

Electoral Reform, Parliamentary Representation and the British MEP

UK elections to the European Parliament changed in 1999 from being fought through single-seat constituencies, using the 'first past the post' system, to a party list system from which several representatives are chosen through proportional representation (PR). These constituencies typically cover whole regions. Researchers at the Universities of Manchester and Aberystwyth sought to examine the impact of the new system on role of MEPs, including the extent to which they had contact with their constituents. Their research has implications for the debate over House of Commons electoral reform.

Key findings

Who was elected? The change made a big difference to the number of parties winning seats. Seven parties won seats in 1999, compared with four in 1994. Parties gained seats much closer to their share of the vote. While Labour had won 73 per cent of MEPS with a minority of the vote in 1994, no party approached 50 per cent representation in 1999. There were also more women and ethnic minority representatives. However, the ratio of seats to votes in Britain and its female representation still lagged behind the average for other European Union countries.

Voters v Parties: Because the parties draw up the lists – and decide where candidates are placed on them – MEPs have a far greater incentive to secure support from within the party than the broader public. MEPs insisted in interviews that the link with voters still matters, and they are still more likely to have regular contact with the electorate than many of their European counterparts. But this was not borne out by the survey evidence which showed that their legislative and oversight activities ranked above representation of individuals and social groups as priorities in 2000, whereas in 1996 all these activities had been given equal weight.

In the constituencies: Despite having the resources to employ three full-time staff each, MEPs now have a low profile presence in their constituencies, and often share offices and staff with colleagues from their own party. The internet is growing in importance, but the level of overall contact from voters appears to be declining, and in 2000, most MEPs had no direct email link for constituents via their websites. Despite opportunities for cross-party co-operation in the new regional constituencies, such contact is relatively uncommon and ad hoc. Scottish MEPs work better across party lines than their Welsh counterparts.

Party or regional interest? With such large constituencies, a degree of geographical or social targeting by MEPs might be expected. But, instead, there is evidence that MEPs increasingly see themselves as regional representatives of their political party as much as they are representatives of the geographical region they represent.

About the study

The research was carried out by Prof David Farrell (Department of Government, University of Manchester) and Dr Roger Scully (Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Wales, Aberystwyth). The researchers interviewed 61 British MEPs (73 per cent of the total) for their study.

Further details

The full report "Electoral Reform, Parliamentary Representation and the British MEP" is available at www.meps.org.uk and on the ESRC database at www.regard.ac.uk. For more about the European Parliament Research Group please visit www.lse.ac.uk/Depts/eprg.

Key words

Electoral reform, Parliament, MEP

FULL REPORT

Background

The 1999 European Parliament (EP) election was the first (and, so far, only) time that Britain has used a proportional electoral system for a nationwide election. It was also the first (and, again so far, only) use in Britain of (closed) party lists, which exclude any component of candidate-centred voting. The 1999 election thus represented a sharp contrast with the equivalent contest five years earlier, when the 84 British MEPs were elected by plurality from single-member constituencies.

Reform of the electoral system used for EP elections could be expected to have a number of consequences. First, electoral system change has an immediate impact on *who* is elected. But there are also a series of potential consequences of electoral reform in terms of the ongoing relationship between the voters and their representatives. Our project has addressed this latter theme, examining the attitudes and behaviour of elected representatives. The research has had a practical importance not only because the growing powers of the EP makes the behaviour of its membership of greater salience; in the context of the large-scale constitutional innovation in the UK in recent years, including the creation of new political institutions elected by a variety of systems, and with ongoing discussion of possible electoral reforms for a partially or fully elected Upper House at Westminster, the Welsh Assembly and local government in Scotland and Wales, citizens and scholars in the UK have an urgent need to know more about the longer-term consequences of alternative electoral formulae.

