

Democracy for the sake of it? - part 2

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*Following the sterling defence of EU democracy [0] by Labour MEP Richard Corbett, **Paul Davies** (formerly of the Electoral Reform Society) takes a closer look at the role of the European Parliament, currently the EU's only democratic institution:*

As I mentioned in last week's introduction [0], on the whole we don't know a great deal about the European Parliament or the people that sit in it. We also have only a vague notion of how they got there in the first place.

What we do know, however, is that there are now 785 MEPs, selected from the 27 Member States of the enlarged European Union. MEPs in general have been around since 1979, elected by direct universal suffrage for five-year terms (before that they were appointed members of national parliaments). Seats are shared out in proportion to the population of each separate country, give or take. There are also minimum and maximum levels of MEPs allowed for any one State, these being five and 99 respectively.

That all sounds simple enough, so long as one doesn't stop to try to work out the overall cost of 785 rather liberal expense accounts. But step beyond the boring basics and it all starts to get a bit messy.

Each Member State is allowed to choose how it elects its MEPs, providing that they let everyone over 18 have a say and don't burn votes cast by women before they've been counted.

This has inevitably led to a variety of systems being used across the continent. Some countries went for the simple option of copying their neighbours, while others thought they'd be a bit more innovative and find new and exciting ways to confuse their electorates.

Most member countries send their chosen ones to the European Parliament on the basis of votes cast via some sort of list system. These range from the open to the open/semi-open to the semi-open to the completely closed and include regional lists, national lists and those with and

those without thresholds.

Britain has an appropriately arcane sort-of-list, sort-of-something-else system that ties in well with the British public's understanding of the process as a whole.

Ireland, Northern Ireland and Malta stand out from the crowd, as they use every psephologist's favourite system, STV.

What research that has been done tends to favour the idea that the more voter-orientated the system is, i.e. STV or more-open lists, the more likely voters are to engage with the whole idea of European Parliament elections. The data used to measure this are of course somewhat speculative and rather reliant on turnout figures, but it makes intuitive sense that a system like STV, which rewards candidates willing to go out and engage with their electorates, would result in more people turning up on election day.

To be continued...

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