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**Small Districts with Open Ballots:
A New Electoral System for the European
Parliament**

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Small Districts with Open Ballots:

A New Electoral System for the European Parliament

Sara Hagemann, Simon Hix

Abstract:

This note was presented by the authors for a workshop organised by the Committee on Constitutional Affairs on 25/26 March 2008. The authors propose a radical reform of the European electoral system in order to create more interest in European politics and the selection of political leaders at the European level. The new system should also increase the incentives for EU citizens to take part in European elections.

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1. Introduction

Despite high hopes in the 1970s, the experience has been that after six rounds of elections, European Parliament elections have patently failed to establish an ‘electoral connection’ between EU citizens and politics in the European Parliament in particular, and in the EU more generally (e.g. Hix and Marsh, 2007; Farrell and Scully, 2007).

There are two main aspects of this failure:

- 1) In almost all member states, citizens do not use European Parliament elections to voice their preferences over EU-level political alternatives, but rather to express their opinions on national parties, national politicians, and national policy issues; and
- 2) In most member states, citizens do not use European Parliament elections to reward or punish individual MEPs for their activities, involvement, policy positions or behaviour in the European Parliament.

The first aspect cannot be resolved by tinkering with the electoral systems for the European Parliament, as it relates to the incentives for national parties and politicians in European Parliament elections relative to the national electoral cycle. These incentives might be changed if the stakes in European Parliament elections were significantly higher than they are now, for example if the outcome of European elections had a more direct effect on the direction of the EU policy agenda. This could happen, for example, if European Parliament elections were linked to the election of the Commission President, the EU budget negotiations and/or other major EU decisions with an apparent and direct impact on the policy agenda.

Nevertheless, the second aspect can *definitely* be addressed by changing the way MEPs are elected. To understand how, we will first introduce some well-established discoveries from political science about how the design of an electoral system shapes the relationship between citizens and elected politicians. Then, we will illustrate how these discoveries apply directly to the experience of European Parliament elections.

The results suggest that MEPs should be elected in relatively small districts with ‘open’ ballots; where citizens can choose between individual politicians, either from different parties or from the same party, rather than just choosing between pre-ranked lists of politicians in a closed party contest. Where this design is already used in European Parliament elections, there is already a relatively good connection between citizens and MEPs as expressed by the higher involvement of citizens in these member states. This ‘best practice’ should become the general model in all member states.

2. Electoral Systems and Candidate Incentives

Research on candidates’ and citizens’ behaviour in electoral systems has discovered a strong and stable relationship between the size of a candidate’s district (the number of politicians who will be elected from a single district), the structure of the ballot used, and the incentives for a candidate to campaign directly to the citizens: to raise his or her name profile amongst

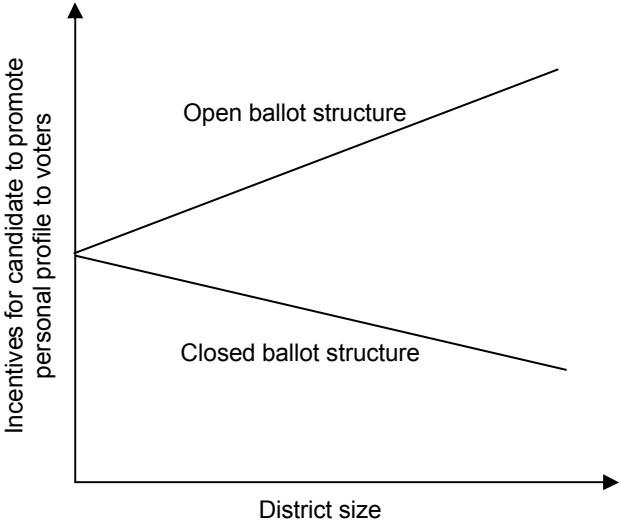
the citizens and to spend time and resources explaining why a citizen should vote for him or her as an individual politician as well as for his or her political party.

To explain further, there are three main types of election ballot structure:

- 1) A *closed* structure, where citizens choose between parties, or slates of candidates of parties, but cannot choose between individual candidates from the same party (such as ‘closed-list’ proportional representation (PR) or single-member-plurality);
- 2) An *ordered* structure, where parties presented pre-ordered lists of candidates, citizens can either choose to vote for a party or to vote for an individual candidate on a party list, but candidates need to receive a relatively high proportion of votes for the pre-ordered list of candidates to be changed (known as an ‘ordered-list’ or ‘semi-open-list’ PR); and
- 3) An *open* structure, where several candidates stand in each district for each party, citizens choose one (or more) candidates (rather than voting for a party), and the number of individual votes each candidate receives has a direct influence on which candidates are elected for each party (such as ‘open-list’ PR, or single-transferable vote (STV)).