Scholars, however, have remained uncertain as to the impact of electoral systems on representatives' attitudes and behaviour. For instance, following from the pioneering work of Fenno (1978), a number of scholars have suggested that an important stimulus for 'constituency service' behaviour by representatives is the electoral benefit accruing to representatives via a 'personal vote' (Cain et al. 1987; Kuklinski 1979). Representatives elected under a Single Member Plurality (SMP) system have appeared to be motivated substantially by strategic-electoral considerations of vote-maximization. The implication is that under different electoral rules, different behaviour would follow from representatives: 'a polity's electoral process, its policy processes, and the finer details of its institutional structure are bound together. If one changes the others adjust accordingly' (Cain et al. 1987: 9). Similarly, Bowler and Farrell argued that party list systems require those seeking re-election to focus on the needs of a party leadership, and provide less incentive for non-partisan constituency service activities: 'it is relatively easier for legislators to shirk in satisfying voter demands under some electoral systems than others' (1993: 53).

But many scholars doubt the impact of electoral systems here. The limited awareness of most MPs in their constituencies (Crewe 1985; Farrell and Gallagher 1999; Weir and Beetham 1999), and the paucity of evidence that growing constituency service activity by MPs has enhanced any 'incumbency advantage' (Gaines 1998), has prompted some to regard the growing constituency-related activity of UK parliamentarians as 'the puzzle of constituency service' (Norris 1997). Furthermore, a cross-national collaborative research project in the 1980s concluded that 'electoral systems are *not* fundamental in determining parliamentarian/constituency relationships...electoral systems are, perhaps, rather more passive elements...than either supporters or opponents of electoral reform tend to believe' (Bogdanor 1985: 299). Drawing on evidence from the 1994 European Elections Study, Katz has argued that cultural factors are more important than strategic-electoral considerations (Katz 1997; also Searing 1994); he therefore

warns against predicting that electoral reform will generate a mechanistic response from representatives (1999: 16).

Given these scholarly divisions, we must remain uncertain about how representatives will respond to substantial electoral reforms. However, much of the ambiguity of previous research findings arguably stems from problems with research design: specifically that within a polity, the electoral system is normally a constant, not a variable. The change in the system used for EP elections in 1999 allows for a 'before-and-after' comparison of a precision rarely available to students of politics in advanced democracies. Holding the wider political context and culture relatively constant, amidst a substantial reform of the electoral system and the incentives for behaviour promoted by it, allows for an unusually clear insight into whether constituency activity directly follows strategic incentives, or is rooted more in factors (like cultural traditions surrounding the representative's role) that respond only slowly to electoral incentives.

Objectives

The project proposed to make four 'substantial contributions':

1. To 'contribute to scholarly understanding of the consequences of electoral systems for parliamentary representation, by examining an aspect of the representative relationship generally neglected in current research.' We have sought to achieve this objective by exploiting the opportunity offered by the electoral system change in the UK to compare the constituency-related attitudes and behaviour of MEPs in the current parliament (elected under the regional, closed party-list electoral system) with the previous parliament (elected via single member plurality). We have achieved this by: comparing interview responses of newly elected (in 1999) and previously incumbent MEPs; comparisons of survey data gathered over a number of parliaments; and the integration of interview data from studies carried out by the authors on previous parliaments (see sections below for further details on our methodology).
2. To produce findings that 'will have more specific and immediate implications for current debates over electoral reform within British politics.' Specifically, we have sought to consider some of the wider issues that are raised by electoral reform, such as whether at least some electoral systems may achieve greater proportionality only at the cost of diminishing the constituent-focus that has long been regarded as an important dimension of parliamentary representation in the UK. We have sought, and will continue to seek, to communicate our findings in the manner described below.
3. To provide 'important new knowledge ... into the quality and form of representation enjoyed by British citizens from members of the increasingly important European Parliament.' Our large number of interviews with British MEPs, together with our visits to constituency offices and other data gathering efforts have provided us with the most detailed set of evidence yet harvested regarding how MEPs actually implement their representative role, what voter contact means to them, and how this has changed, particularly in the light of the electoral reform of 1999. Through forthcoming and future publications, this information will be systematically presented to scholars, political practitioners and other interested parties.
4. To 'inform current discussions over possible further change to the system used to elect British MEPs.' At the time of our application, there was much speculation about further reforms to the electoral system for British EP elections. While the system is

now to be left unchanged for the 2004 elections, the investigators have made contributions to discussions about possible future changes, the options available under the new EU (2002) legislation on uniform electoral procedures, and the implications of change for the representative role of MEPs. These consultations have included: our involvement in roundtables of the Independent PR Commission (as outlined below), a presentation by Farrell (on election and candidate selection procedures) to a working group established by the European Parliamentary Labour Party, at the London's offices of the European Parliament in 2002, and discussions with civil servants in the Cabinet Office and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. Our research is also proving highly relevant given ongoing moves to reduce the number of British MEPs as a consequence of the next EU Enlargement. Given our findings – as outlined below – about the problematic nature of constituency-based representation in large, far-flung regions, moves to reduce the size of the British EP contingent will further affect MEPs' relationships with their constituents.

