

## [Henning Meyer](#) **Euro vision**

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# Euro vision

The party that succeeds in reaching out to the 'Polish voter' could reap huge electoral benefits.



**Henning Meyer**

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With local elections in Scotland, Wales and parts of England coming up on May 3, it is the right time to draw attention to a group of eligible voters that has been completely forgotten by British political parties so far. I am talking about the "Polish voter" - representing the large and still growing group of EU foreigners (UK residents from EU countries other than Britain). In the current campaigns, only the Scottish National party had some limited targeting of Polish voters in Scotland.

In the last few years, we have talked extensively about the impact of European immigration, especially from eastern European countries, on the UK economy but there has been no adequate discussion about the electoral implications this immigration could have. To summarise a few facts: all UK residents with a EU passport are eligible to vote in local, regional and European elections. EU citizens have active as well as passive voting rights, so they can also run for office on these political levels. The general election is in fact the only ballot where EU foreigners are not allowed to participate (apart from Irish and Cypriot nationals). These rights obviously also apply to UK citizens living in other EU countries. The British vote can thus have a decisive influence in areas where a large share of the electorate is made up by British expats.

But what are the political implications of European immigration coupled with the described voting rights in the UK? The Labour Movement for Europe in London and the south-east has recently published a policy paper analysing the potential of the EU electorate in the London region. And the implications could be huge. Nobody knows exactly how many EU foreigners live in the UK, but conservative estimates put their numbers on more than 1 million, most of them in and around London.

The French embassy alone estimates that there are 300,000 French people living in Britain, two thirds of them in London and the south-east. Other data shows that EU

foreigners are four times less likely to be registered on the electoral roll than British citizens. This is a democratic problem that could become a political opportunity: the EU electorate has no real political representation in the UK because only few participate in the electoral system. But the political party that finds a way of appealing to these voters can reap huge electoral benefits, especially in London and the south-east where the regional and mayoral elections of 2008 will be fought on a proportional representation (PR) basis, meaning that every single vote counts.

The EU electorate is a quite diverse group but reaching out to them should not be too problematic. The vast majority live in the UK for work and lifestyle reasons, so policy areas such as public transport, affordable housing, job creation and so on will be of major concern to them. These are all issues that will have to be highlighted in the general election campaign anyway. So what is needed is only some additional tailoring of campaign strategies.

What party is the most likely to benefit from this? Above all, it looks like the Labour party is in a good position to benefit from a strategy targeting the EU vote. The Tories will not be an option for EU foreigners, not even for conservative ones, because they lack the strong religious connection many continental conservative parties have and, above all, they are seen as opposed to European integration as such - so they do not necessarily support the policies that brought many Europeans here in the first place. Against other parties, Labour can argue that it was Blair's government that granted immediate access to the British labour market for citizens of new EU member states - at least in the 2004 enlargement round - and hence gave many fellow Europeans immediately a chance for better paid jobs.

The EU vote could also be instrumental in minimising the impact of discriminatory parties such as the British National party, especially in PR elections. But above all, reaching out to the EU electorate would be an active integration policy, giving foreigners the means to exercise their democratic rights properly and thus foster integration of a significant group of recent immigrants into mainstream British society. The debate about the future of the EU will have to focus - amongst other issues - on the applicability of basic democratic rights throughout the union, not least the right to vote.

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