The incentives for candidates to raise their personal profile amongst the electorate are then determined by the combination of district size and ballot structure, as Figure 1 illustrates.

Figure 1. District Size, Ballot Structure and Candidate Incentives



Source: Adapted from Carey and Shugart (1995) and Shugart (2005).

With a ‘closed’ ballot structure, the *larger* the district size, the *smaller* the incentive for a candidate to cultivate a personal vote. This is because the larger the district, the possibility of differentiating between candidates within each party decreases, which leads to the election becoming a battle between political parties rather than individual politicians.

In contrast, with an ‘open’ ballot structure, the *larger* the district size, the *greater* the incentive for a candidate to cultivate a personal vote. This is because the larger the district,

the greater the need to differentiate between candidates from the same party, which leads to the election becoming a battle between individual politicians rather than between political parties.

The question, then, is what is the best combination of district size and ballot structure? The answer, of course, depends on the circumstance. In general, most political scientists would argue that if a district size is very large, it is better to have a closed ballot than an open ballot structure. Otherwise, elections would be dominated by the personalities of a few high-profile candidates rather than the policy positions and performance of all the candidates and the parties they stand for. The result would be weak and ineffective parties and a parliament of media stars and millionaires!

However, if the district size is relatively small, then most political scientists would argue that it is better to have an 'open' ballot structure. The national level election would then still be a battle between parties rather than personalities, but at the district level candidates standing under the same party label would be forced to compete more vigorously on their performance and prospects, and voters would have a name (and a face) to cast their vote for rather than simply a party label (e.g. Samuels, 1999; Shugart et al., 2005; Chang and Golden, 2006).

3. The Experience of European Parliament Elections

Where the European Parliament is concerned, the optimal solution would be relatively small districts (for example, with 4 to 10 politicians elected in each district) with an open ballot structure (with either open-list PR or STV). This would provide a strong incentive for MEPs to raise their personal profile with the electorate, which in turn would raise the general profile of European Parliament elections, without turning each national election into a 'beauty contest' between the MEPs.

There is strong evidence from the 2004 European Parliament elections to support this argument. Figure 2 shows the 26 electoral systems that were used in the 2004 European Parliament elections (i.e. two different systems were used in the UK: regional-based closed-list PR in Britain, and STV in Northern Ireland).

Figure 2. Electoral Systems Used in the 2004 European Parliament Elections

		<i>Ballot structure</i>		
		Closed	Ordered	Open
<i>District size</i>	Average district size <10	France (9.8) UK-Britain (6.8) Poland (4.2)	Latvia (9) Belgium (8) Slovenia (7) Cyprus (6)	Estonia (6) Luxembourg (6) Malta (5) Ireland (3.3) UK-N.Ireland (3)
	Average district size >10 & <20		Sweden (19) Austria (18) Slovakia (14)	Italy (15.6) Denmark (14) Finland (14) Lithuania (13)
	Average district size >20	Germany (99) Spain (54) Greece (24) Hungary (24) Portugal (24)	Netherlands (27) Czech Republic (24)	

Note: The average number of MEPs elected in each district in each member state is in parentheses. For Italy, although MEPs were presented in regional districts, seats were allocated on the basis of national vote shares.

In the Eurobarometer post-elections survey in June 2004, EU citizens were asked *inter alia*:

- 1) ‘Political parties and candidates campaigned for votes in the European Parliament elections we have just had. For each of the following, please tell me if you have been in this situation or not:
 - a. ...
 - b. You received leaflets concerning the European Elections in your mailbox’; and

- 2) ‘For each of the following propositions, please tell me if it rather corresponds or rather does not correspond to your attitude or your opinion:
 - a. ...
 - b. You had all the necessary information in order to choose for whom you were going to vote in the recent European Elections’.

Figures 3a-b shows the percentage of citizens in each member state who responded positively to these questions: with Figure 3a showing the percentage of citizens who received leaflets, and Figure 3b showing the percentage of citizens who said that they felt well informed. In each figure, the ‘open’ ballot systems are indicated in RED, the ‘ordered’ ballot systems are indicated in BLUE, and the ‘closed’ ballot systems are indicated in YELLOW. The lines in the figures are simple linear regression lines between the responses and district magnitude.

