



**European Parties Elections  
and Referendums Network**

**2004 EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTION BRIEFING NO 14  
THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTION  
IN THE UNITED KINGDOM  
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**Key points:**

- The 2004 European Parliament elections played the role of an electoral barometer at the time of the mid-term of the Labour government and it was clear that the party suffered from the unpopularity of its leader with a drop in electoral support for the party gaining 22.6 per cent.
- The most spectacular feature of the EP elections was the success of the UK Independence Party which stands for withdrawal of the UK from the EU and which secured 16.2 per cent of the vote and 12 MEPs.
- The EP elections provided the first electoral test for the new leader (Michael Howard) of the Conservative Party but the party, although gaining the highest share of the vote (26.7 per cent), did not gain as much as it hoped and saw its vote fall the most of any party since the last EP elections (down 9.1 per cent).
- The results across the UK can be disaggregated into six different, and differently sized regions (Southern England, Northern England, London, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland) which all have distinct patterns of party competition and this is evidence of an increasing regionalisation of UK party politics.
- Turnout was the highest ever for the UK in EP elections (at 38.4 per cent of the electorate) and this may be partially due to multiple elections being held on the same day and to the introduction of postal voting in a number of regions.

**The Context**

The context in which the European Parliamentary elections took place in the UK was one of Labour dominance at the national level. Labour won a second general election in 2001 and therefore the EP elections took place at a time that is effectively the mid-term merging into the run up to the next general election (which must take place before June 2006). The year had been, however, a difficult one for the Blair

government mainly due to the fall-out from British participation in the Iraq and the fall-out over the handling of the related issue of weapons of mass destruction which had led to the death of a government scientist. It is clear that the popularity of Prime Minister Blair lay below that of his government. His personal poll ratings have become extremely low with one poll in June 2004 giving him 30 percent satisfaction rating while 61 per cent were dissatisfied.

In general terms, the New Labour government has moved the party towards the centre of the political spectrum but its move towards a less Eurosceptic position than that of its predecessor Conservative administration has been less pro-European than many expected. Labour supported, in principle, entry into the Euro but argued that it should only take place when four tests were met that demonstrated that it was conducive for national interests. The Blair administration has clearly a more Europhilic orientation but there is the strong sense that it has drawn back from making more of the European issue. The domestic arena is far more attractive as a proposition for Labour as the economy is in better shape than it has been for decades, and in foreign policy, the recent Iraq war has demonstrated a stronger transatlantic than 'European' orientation.

The Conservative Party, as the main party of opposition at the Westminster level had installed a new leader, Michael Howard, in November 2003 in an attempt to stem the long-term electoral malaise. The party had been through two leaders (William Hague and Ian Duncan Smith) since they had last been in office and was looking for leadership to both bring the party together and to bring voters back into their fold. The issue of 'Europe' has been at the heart of Conservative divisions since the downfall of Thatcher and has never been far from the broader agenda of Conservative Party politics although Howard is benefiting from the quelling of the some of the discord by his predecessors.

This means that in general the EP elections were an important electoral barometer of a (relatively) popular government with an unpopular Prime Minister but with an official opposition that has been unable to fully make itself a viable party of government at Westminster.

The two European issues that feature as part of the context for the EP elections were the Constitutional Treaty and the enlargement of the EU. Their appearance in British politics were very different. After the failure of the Brussels summit in December 2003 to find agreement on the Constitutional Treaty, there was a sense that this was a 'win' for the UK as the potentially divisive issue of the Constitution had been deferred and the culprit (for once) was not the UK. However, by the time of the EP election campaign it had become clear that, due to the efforts of the Irish Presidency, agreement on some sort of Constitutional Treaty was likely to take place in the wake of the elections. This meant that for Eurosceptics in the Conservative Party and in UK Independence Party, the Constitutional Treaty was a useful issue for focusing attention on the European issue. It featured regularly in the media and in politics as an issue.

The enlargement of the EU in May 2004 had been greeted in the UK by a discussion of the possibility of a substantial increase in immigration from the new member states of Eastern and central Europe. The issue was framed in very much domestic terms with a discussion of the economic effects of any 'wave' of immigration. What was

notable was perhaps the absence of a real sense of the change incurred by the enlargement to include another ten states and particularly the symbolic value of bringing in the eight post-communist states from central and Eastern Europe. It had hardly been noted as an issue in either the media or in general politics.