Methods

The research deployed four main methods for gathering information on the constituency service activity of MEPs: (1) MEP interviews, (2) case study visits, (3) analysis of MEP websites, and (4) comparative analysis.

1. Interviews. Our proposal envisaged a series of semi-structured interviews with a representative 50 percent sample of MEPs in the current (1999-2004) parliament. In the event, the level of cooperation was such that we were able to interview a greater proportion than anticipated: a total of 61 MEPs (73 percent percent of the British membership) have been interviewed.

Each interview was of about 45 minutes in duration; almost all were carried out in a series of research visits to Brussels between September 2001–February 2002. The objective was to explore the same sets of issues with each interviewee:

- The most important features of their work as an MEP, and how this has changed in the time that they have been a member
- Do MEPs operate as effectively as they can? Are there any features that could be changed to improve the effectiveness of MEPs?
- How does their role as an MEP compare with that of MEPs from other member states? Do any particular countries stand out in this regard? Is there anything different about the way British MEPs operate?
- How does their role as MEP compare with that of an MP?
- How the new regional list electoral system affects their role as an MEP
- Who do they feel they represent?
- The nature and degree of voter contact, and how this has changed under the new electoral system
- Is there cooperation (joint operation) with fellow party MEPs in the region?
- Levels of contact with other parts of the party: regional office, MPs, local councillors
- Levels of contact with MEPs from other parties in the region
- How candidate selection procedures may affect their role

The interviews were recorded (it having been made clear that interviewees' identities would not be revealed in subsequent publications) and then professionally transcribed. Anonymised

versions of all transcripts are to be lodged with the Qualidata archive at Essex (we are currently negotiating the details with the data archive). We are in the process of coding the transcripts, along with our other data, to facilitate tests of our hypotheses (some results are presented below).

2. *Case studies.* As outlined above, we were unable to implement this part of our research in the manner originally envisaged. Our initial intention had been to carry out a series of case studies of 12 MEPs in six target regions (London, North-West, Eastern, North-East, Scotland and Wales), consisting of a mix of (1) participant observation of MEPs carrying out their constituency work and (2) the gathering of additional material relating to constituency correspondence and MEPs' weekly diaries.

This aspect of our research required considerable revision, for two reasons. First, it quickly became apparent that there was little point in asking MEPs for permission to spend a period of time observing their constituency activity. Few, if any, MEPs appear to spend extended, dedicated periods of time in their regions in the manner envisaged by the 'constituency weeks' that are part of the regular timetable of the EP. And now, if not before, no MEP we talked to even claims to hold 'constituency surgeries'. For the most part, constituency contact tends to involve attending one-off meetings with organised groups, factory visits, or party meetings. There are few occasions when MEPs actually meets directly with their 'voters'; rather, most of the contact between MEP and voter is indirect, with their constituency staff liaising with voters on their behalf. This, in itself, is a highly significant research finding.

Thus, it was soon made clear to us by MEPs we interviewed that the best means of understanding their constituency activity was to visit their constituency office and talk directly with staff. We adapted our research strategy accordingly, to conduct a rather great number of shorter visits to constituency offices. Each such visit consisted of the following components: (1) a semi-structured interview with the assistant (in some cases, where relevant, with more than one assistant); (2), wherever possible, the gathering of information relating to constituency correspondence and the weekly diary of the MEP; and (3) observations made by the investigator of the location and nature of the office in question.

To-date we have conducted visits to the constituency offices of 19 MEPs, in the following regions: Scotland, the North-East, North-West, Yorkshire, East-Midlands, West-Midlands, Wales, and London. The assistant interviews explored the following themes:

- The staffing and structure of the office
- How constituency offices related to MEPs and their Brussels offices
- Role of constituency offices in networking with the public, local groups, local party etc, and in organising the constituency presence of the MEP

These constituency visits have proven to be highly useful in helping to control for the dangers of 'loose talk' that we had identified in our original application. For instance, some MEPs' claims regarding the extent of correspondence directed to them have proven to be somewhat inflated.

