

# Reforming European elections: Could a pan-European ballot paper engage EU voters?

 [blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2016/03/08/reforming-european-elections-could-a-pan-european-ballot-paper-engage-eu-voters/](https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2016/03/08/reforming-european-elections-could-a-pan-european-ballot-paper-engage-eu-voters/)

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*European Parliament elections are frequently criticised from the perspective that they suffer low turnout levels and tend to be dominated by national rather than European political issues. **Damien Bol** presents findings from a study on whether the creation of a Europe-wide electoral district, elected via a pan-European list of candidates, could help engage EU citizens. He notes that while there is great potential in this system as a mechanism for addressing the EU's democratic deficit, it would need to be carefully calibrated to prevent the European Parliament from becoming dominated by representatives of larger member states.*



The EU is at a critical moment in its development. Many citizens express a negative attitude towards European integration and do not trust European decision makers. A proposal that has been put forward to mitigate this problem, and to help European representatives gain the confidence of the population, is to create a pan-European district in which a small number of MEPs would be elected.

In a recent [paper](#) we evaluated this proposal via a unique online experiment where we invited thousands of Europeans to report how they would vote in a pan-European ballot. We find that vote choice in a pan-European district would be substantially affected by the presence of national candidates on the lists. There are a number of implications and recommendations for European decisions makers that can be derived from these findings.

## The EuroVotePlus experiment

In the three weeks preceding the 2014 European Parliament election, we conducted an online experiment (for a discussion of the details of this experiment, see this other [paper](#)). We created a multi-lingual [website](#), open to all, where users were invited to learn more about European elections in general, as well as the rules used to elect MEPs, and to participate in an online voting experiment.













































































In the experimental part of the website, we invited people to indicate their vote preference in the upcoming European election using the party lists present in their district. We also asked all participants, regardless of their country, to indicate how they would vote if 10 additional members of the European Parliament were to be elected in a pan-European district. We simulated a pan-European ballot by creating party lists based on the existing political groups in the European Parliament. We randomly picked, for each respondent, 10 incumbent MEPs from each political group. A screenshot of a pan-European ballot is presented below. The ballot contained the name of the candidate, his/her nationality, and a picture.

## Figure: A pan-European ballot paper

# Closed List

**1** You vote for one list. The votes will determine the number of seats given to the list. Within each list, candidates will be elected according to the order that appears on the ballot, which has been decided by the party.