The UK is relatively unusual in Europe with regard to how the issue of European integration plays in domestic politics. There are four features that make this case. Firstly it is unusual to have one of the major parties as a Eurosceptical one. Usually it is parties at the periphery of their party systems that express soft or hard Euroscepticism and so the Conservatives are an unusual case. Secondly, public opinion in the UK is consistently the (or among the) most Eurosceptical of all member states. Thirdly, a significant section of the 'broadsheet' and 'tabloid' newspaper sectors are avowedly Eurosceptic. Fourthly, and largely as a product of the previous two features, the politics of Europe is a significant part of the elite political discourse and it has played a significant role in the downfall of one major party leader (Margaret Thatcher) and is a perennial issue in inter-party conflict.

It is important to differentiate between dominance at Westminster and political dominance in the UK generally. One of the programmes of the New Labour administration has been to introduce devolution, in differing degrees, to Scotland, Wales and to London. And there are plans to have referendums in parts of England with an eye to English regional devolution. The result of this has been to highlight or increase the tendency for an increasing regionalisation of party competition in the UK. Northern Ireland has always had a distinct party system that shares little in common with the British party system but increasingly British party politics has become increasingly heterogeneous. Competition for the majority between Labour and Conservative may be the perennial feature of Westminster politics but this is not characteristic of much party competition in the UK at other levels.

Two technical aspects of the EP election need to be considered. The first is that in Great Britain a d'Hondt quota electoral system of PR is used whereby seats are distributed in proportion to votes and this is in contrast to the simple member plurality system used for national elections. Northern Ireland uses Single Transferable Vote to elect its three MEPs. The other consideration is that, following the enlargement and the changing size of the EP, the UK was electing a smaller number of MEPs - 75 down from the previous 84.

### **The Political Parties and the Campaign**

The unofficial kick-off of the campaign was best marked by Tony Blair unexpectedly announcing that a referendum would be held to ratify the European constitutional treaty which he decided on April 22nd. This had the effect of undermining the Conservative's campaign which had focused on the Blair's unwillingness to hold such a referendum but it also committed the Prime Minister to a referendum on a European issue which looks at best difficult to win. It also marked a change of tack for the PM, as his argument had previously been that a referendum was unnecessary, as the treaty did not fundamentally have implications for the balance of power between the EU and member states.

The Labour Party campaign was portrayed as largely a negative campaign with Tony Blair being noticeably absent from the four TV party broadcasts and with the

emphasis on knocking the Conservative Party's leader Michael Howard in his first electoral test as leader of the party. The nature of Labour campaign literature was rather defensive of the participation of the UK in the EU seeing the need to emphasise existing benefits rather than stressing future directions. The stress was very much on the advantages of a strong defence of national interests at the European level. Emphasis was on the economic advantages of integration with 'jobs and growth' at the centre of this and on the need for international co-operation in the globalised economic sphere. Moving into the traditionally Conservative areas, Labour drew out the need for European integration as a means to address "cross-border crime and illegal immigration". The Conservatives were portrayed as the Eurosceptic bogeymen with an emphasis on the negative aspects of the previous period of Conservative government with Howard's role therein highlighted. The Constitutional Treaty was defended as a means of countering the 'fear that the EU is too bureaucratic and often meddles in areas best left to nation states'. The final message of the manifesto was 'Britain is working. Don't let the Tories wreck it again'. This encapsulates the economic emphasis, the attack on the Tories and the relative absence of the European dimension in the Labour campaign.

Europe has been a fundamentally problematic issue for the Conservatives and it is clear that the EP campaign suffered from three major problems for the party. The first issue was the campaign had to bridge range of opinions from 'hard' Euroscepticism, through soft policy-oriented Euroscepticism through pro-European positions. This meant that the campaign was as interesting for what was not said as for what was made explicit. The second problem facing the party was that it was clear that a centrepiece of their campaign was to be the call for a referendum on the Constitutional Treaty which the labour government initially opposed but this strategy was undermined when Blair rather unexpectedly changed position and called for a referendum. The third problem was the challenge from UKIP for the hard Eurosceptical vote that the Tories have recently colonised.