There was an additional reason why our research strategy has had to adapt and this was also something that was not foreseen when making our original application. Our type of research relies crucially on cooperation received from the subjects of study. When a politician's job is on the line, their willingness to cooperate can be affected. Under a closed list electoral system, the issue of candidate selection assumes similar importance, because the place on the list is even more important than the election itself. We deliberately chose our research period of September 2001–March 2002 to avoid dangers of overlapping with candidate selection processes: given that the next EP election is not until June 2004, it seemed a reasonable assumption that parties would

not carry out candidate selection before 2003. In the event, and taking even their own MEPs by surprise, the Labour party brought forward the selection process to early 2002. After a short delay, the other parties followed suit, and candidate selection is almost complete. These events seriously hampered our efforts to gain access to several MEPs' offices. It was made clear to us that we would be better off waiting until after the selection had taken place. Given this situation (and also in the light of personal family problems of one of the investigators), we sought the permission of the ESRC to extend the end of award deadline by three months (until November 2002). While this extended deadline has enabled some additional constituency visits to be carried out, the fact that candidate selection is still ongoing has not helped. Given these events, but also the demonstrable value of constituency visits, we will be pursuing further such visits (covering the costs for this from our own resources) over the coming months.

3. *Websites*. One other factor that we had not originally accounted for was the extent to which, prompted by the growing popularity of the internet, the majority of individual MEPs would develop a 'virtual' constituency presence via websites. Several of the MEPs we first interviewed – without prompting – stated this as an important aspect of their constituency-related activity; it thus demanded some attention. We therefore conducted a qualitative assessment of MEPs' websites in terms of a series of categories; in addition, we used the 'contact me' facility on websites to institute a short survey to elicit further information about the design and updating of the website (whether and when the survey received reactions was also recorded). Information from this aspect of our research is currently being coded, but we can have already identified some interesting trends. For instance, at the time of our first scrutiny of websites in early 2002, only 44 (out of 84) MEPs had a website. Of these 44 sites, less than half (19) included interactivity options; one-quarter (11) were largely devoid of any meaningful material such as newsletters or press releases; and a handful lacked even the most basic information about how to contact the MEP (in four cases no constituency office address was provided, in two cases there was no 'contact us' facility). As the next election draws nearer, increasing numbers of MEPs are taking websites more seriously. The number of MEPs with websites as of mid-February 2003 has increased to 70 (a 59 percent rise in less than a year).

4. *Comparative analysis*. While the bulk of our research has been on British MEPs, we deliberately built in a comparative dimension as a means of further assessing the affects of our independent variables – particularly those relating to the electoral institutional environment. Our participation in a cross-national survey of all MEPs yielded important additional information, enabling us to test further whether British MEPs' representative roles are affected by cultural factors unique to Britain. The MEP2000 survey was co-authored by Simon Hix and Roger Scully, on behalf of the European Parliament Research Group (<http://www.lse.ac.uk/depts/eprg>), and funded by a grant to Simon Hix under the 'One Europe or Several' research programme of the Economic and Social Research Council (Grant: L213252019). The survey was administered in September 2000, with an overall response rate of 31.8 percent. Information used from this survey features prominently in our forthcoming *Journal of Common Market Studies* paper, and is also used – though less extensively – in the *Journal of Legislative Studies* publication.

Results

Our research has drawn on a range of empirical data; coding and analysis of this data is ongoing, and the final results will not be available until later this year. Nonetheless, initial important findings have been reported in the nominated publications and in other papers posted both on the REGARD website and our website (www.MEPs.org.uk). This section summarises the key findings generated thus far.

- Initial Electoral System Impacts

The shift from a non-proportional to a proportional electoral system had a substantial effect on *who* was elected. In 1994 only four parties won seats, with Labour (on a minority of the vote) winning 73 percent of MEPs. In 1999 the number of parties represented jumped to seven, with no party approaching 50 percent of total representation. Thus, for the first time Britain had a parliamentary representation (albeit at the EU level) akin to the pattern of multi-party assemblies normal in much of Western Europe.