**2** Hit "Confirm your choice"

 United Left - Nordic Green Left	 Freedom and Democracy	 European People's Party	 Conservatives and Reformists	 Alliance of Liberals and Democrats	 Greens - European Free Alliance	 Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<b>1</b>  <b>Gabriele ZIMMER</b> Germany	<b>1</b>  <b>Nigel FARAGE</b> United Kingdom	<b>1</b>  <b>László SURJÁN</b> Hungary	<b>1</b>  <b>Robert STURDY</b> United Kingdom	<b>1</b>  <b>Jean-Luc BENNAHMIA</b> France	<b>1</b>  <b>Amelia ANDERSDOTTER</b> Sweden	<b>1</b>  <b>Gianni PITTELLA</b> Italy
<b>2</b>  <b>Cornelia ERNST</b> Germany	<b>2</b>  <b>Zbigniew ZIOBRO</b> Poland	<b>2</b>  <b>Lambert van NISTELROOIJ</b> Netherlands	<b>2</b>  <b>Kay SWINBURNE</b> United Kingdom	<b>2</b>  <b>Andrew DUFF</b> United Kingdom	<b>2</b>  <b>Jean LAMBERT</b> United Kingdom	<b>2</b>  <b>Marek SIWIEC</b> Poland
<b>3</b>  <b>Sabine WILS</b> Germany	<b>3</b>  <b>Mara BIZZOTTO</b> Italy	<b>3</b>  <b>Sebastian Valentin BODU</b> Romania	<b>3</b>  <b>Valdemar TOMAŠEVSKI</b> Lithuania	<b>3</b>  <b>Cecilia WIKSTRÖM</b> Sweden	<b>3</b>  <b>Helga TRÜPEL</b> Germany	<b>3</b>  <b>Monika FLAŠIKOVÁ BENO</b> Slovakia
<b>4</b>  <b>Vladimír REMEK</b> Czech Republic	<b>4</b>  <b>Jacek Olgierd KURSKI</b> Poland	<b>4</b>  <b>Thomas MANN</b> Germany	<b>4</b>  <b>Marina YANNAKOUAKIS</b> United Kingdom	<b>4</b>  <b>Eduard-Raul HELLVIG</b> Romania	<b>4</b>  <b>Satu HASSI</b> Finland	<b>4</b>  <b>Ioan Mircea PAȘCU</b> Romania
<b>5</b>  <b>Sabine LÖSING</b> Germany	<b>5</b>  <b>Jaroslav PAŠKA</b> Slovakia	<b>5</b>  <b>József SZÁJER</b> Hungary	<b>5</b>  <b>Ryszard Antoni LEGUTKO</b> Poland	<b>5</b>  <b>Angelika WERTHMANN</b> Austria	<b>5</b>  <b>Christian ENGSTRÖM</b> Sweden	<b>5</b>  <b>Dolores GARCÍA-HIERRO CARABALLO</b> Spain
<b>6</b>  <b>Nikola VULJANIĆ</b> Croatia	<b>6</b>  <b>Paul NUTTALL</b> United Kingdom	<b>6</b>  <b>Barbara MATERA</b> Italy	<b>6</b>  <b>Michał Tomasz KAMIŃSKI</b> Poland	<b>6</b>  <b>Charles GOERENS</b> Luxembourg	<b>6</b>  <b>Carl SCHLYTER</b> Sweden	<b>6</b>  <b>Sergio Gaetano COFFERATI</b> Italy
<b>7</b>  <b>Kartika Tamara LIOTARD</b> Netherlands	<b>7</b>  <b>Jacek WŁOSOWICZ</b> Poland	<b>7</b>  <b>Horst SCHNELHARDT</b> Germany	<b>7</b>  <b>Konrad SZYMAŃSKI</b> Poland	<b>7</b>  <b>Guy VERHOFSTADT</b> Belgium	<b>7</b>  <b>Eva JOLY</b> France	<b>7</b>  <b>Claudette ABELA BALDACCHINO</b> Malta
<b>8</b>  <b>Georgios TOUSSAS</b> Greece	<b>8</b>  <b>Frank VANHECKE</b> Belgium	<b>8</b>  <b>Marco SCURRIA</b> Italy	<b>8</b>  <b>Anthea McINTYRE</b> United Kingdom	<b>8</b>  <b>Gjommaria UGGIAS</b> Italy	<b>8</b>  <b>Eva LICHTENBERGER</b> Austria	<b>8</b>  <b>Marino BALDINI</b> Croatia
<b>9</b>  <b>Charalampos ANGOURAKIS</b> Greece	<b>9</b>  <b>Roger HELMER</b> United Kingdom	<b>9</b>  <b>Roberta METSOLA</b> Malta	<b>9</b>  <b>Edvard KOŽUŠNÍK</b> Czech Republic	<b>9</b>  <b>Olle SCHMIDT</b> Sweden	<b>9</b>  <b>Philippe LAMBERTS</b> Belgium	<b>9</b>  <b>Spyros DANELLIS</b> Greece
<b>10</b>  <b>Marisa MATIAS</b> Portugal	<b>10</b>  <b>Bastiaan BELDER</b> Netherlands	<b>10</b>  <b>Theodor Dumitru STOILJAN</b> Romania	<b>10</b>  <b>James ELLES</b> United Kingdom	<b>10</b>  <b>Jorgo CHATZIMARKAKIS</b> Germany	<b>10</b>  <b>Iñaki IRAZABALBEITIA FERNÁNDEZ</b> Spain	<b>10</b>  <b>Vilija BLINKEVIČIŪTĖ</b> Lithuania

**Note:** The ballot paper shown was randomly generated on the [EuroVotePlus](#) website.

## Findings

In the pan-European ballot, people were invited to cast a vote under different electoral rules. We first asked them to cast a vote under closed-list proportional representation for which they could only choose one list. Even if the participants appeared to be ideologically driven, as they voted massively for the pan-European list corresponding to the party they had the intention to vote for in the national ballot, they were strongly affected by the nationality of the candidates appearing on the list. They were 48 per cent more likely to vote for a list when there was a least one candidate of their country.

We also asked them to vote under open-list proportional representation for which they could choose one list and give extra points to individual candidates of this list. The effects were similar to those observed under closed-list proportional representation, but we observed that the participants were 8 times more likely to give a positive point to candidates of their own nationality.

## Recommendations

We derive two concrete recommendations for EU decision makers. First, if a pan-European district is created, we recommend establishing a maximum number of candidates from each EU country on each of the lists. If this number is not fixed, pan-European parties, anticipating the effect of the nationality of candidates on vote choice, would be likely to nominate candidates from large countries.

Second, if a pan-European district is created, the argument developed in this article lends support to the implementation of a closed-list PR system, instead of an open-list PR system. Since we find that Europeans would give more positive votes to national candidates, the open-list PR system would also lead to the domination of the pan-European seats by large countries.

All in all, although we see great potential in creating a pan-European district to reduce the EU's democratic deficit, we recommend being cautious in setting the precise rules for such a system should it be used in future European Parliament elections.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics. For more information on the article, see the author's recent paper in [European Union Politics](#) (co-authored with Philipp Harfst, André Blais, Sona Golder, Jean-François Laslier, Laura Stephenson, and Karine Van der Straeten).*

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## About the author

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[Damien Bol](#) is a Lecturer in Political Behaviour at the Department of Political Economy of King's College London. Prior to this, he has worked and studied at the universities of Louvain (Belgium) and Montreal (Canada). His research lies at the intersection of political behaviour, comparative politics, and political institutions. He uses experimental and observational methods to study elections, voting behaviour, and party strategies in established democracies, especially West European countries and Canada.



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