In the event the Conservative campaign placed a great emphasis on the need to reduce the red tape coming out of the EU with a campaign against 'fraud and waste'. They emphasised their sceptical position on the EU and used the phrase that 'We don't want to be party of a country called Europe' but never called for withdrawal. Their opposition to the Constitutional Treaty played a central part in their manifesto occurring as a leitmotif throughout the document. The manifesto highlighted the issue of the problems with the common fishing and agricultural policies and the need for strong national control in foreign affairs and defence policy.

The Liberal Democrats, the most consistently Europhilic of the main parties, made their opposition to the war in Iraq the main issue and their leader, Charles Kennedy, linked this to the European issue by emphasising how Blair's support of the US had the effect of an 'increasing isolation' in Europe. Their manifesto emphasized Liberal Democrat achievements at the European level by their existing and prospective MEPs and generally is much positive in its portrayal of the European integration process. The EU is defended as the best means of ensuring economic prosperity but also for its ability to promote justice, security and peace. In some ways the Liberal Democrat approach fits more squarely with other 'new politics'/green agendas with much attention given to the environment, internationalism, peace in Europe and the need to build a 'greener Europe'.

The three parties of Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democrats constitute the mainstream of British politics. The periphery of the party system as far as the EP elections are concerned is made up of five main forces: UKIP in Great Britain, the nationalists in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, and the extreme right in the shape of the British National Party in Great Britain, the Greens across the UK and the anti-war Respect party in Britain.

UKIP was formed in 1993 and in the 1999 EP elections had secured 3 MEPs. UKIP benefited from the involvement of Robert Kilroy-Silk who became the public face of the party, although he was not the leader. Kilroy Silk was an MP in the Labour Party before leaving Westminster to host a daytime TV talk show for 17 years. He was sacked from his show in January 2004 after one of his newspaper contributions described Arabs as "suicide bombers, limb-amputators, women repressors." The party campaigned on saying no to a series of things: EU membership, the EU constitution, 'unlimited EU immigration', to the Euro and the party stresses the fraud and corruption of the EU. Leaving the EU, the party would favour a free trade agreement with the EU. The party is therefore best understood as a right-wing populist hard Eurosceptic force. It was clear that Kilroy's presence invigorated the UKIP campaign and served as a powerful media story.

At the other end of the ideological spectrum as the Greens in the UK who have never had the success of many of their sister parties in other parts of Europe, although the 1989 European elections provided an electoral high-water mark with 15 per cent of the vote. The campaign focused on Green voting as a means of expressing dissatisfaction with the New Labour government. Issues that had little to do with the European Parliament such as Iraq, top-up fees in University education and public transport failures were cited as reasons to express a sense of betrayal by New Labour in voting Green.

The anti-Labour position of the Green was also articulated in a new force Respect: The Unity Coalition which explicitly cast the EP election as a 'referendum on Blair'. The party was led by ex-Labour MP George Galloway who was expelled from the party in 2003 for his outspokenness on the issue of the Iraq war. The party continued with Galloway's anti-war and anti-Blair themes and was heavily critical of the liberal aspects of European integration rejecting a 'Europe of cuts and deregulation'. Unlike the right-wing populism of UKIP, Respect articulated a left-wing populist (soft) Euroscepticism which combined internationalism, third world solidarity and an anti corporate power stance with the promotion of justice and which ended up rejecting the EU constitutional treaty as undemocratic and negotiated by elites.

In Wales Plaid Cymru took a pro-European position and stresses the value of European integration for agriculture, the environment and for linguistic diversity. It also placed an emphasis on the economic benefits of regional aid and the need for international co-operation. The Scottish National party took a slightly different approach emphasizing that independence would bring to Scotland all the benefits of being a member state in the EU without the costs of being represented as part of the UK. They argued that 'Scotland's problem is not Europe – it is our lack of voice in Europe'. While broadly supportive of Europe, the SNP made great play of its

opposition to the common fisheries policy which it sees as damaging Scottish fishing interests.