Electoral reform for the EP elections produced a model set of aggregate electoral consequences. (It should be stated that the differences in aggregate electoral outcomes were not, in the main, simply due to different voting patterns between 1994 and 1999). Levels of disproportionality along party lines plummeted (the Gallagher Index measure falling from 23.73 to 8.30); the effective number of parliamentary parties doubled (up from 1.69 to 3.13); there was also a notable increase in the proportion of women MEPs (up from 19 to 25 percent), while the number of MEPs from ethnic minority backgrounds rose from one to four. However, it is worth noting that while the ‘representativeness’ of Britain’s EP delegation improved between 1994 and 1999, Britain still lags behind other EU member states. Britain’s disproportionality score of 8.30 compared with an average of 4.76 for the other 14 member states (only Luxembourg, with a mere 6 MEPs, had higher disproportionality, of 10.95). Britain was also lower than average with regard to the effective numbers of parliamentary parties and proportion of women MEPs (averages in the other 14 member states were 4.96 and 33.73 percent respectively).

- Voter emphasis versus party emphasis

The regional-list system imposes greater than ever party-based incentives for (re-) election upon MEPs. With little potential for accruing a personal vote, and candidate (re-) selection now in the hands of party members, MEPs’ greatest incentive is to secure support from within the party rather than the broader public.

Our interviews with individual MEPs suggested that they still tend to place great stress on their link with voters. However, there are tentative indications (currently being explored further), from interviews conducted with MEPs first elected before 1999 and from comparison with previous interviews conducted by Scully, that the voter emphasis may be of somewhat lesser relative importance. This appears to be confirmed by analysis of the available quantitative evidence. The MEP2000 survey replicated a battery of items asked in an earlier (1996) survey of MEPs. In 1996, four items – legislating, participating in parliamentary oversight, the representation of individuals and the representation of social groups – among a battery investigating ‘important parts of an MEP’s work’ were given roughly equal importance by British MEPs. In the 2000 survey, the identical battery produces different results: legislation and oversight activities are now ranked as being substantially more important than the others. The lower priority accorded to representing individual citizens is shown even more starkly by a comparison of the normalised scores across both samples (dropping from 0.80 in 1996 to 0.60 in 2000). Although British MEPs still score more highly than those from most other EU states, this is a significant decline.

- The Nature and Quantity of ‘Constituency Presence’

MEPs’ focus on their constituency presence is facilitated by the quite considerable resources they can bring to bear. All MEPs receive allowances to cover the cost of running offices in their locale and to pay the salaries of their staff (with enough resources for the equivalent of about

three full-time staff members). Eight British MEPs did not, at the time we began our constituency visits, have a publicly advertised office address within their region (up from 6 MEPs without such offices in their – smaller – constituencies at the end of the previous parliament). And as we witnessed on our visits to MEPs' offices, resources are often channelled elsewhere (such as Brussels offices). Thus, the definition of what constitutes a constituency office tends to be quite loose: some 'constituency offices' are nothing more than a single desk in the corner of their party's regional office, with a part-time assistant there to take calls and 'file' correspondence (in some cases, there may be no assistant, and the calls forward automatically to the MEPs' home; in some cases the desk is located in the MEPs' home; in some cases there is nothing more than a postal address, and all correspondence is sent automatically to the Brussels office). At the other extreme are MEPs who take a suite of offices, perhaps shared with other MEPs from the same party in the region, or other party politicians (MPs, members of the Scottish parliament, local councillors, etc.), with a team of assistants and banks of PCs. Given this wide variation, our constituency visits are helping us to establish the degree to which different models are more or less typical.

Our interviews with MEPs' assistants revealed that 'constituency' correspondence appears to be relatively small in quantity, and in most instances probably declining. To some extent this reflects a greater use of emails; but there also appears, quite simply, to be less contact from voters.

The electoral system change, as stated earlier, appears to have prompted a downgrading of constituency work at the expense of other priorities. But there has also been a change in the *form* of MEPs' constituency presence. First, via websites, most MEPs now maintain a 'virtual' presence open to their constituents, that was almost entirely absent before 1999. E-mails are also widely used, although primarily to target interested individuals groups within the regional party. A further change is that the existence of multiple members within regions has created the possibility of 'teamwork' within parties (with representatives dividing responsibilities between them) and/or rivalry between representatives of different parties competing to serve their constituencies better and achieve higher public visibility.

