to work for the common good of God's kingdom
- Pray for voters that we will use our votes wisely and with discernment
- Pray for all those involved in organising the elections and ensuring integrity

Read the Party Manifestoes and Contact the Parties in your Region

Manifestos are usually available a few weeks before the election

www.conservatives.com

www.greenparty.org.uk

www.labour.org.uk

www.libdems.org.uk

www.plaidcymru.org

www.snp.org

www.ukip.org

You will be able to find out about your candidates through the parties.

If you need to know which region you are in visit

www.aboutmyvote.co.uk/

Organise a Hustings Event

Traditionally at election time, churches have been involved in organising hustings – public meetings where candidates answer questions from voters. These can help people to make a more informed decision on how to use their vote. Hustings are rarer for European than general but if you are interested in running a hustings event in your area, check out our top tips.

Plan - These events work best when done ecumenically, try and get as many churches involved as possible.

Inviting Candidates - The regional list system can make hustings a bit trickier. Ask parties to provide one candidate or spokesperson. Find out which parties/independents are standing by contacting your Regional Returning Officer.

Who to invite - You don't have to invite everyone, if there are lots of parties standing you may need to limit those coming to the bigger parties. For more information see the Electoral Commission website at <http://goo.gl/GMb4G3>

Find a Chair – find a firm, impartial and respected person to chair the meeting.

Find a Venue - Make sure you have a venue big enough and that it is accessible for those with disabilities. Do you need stewards to welcome people and provide refreshments?

Get the word out - Advertise it the event as widely as possible. Use posters in community spaces, church websites and social media if possible. Send a press release to the local newspaper and radio station.

On the day - Decide a structure for the debate ahead of time, and be aware of timings. Remember you may have a number of candidates, so even two minutes speeches can add up.

Any questions? - Decide how you are going to handle questions from the public. Do you want to take them in writing before the meeting starts, or just from the floor during the meeting? It's always useful to have some people primed incase people are slow to engage.

Further Info - You can find more info on the JPIT website, or from the Electoral Commission.

And, of course, don't forget to vote!