The British National Party is an extreme right party that places its hostility to immigration at the centre of its appeal. In the campaign the party combined this with a hard Eurosceptic position where it advocated withdrawal from the EU for reasons of securing British independence in order to restore trading links with Australia Canada and New Zealand. There had been some attention on the BNP in the media and questions about how it would fare in the EP elections with some speculation that it might secure a seat.

As the campaign came to a close the issue of postal voting, which had been introduced as an experiment in four regions (East Midlands, North East, North West and Yorkshire & the Humber) itself became an issue. This became an issue when there were stories about the failures of the system to provide ballot papers in these cases and there was a concerted effort to make sure 4 million missing ballot papers were delivered by the 1st June. But in general the campaign was not high profile and, in the main, tended to be dominated by domestic political competition.

### **The Results and Analysis**

The ‘winners’ from the elections in terms of vote and seat share were the Conservatives with 26.7 per cent of the vote and 27 MEPs. This was however still a 9.5 per cent fall on their vote share in the 1999 elections. It was also short of their own target of retaining 36 seats (in a reduced UK number). The issue for the Conservatives was not so much the European issue as the election as their first test of the new leadership (Michael Howard) and the ability to capitalise on the governing Labour Party’s problems mainly due to the Iraq intervention.

**Table 1: Results of the June 2004 UK election to the European Parliament**

<b>Party</b>	<b>Vote Share</b>	<b>Number of MEPs</b>	<b>Vote Share in 1999</b>	<b>Vote change</b>	<b>Number of MEPs in 1999</b>
<i>Conservative</i>	26.7	27	35.8	-9.1	36
<i>Labour</i>	22.6	19	28.0	-5.4	29
<i>UKIP</i>	16.2	12	7.0	+9.2	3
<i>Liberal Democrat</i>	14.9	12	12.7	+2.2	10
<i>Green</i>	6.2	2	6.3	-0.1	2
<i>SNP</i>	1.4	2	2.7	-1.3	2
<i>Plaid Cymru</i>	1.0	1	1.9	-0.9	2
<i>BNP</i>	4.9	0	1.1	+3.8	0
<i>Respect</i>	1.5	0	na	na	
<i>Others</i>	4.6	0			
<i>Turnout</i>	38.4	75			

The governing Labour party dropped its vote share to 22.6 per cent (from 28.0 per cent at the last election) and secured 19 MEPs. In many ways this was not the disaster that many had expected. The unpopularity of Tony Blair and the government’s intervention in Iraq had not brought about the collapse that might have been

fundamentally problematic for the party. Labour treated the result as a case mid-term blues – only to be expected but not an indicator of future Labour electoral fortunes.

Eating into the Conservative vote was clearly the support for UKIP which gained 16.1 per cent nationally of the vote and was the third largest party in terms of vote share. The party had a regional basis in Southern England and came second in four of the Southern regions (East of England, East Midlands, South East and South West) and had the largest vote share in the East Midlands where it had 26.1 per cent. The only place in Southern England where it did not fare well was London.

UKIP came out as the ‘winners’ for the UK media. Given the rather negative and expected ‘news’ of Labour and Conservative results, the media focused much attention on the 12 new UKIP MPs. It also helped to have such a media-savvy MEP as Kilroy-Silk. Asked what he was going to do in the EP Kilroy-Silk said “Wreck it - expose it for the waste, the corruption and the way it's eroding our independence and our sovereignty.” But he denied that he wanted to replace the leader Robert Knapman as leader. There was also the clear equation made that the UKIP success had largely been at the expense of the Conservative Party.

Looking at the results in terms of the parties’ stance on Europe, we can identify three groupings – those parties that are pro-European (Labour, Liberal Democratic, Plaid Cymru and SNP), those parties that are soft Eurosceptic (Conservative, Greens, Respect) and those parties that favour withdrawal and therefore are hard Eurosceptic (UKIP and BNP). Aggregating their vote is not a particularly accurate guide to the nature of the electorate and their stance on Europe because voting behaviour is mediated through many other factors and in many cases party voting may have very little or nothing to do with a party’s stance on Europe. But we can still note that the hard Eurosceptic vote is 19.1 per cent so that we can say that almost one in five voters were not put averse to a wholesale anti-EU message. Another way to look at this is to consider that this share of the vote does constitute the protest potential of the hard Eurosceptic vote given that we can regard both UKIP and the BNP and (perhaps different forms of) protest parties.