Figure 3a. Electoral System Design and Campaign Leaflets in the 2004 EP Elections

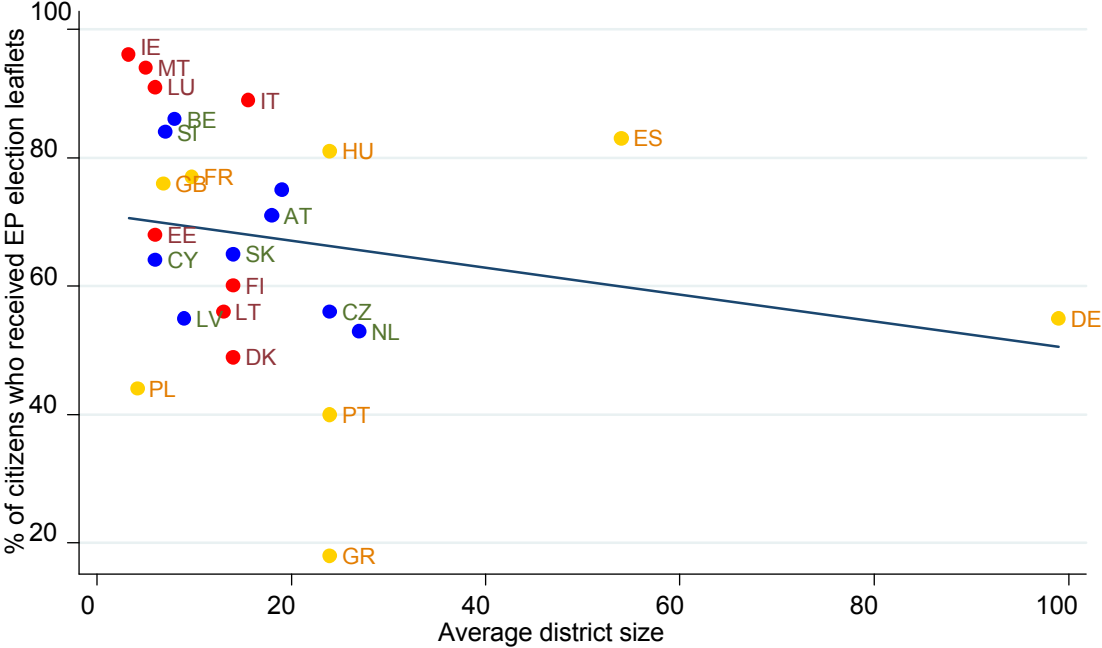
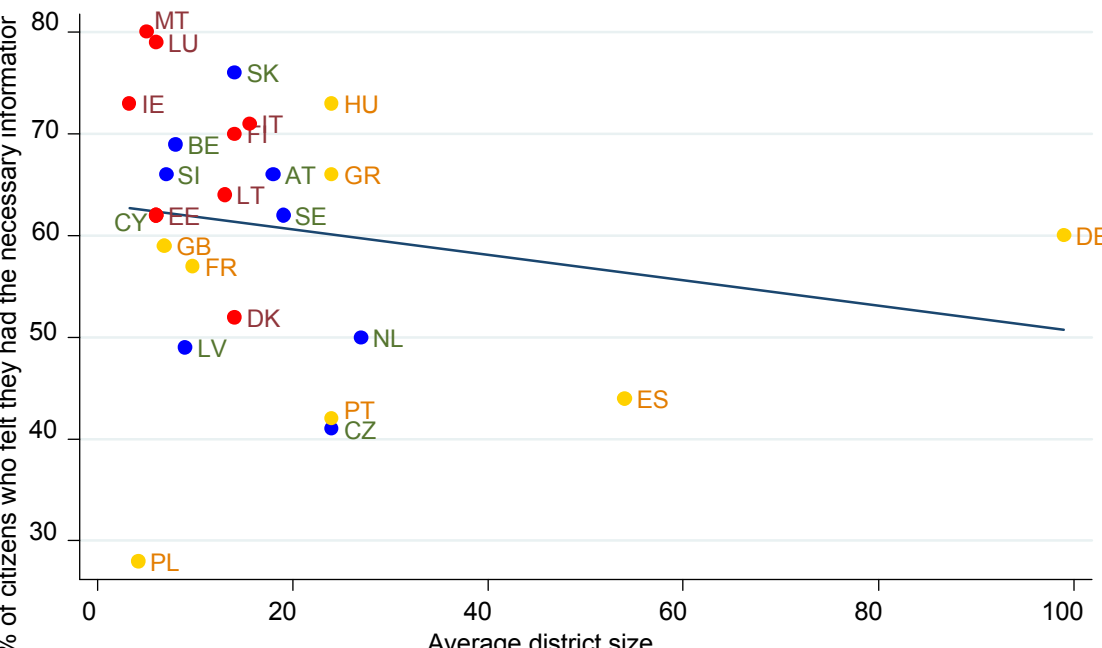


Figure 3b. Electoral System Design and Information in the 2004 EP Elections



These figures suggest a relatively strong relationship between average district size, the ballot type used, and how much citizens were contacted by individual candidates or felt informed about the elections in 2004. In general, the smaller the average district and the more open the ballot structure, the *more* likely citizens were to be contacted by candidates or parties, or feel that they were well informed about the elections.

