

The History of European electoral reform and the European Elections Act

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Posted by Historical Archives

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Next year, the entry into force of the Electoral Act (or Act Concerning the Election of the Representatives of the European Parliament by Direct Universal Suffrage in full), will mark its 40th anniversary. The Act laid the legal foundation for holding the first direct elections to the European Parliament, in June 1979. In retrospect, it is more than obvious that the direct elections have changed the character of the assembly quite radically and emboldened its Members to fight for increased democratic legitimacy, stronger legislative powers, and greater oversight of other EU institutions.

The event that took place in the European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS) Library Reading Room on Monday, 16 November 2015, was the third in a series of conferences jointly organised by EPRS and the European University Institute in Florence. These events usually take place in Florence in spring and in Brussels in the autumn. The conference aimed to refresh our memory of this historical step towards a European democracy. Moreover, it also linked the anniversary of the Act to current moves for further reform of the European electoral procedure. Just days before the event took place, the plenary adopted a [resolution](#) on the Reform of the Electoral Law of the European Union (2015/2035(INL)), which submits a certain number of proposals to improve the European character of EP elections and to increase voter interest.



Ramón Luis Valcárcel, Vice-President

Audio recording of the event:

http://europarl.europa.eu/EPRS/16112015_Library_event-CUT.mp3

The conference began with an introductory speech by Vice-President Ramón Luis Valcárcel Siso. In his capacity of Vice-President responsible for the Parliament's Library, he congratulated EPRS for its series of topical events in such an elegant venue. He referred to a speech given by former MEP Altiero Spinelli in 1983, in which Spinelli stressed that decisions of a European dimension should be prepared politically through debates, electoral campaigns and compromises which demonstrate the degree of consensus called for among European citizens. Although acknowledging that today's situation is quite different from that of 1983, the Vice-President reminded the audience that Parliament insists on holding European debates and implementing European decisions because 'most of us are convinced that this is the only logical and effective way to deal with problems such as youth unemployment, climate change or refugees from regions torn by civil war or other catastrophes.'

In the following keynote speech David Farrell, Professor at Dublin University College and renowned expert on electoral systems and their impact on the electors, provided an overview of the various national specialties in designing ballot papers and party lists for the European elections. He underlined the crucial importance of different degrees of electoral representation in the Member States, mentioning his home country as an outlying case. Professor Farrell also suggested guidelines for the future evolution of European electoral procedures. He notably promoted more open party lists and some alignment of ballot paper design across the Member States.



' The History of European electoral reform and the European Elections Act 1976 '

Ulrike Lunacek, Vice-President responsible for European Political Parties, commented on the previous speeches, informing listeners and panellists of Parliament's continuing efforts to achieve a more coherent European electoral procedure, both in previous terms, notably by Andrew Duff, and more recently in the Hübner-Leinen report adopted in the AFCO Committee on 28 September 2015 and in the plenary on 11 November 2015.

The next item on the programme was the presentation of a draft study by Olivier Costa, Professor at Sciences Po Bordeaux and the College of Europe, commissioned for the EPRS Historical Archives unit. The study deals with the political context of the European Council's decision to introduce direct elections. Professor Costa stressed the important impact of government changes, notably in France and Germany, where President Giscard d'Estaing and Chancellor Helmut Schmidt arrived in power at almost the same time, in 1974. Without the congenial relationship between the two political leaders, the Electoral Act may have only seen the light much later. In a similar vein, the only revision of the Act, in 2002, came about after the election of Tony Blair as Prime Minister of the UK. The final version of the study will be presented in spring 2016.



Ulrike Lunacek, Vice-President

The evening concluded with a panel discussion chaired by Alfredo De Feo, Director, at EPRS and currently EP Fellow at the European University Institute. The panel consisted of Andrew Duff, Visiting Fellow at the European Policy Centre and long-time advocate of electoral reform during his time as a leading Member of Parliament's Committee on Constitutional Affairs. Andrew Duff notably reminded participants that national parties and their leaders watch any further extension of the means and resources made available to European political parties quite jealously. He also stressed that a more thorough electoral reform was probably only possible by convening another Convention.

Professor Alexander Trechsel, Head of the Department of Political and Social Sciences at the European University Institute and a distinguished expert on federalism, European democracy and electoral procedure, described the importance of modern technology as an instrument for increasing participation and debate at the European level. Using computer-based vote profiling techniques national political parties might eventually compete not only in their home states but across the Union.

Finally, Dieter Schlenker, Director of the Historical Archives of the European Union, based at the European University Institute, provided an overview of some fascinating archival stock given to the HAEU by individuals involved in electoral reform, especially at the time of the drafting and negotiation of the Electoral Act. According to him, many personal archives still await scholarly treatment.

During the conference, several background documents were made available to participants and listeners:

- a [briefing](#) produced by the Historical Archives of the Parliament on the '40th Anniversary of the 1976 Act on Direct Elections to the European Parliament';
- a [compendium](#) of archival documents produced between 1974 and 1976, produced not only in the Parliament but also in the Council and the Commission;
- a [European Added Value Assessment](#) drawn up by DG EPRS on 'The Reform of the Electoral Law of the European Union' and, finally,
- the above-mentioned draft study on 'The history of European electoral reform and the Electoral Act 1976: Issues of democratisation and political legitimacy', which will be completed next spring for the 40th anniversary of the Act;
- a [study](#) by Professor Luciano Bardi and others, proposing to harmonise and Europeanise the ballot papers used in European elections; the study was recently commissioned by the Policy Department on Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs of the EP Directorate-General for Internal Policies of the Union.

Finally, the roundtable not only commemorated 40 years of electoral reform, but also provided a useful and topical reminder of the continuing need to argue and act towards more European solutions to the pressing political problems confronting the European Union. For this, a vibrant European democracy based on direct voter involvement seems indispensable.

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Elections Act 1976'



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