The best way to understand the trends in the UK’s EP election result is actually to disaggregate the result by regions. Doing this it is clear that there are effectively six different patterns of competition in the UK and it becomes useful to think of the UK as six different party systems based on a regionalisation. This is partly more visible in EP elections because of the larger constituencies but it is also indicative of a larger trend in UK party and electoral politics that belies that standard characterisation of the UK as a two-party system. The six regions are the South and Midlands of England (excluding London), Northern England, London, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Table 2 below compares the regions across some dimensions.

Northern England (including Yorkshire & Humber, North West and North East constituencies) is characterised by Labour dominance with the Conservatives in second place followed by the Liberal Democrats. It is notable that UKIP in these constituencies comes fourth and scores an average of 12.8 per cent but that this is the region where the far right BNP gains its highest vote share with nearly 7 per cent of the vote. Burnley is one of the strongholds of the BNP and here the party gained 16.7 per cent of the vote, its strongest showing across the UK.





**Table 2: Six Regional Patterns of Party Competition in 2004 EP Election Results**

	Party with largest vote share	Party with second largest vote share	UKIP vote	BNP vote	Liberal Democrat vote	Green Vote	SNP/PC	Percentage of UK Electorate
<i><b>Southern England</b></i>	Conservative (30.3)	UKIP* (Labour vote 17.8)	21.1	4.3	14.8	6.3	na	48.7
<i><b>Northern England</b></i>	Labour (29.3)	Conservative (22.5)	12.8	6.9	16.8	5.6	na	24.8
<i><b>London</b></i>	Conservative (26.8)	Labour (24.8)	12.3	4.0	15.3	8.4	na	11.6
<i><b>Scotland</b></i>	Labour (26.4)	SNP (Conservative vote 17.8)	6.7	1.7	13.1	6.8	19.7	8.8
<i><b>Wales</b></i>	Labour (32.5)	Conservative (19.4)	10.5	3.0	10.5	3.6	17.4	5.1
<i><b>N. Ireland**</b></i>	DUP (32.0)	Sinn Fein (26.3)	na	na	na	0.9	na	2.5
<i><b>TOTAL</b></i>	<i>Conservative (26.7)</i>	<i>Labour (22.6)</i>	<i>16.1</i>	<i>4.9</i>	<i>14.9</i>	<i>6.3</i>		

\*With the exception of the West Midlands where Labour came second

\*\*Percentages are First Preferences.

In contrast Southern England is the area that includes the constituencies of South East and South West England, East of England as well as the East and West Midlands but excluding London, is characterised by Conservative dominance with the greatest competition coming from UKIP rather than from Labour. This area is also the heartland of the support for UKIP with a vote share of 21.1 which is above the national level of 16.1 per cent and Labour performs poorly here with 17.8 per cent against its national vote share of 22.6. It is also worth noting that the district in which UKIP performed best was Boston where it gained 37.6 per cent of the vote. Here the issue of illegal immigration had been a big issue where fruit and flower pickers from Eastern Europe were perceived to have undercut local jobs. This demonstrates why the UKIP message of anti-immigration meshes with their hard Euroscepticism among their core constituencies.

London stands as a distinct area with a close two-party race between Labour and Conservatives with the Tories coming out ahead. It is evident that Labour's vote is far more robust in the capital than in the surrounding region of Southern England with 24.8 per cent of the vote. It is also the region where the Greens perform best with 8.4 per cent of the vote, although the single best district performance is in Brighton &

Hove, home of EPERN, and part of the South East of England constituency where the Greens have a strong and successful local presence.

Scotland is marked by two party competition between Labour and the Scottish National Party with Labour dominating. In Wales, although the nationalist party Plaid Cymru came third with 17.4 per cent, the competition is effectively one of Labour dominance with competition between Plaid Cymru and the Conservatives for second place with the Conservative out-performing the nationalists in the EP elections.