Table 1 presents a more systematic test of the relationships suggested by the patterns in Figures 3a and 3b, with control variables for the total number of MEPs elected in a member state and the general level of support for EU membership in a member state.

Table 1. Predictors of How Much Information Citizens Received About the EP Elections in 2004

Variable	Per cent of citizens who received election leaflets	Per cent of citizens who felt they had the necessary information
Open ballot used in a member state	63.6 (+/- 19.1)	74.2 (+/- 12.8)
Ordered ballot used in a member state	59.2 (+/- 16.1)	64.3 (+/- 10.8)
Closed ballot used in a member state	42.7 (+/- 19.7)	59.2 (+/- 13.2)
Average district size in a member state	-.242 (+/- .240)	(not significant)
Total MEPs in a member state	.301 (+/- .203)	(not significant)
EU support in a member state	(not significant)	(not significant)
Observations	25	25
Adj. R-squared	.927	.958

Note: The models are estimated with linear OLS regression, with no constant. Standard errors are reported in parentheses. Only statistically significant results are reported ($p < .10$).

Irrespective of district size, Table 1 shows that citizens in open ballot systems were about 5 per cent more likely to be contacted by candidates or parties than citizens in ordered ballot systems, and were more than 20 per cent more likely to be contacted than citizens and parties in open ballot systems. Similarly, citizens in open ballot systems were about 10 per cent more likely to feel well informed about the elections than citizens in ordered ballot systems, and were about 15 percent more likely to feel well informed about the elections than citizens in closed ballot systems.

The effect of the size of the district seems far less systematic: with candidates in larger districts being slightly less likely to campaign directly to voters than candidates in smaller districts, but there being no significant relationship between district size and how well informed the citizens felt about the elections.¹

These results consequently suggest that the design of the electoral system used in European Parliament elections is one of the main reasons why citizens in Ireland, Malta, Luxembourg, Italy and Finland feel considerably more engaged in the process of electing their MEPs than citizens in Germany, Portugal, Greece, Poland and The Netherlands. If these other member states had open ballot structures, citizens would feel far more connected to their MEPs.

¹ One reason for this could be that the electoral campaigns and communication tools by candidates in large constituencies may simply be different, but perhaps no less detailed, than those with smaller constituencies.

4. Conclusion

The conclusion is pretty simple: political science research in general, and empirical results from the last European elections, suggest that the best electoral system for the European Parliament is relatively small multi-member districts with some form of ‘open’ ballot structure, which allows citizens to choose between candidates from the same political party.

The open ballot structure would increase incentives for MEPs and candidates to raise their profile directly with the citizens, which in turn would raise public awareness and participation in European Parliament elections, and so increase the legitimacy of the European Parliament and the EU.

However, it is better to combine open lists with relatively small districts. This is because as open ballots in very large districts tend to undermine the coherence of political parties. Districts should not be too small, however, as very small districts lead to high thresholds for small and even medium-sized parties to gain seats. On the basis of the current structures for European Parliament elections, this suggests that the ideal district size is probably somewhere between 4 and 10 MEPs elected in a single district. An average district size of more than 10 MEPs might work in a very large member state, where there are multiple sub-national constituencies, as the national level campaign would then be fought across several districts, and this would allow for smaller parties to gain seats and for the overall outcome to be fairly proportional.

However, if a member state has between 10 and 20 MEPs elected in a single national constituency, and an open ballot structure is introduced, it would be better to break the constituency up into several smaller sub-national districts, of between 4 and 8 MEPs. Otherwise, the national level election would be more about the personalities of the candidates rather than the policies of the parties.

Finally, a new electoral system for the European Parliament could be built on the best-practice used currently in the EU. Small districts with open ballots are already used in Estonia, Ireland, Luxembourg, Northern Ireland, and Malta. Belgium, Britain, Cyprus, France, Latvia, Poland and Slovenia already have small districts, but would need to introduce open ballot structures. Italy, Denmark, Finland and Lithuania already have open ballot systems but would need to be divided into smaller districts. The biggest change would have to be made in Austria, Czech Republic, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Netherlands, Portugal, Slovakia, Spain, and Sweden, where both smaller districts and open ballot structures would need to be introduced.

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