

## **The Nature of the European Union Electorate: Who Votes and Who Doesn't?**

Jon H. Pammett (Carleton University)

Lawrence Leduc (University of Toronto)

Utilizing a specially-weighted version of the 2009 European Election Study (PIREDEU), this paper examines the demographic and attitudinal characteristics of those who vote in the elections for the European Parliament. The main purpose is to investigate those who “include” and those who “exclude” themselves from this key avenue of participation.

### **Demographic Characteristics of the European Electorate**

There are a number of distinct patterns among the sociodemographic characteristics of the European parliament electorate. We note, in particular, patterns found among the age, education, social class and religious variables. As is true in many national elections, in Europe and elsewhere, younger people are significantly less likely to vote than are older age cohorts, and the underrepresentation of younger voters (18-35) in the 2009 European Parliament is substantial at just under six percent. But the age pattern is not found solely among the young. Older people (65+) are over represented in the EP electorate by just over six percent. The combination of missing younger voters and more engaged older ones produces an electorate that is much older than the population as a whole.

There is also a strong pattern that emerges with respect to subjective social class categories. Respondents who self identify as “middle class” are over represented among EP voters by just over five percent. Those who identify as “working class” are under represented by more than six. There is thus the potential for a strong class effect in European elections, to the extent that social class is related to party identification, issue preference, and other political variables. Reinforcing the subjective class relationship is education, where those in the highest quartile of education are more likely to turn out by almost six percent. There are patterns among certain occupational groups as well, but these tend to simply mirror the age and class variables already noted. Retired people are over represented to about the same extent as the over 65 age group more generally. Those in unskilled occupations and the unemployed participate in somewhat smaller numbers than do those in various other occupations. However, unionized workers are over represented in the electorate, no doubt reflecting the ability of unions to more effectively mobilize their members.

The other demographic pattern of interest relates to religion. Those affiliated with several of the larger religious denominations (e.g. Catholics, Protestants) are slightly over represented, while those with no religious preference are under represented. In addition, there is a basic tendency for those of strong religious feeling to turn out in the EP elections, regardless of which religion they espouse (they are 4.1% overrepresented). Those with no religion are underrepresented to an even greater extent (5.6%)

### **Attitudinal Characteristics of the European Electorate**

The paper continues to examine a number of attitudinal items, including feelings of partisan closeness, ideological self placement, feelings about the economy, and attitudes towards the European Union. Those who feel closer to a party (we are not concerned here about what party this is) are substantially more likely to turn out to vote in the EP elections as opposed to those who do not have any party to identify with. Those with an engaged partisanship are overrepresented in the elections by 9.2 %, while those lacking an identification are underrepresented by 10.5%. This is the strongest relationship with any variable, and shows that overtly political issues and personalities are directly involved in mobilizing the European electorate. It shows that the EP electoral arena is not issueless or lacking in substantial political content among those who decide to vote. The shortfall may come among those who do not translate these partisan factors into the EP electoral context.

While the ideological self placement variable does not display any clear pattern with respect to the potential strength of the left or right in European politics, it does indicate that those who place themselves firmly at the center of an 11 point scale are significantly under represented among EP voters. Those who place themselves at the most extreme ends of the scale however, both left and right, are slightly over represented, with a slight advantage accruing to the extreme right.

Very importantly, elections for the European Parliament tend to engage those who are favourable to the existence and continuation of the EU. Those who trust EU institutions are much more likely to vote than those who do not (they are overrepresented by 7.2% while those distrusting EU institutions are underrepresented by 7%). Similarly, those with positive views of enlargement were over represented among EP voters (by 3.6%) in contrast to those respondents who felt that enlargement was “a bad thing”. Those who professed to be “neutral” on the issue

were more substantially under represented. There is, however, only a weak relationship when it comes to further European unification. Those favouring greater integration in the future were slightly over represented, while those who felt that it had “gone too far” were very slightly under represented among voters. Voting in EP elections disproportionately takes place among those already committed to a united Europe.

A summary comparison of the combined electorate for European Parliament elections and for the combined national elections of the same 27 countries shows that the sociodemographic variables correlate only modestly with voting, but in many cases are higher with the EP electorate. Thus, the electorate for the EP is older, more educated, more stable in residence, more likely to have been native born, more religious and, particularly, higher in social class than those of the combined national electorates. We could characterize the EP electorate as a group of ‘solid citizens’, better off than the average and more likely to be attuned to the status quo.

Attitudinal measures reinforced the picture of the EP voter as an ‘establishment figure’. Voters in the EP elections are more likely to believe the economy has improved in the last year, and are particularly more likely to believe it will improve in the next 12 months. As with those who vote in national elections, the level of interest in politics is substantially higher. They are not as likely to be close to a party as those voting in national elections, but are still much more likely to be a partisan than nonvoters.

Finally, EP voters are distinguished by being substantially more European in orientation. This is true in a cultural sense, and also from a pragmatic point of view. EP voters are more likely to think of themselves as European; for most this feeling goes along with a national identification, to be sure, but it is noteworthy that most are willing to look beyond the national boundaries for determine part of their self-identification. Going along with that is a set of beliefs in the EU’s benefits to the country of residence, and an openness to further enlargement of the European community in future. Thus, despite the fact that the Parliament contains a representation of euroskeptics and right wingers who want to constrain the operations of the community, the bulk of the electorate wishes the EU well.