Northern Ireland effectively constitutes an entirely separate case from the rest of the UK. It used a different electoral system (single transferable vote) and has, for historical reasons, an entirely different party system with competition being between Unionists seeking to maintain the relationship with Britain and the nationalists seeking an Irish future for the province. The major UK parties do not compete and the three seats were divided between the two Unionist parties, the Ulster Unionist Party and the Democratic Unionist Party and the republican Sinn Fein which gained its first EP representation.

Dividing the UK into the six regions exposes the fact that no single party dominates the UK and that it is in fact a series of different party systems with great variation between them. Different parties dominate different regions and some smaller parties perform very differently in different regions. The only really consistently performing party in Great Britain is the Liberal Democratic party which appear to have less regional variation than the other major or minor parties. What needs to be considered is that the size of these regions (in terms of population share) varies considerably. Almost half of the UK's electorate (nearly 22m) lives in the Southern region of England. London constitutes a region larger than Scotland and larger than Wales and Northern Ireland combined. In an EU where the smallest member states such as Malta, Cyprus and Luxembourg are significantly smaller than any of the regions in the UK, it is important to treat member states as national entities when they are truly national in trends.

## **Turnout**

The elections saw the highest ever turnout in the UK EP elections with a national figure of 38.4 per cent. This represented an increase of 14.4 on the 24.0 per cent turnout in the 1999 elections that had the UK as the lowest of all member states. (Turnout in 1999 was unusually low as the average UK turnout in all six EP elections is 35.7 per cent.) Much of the growth in turnout was ascribed to the fact that many areas had multiple elections on the same day with the local elections taking place at the same time. Another factor was the use of postal voting which was explicitly designed to increase turnout. It is noteworthy that the areas that had postal voting had an average turnout of 41.9 per cent whereas the other regions had an average of 38.4 per cent and that eight of the ten of the highest district level turnout figures were where there was all-postal voting. The district with the highest turnout was Gibraltar with 56.6 per cent turnout and where the issue of the Gibraltar's relationship with the UK is a key one for voters.

## **Conclusion and Future Prospects**

The 2004 EP election results will have little impact on British politics in general. The reason is that the results only confirmed what was already known and with one

exception (UKIP) provided little of note or comfort for the major forces of British politics. They confirmed that Labour is suffering from a mid-term electoral malaise and that the Prime Minister is no longer the electoral asset that he was. For the Conservatives, they confirmed that the party has a long way to go to really challenge the Labour Party even with their new leader. Although they gained the largest vote share, they should have (and did) expect to do far better out of the misfortunes of the Labour government. The Liberal Democrats marginally improved on their performance and made a constituent showing across Great Britain but face the paradox that as a third force they would, under the UK's electoral system for Westminster, be more advantaged with regional concentration.

The most spectacular feature was clearly the success of UKIP. The party benefited from the clear tendency for UK EP election results to give prominence to protest party voting (as seen in the 1989 Green success) but whether this translates into national success is a far more open question. The party now faces three important challenges. With its increased cohort of MEPs, the party now needs to publicly juggle its opposition to the EU with its participation in it. It also will be expected to translate its European level results into domestic success and so will face the more difficult task (given the Westminster voting system) of translating votes into seats in the House of Commons. And thirdly the party will be forced to expand its agenda. Competing at the national level will demand of it a wider range of policies and issue positions than it has previously had to generate.

As far as Europe is concerned, the EP elections confirmed that the abstract issue of European integration and the concomitant issue of national sovereignty is a resonant issue for many voters but they also confirmed that these issues are rarely the motivation for voting intentions with EP elections being seen by voters as a useful stick to beat incumbents with and an arena to award the protest forces of politics.

*This is the latest in a series of election and referendum briefings produced by the European Parties Elections and Referendums Network (EPERN). Based in the Sussex European Institute, EPERN is an international network of scholars that was originally established as the Opposing Europe Research Network (OERN) in June 2000 to chart the divisions over Europe that exist within party systems. In August 2003 it was re-launched as EPERN to reflect a widening of its objectives to consider the broader impact of the European issue on the domestic politics of EU member and candidate states. The Network retains an independent stance on the issues under consideration. For more information and copies of all our publications visit our website at <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/1-4-2.html>.*