We found substantial evidence that in almost all instances where the option was open to them, parties with more than one MEP in a region did seek to achieve a degree of teamwork within regions. In a few instances this has included joint offices within the region and even staff jointly paid out of two or more MEPs' office expenses. More commonly, it appears to involve regular consultations and attempts at coordinating and dividing up work. Of course, cooperation has not always proceeded smoothly; in one region, for instance, relations between representatives of a major party were at one point so bad that a professional intermediary was required to help resolve differences! Moreover, (at the time of our interviews) the looming issue of re-selection was noted by many MEPs – as one observed, 'the team system in theory works well but in practice it would be interesting to watch it disintegrate around re-selection' (Labour MEP).

Intra-party cooperation has followed different patterns – joint planning, division of labour by functional or geographical criteria, or on a more ad hoc basis. There currently appears to be no dominant pattern to how cooperation proceeds; the demands of a region, as well as the expertise of individual MEPs and their personal relations all appear to be important factors here. Cooperation across party lines seems to be, unsurprisingly, a far less common occurrence. Though most MEPs recognise that the electoral system creates the potential for such cooperation to occur, few have appeared eager to grasp those opportunities. Where such cooperation has happened, it appears episodic, rather than planned or sustained. The one exception to this we identified is Scotland, where MEPs from different parties reported that relations across party

lines were good, and that cooperation occurred across a reasonably broad front. One reason given for this was the recognition of a 'national' dimension for Scotland. However, such considerations appear to have had little impact on MEPs from Wales, where cooperation was reported by all sides to be very limited, with antagonism between the Labour party and Plaid Cymru a major inhibiting factor.

- 'Targets' of Representation

It was hypothesised that the electoral system change might promote differences in terms of *who* MEPs seek to represent. Under SMP, the consensus view (one infrequently questioned) has been that representatives seek to represent all voters. But one reasonable response by representatives to the new electoral system – in reaction to the problems of seeking to represent large and diverse regions – might be a narrowing of the focus of their efforts. Thus, MEPs might choose to target a particular geographical area within their wider region, possibly one containing much of their potential support; alternatively, they might identify particular social groups as including many of 'their' voters, or focus quite explicitly on supporters of their party.

Our examination of cross-national survey evidence has suggested that, looking across all member states, MEPs have strong views on their role as representatives. Although aware of responsibilities to represent multiple 'principals', they prioritise between different representative activities. Among British MEPs, comparing the 1996 and 2000 survey data produced no differences between the two periods in terms of the importance given to representing 'my national party' and 'all people who voted for my national party': the 1996 and 2000 normalised scores for responses to both these items are identical!

Our examination of other evidence, however, suggests a somewhat different picture. The growing use of e-mail communication by MEPs' offices appears – according to their accounts – to be increasingly targeted at intra-party sources, with party e-mail lists forming a convenient outlet for regular 'newsletters' from MEPs. Similarly, many of our interviews with MEPs indicated a growing sense that MEPs were concentrating more of their attention upon, and were coming to see themselves increasingly as, representatives of their party's views and the supporters of their party within their region. Thus, while 82 percent of MEPs interviewed were coded as indicating that they regarded themselves as – in a broad sense – representing a particular geographical constituency, some 59 percent also indicated that they saw themselves as representing supporters of their particular political party. And almost half (49 percent) of MEPs were coded as regarding representation of their geographical constituency as of little or no importance.

Thus, our evidence does suggest strongly that greater proportionality in the electoral system used for EP elections has been, to some extent, 'bought' at the cost of a reduction in the constituency focus of representatives. MEPs have come to view this element of their work as somewhat less important, their visibility to the voters appears to be declining, and they increasingly appear to view themselves as party representatives as much as representatives of a particular region. As one MEP put it, 'I suppose what has changed is that I increasingly see myself as representing my party. With the PR system people who voted for me, voted Labour. If they did not vote Labour there are other people they can go to. If they voted Liberal they got a Liberal MEP to go to, if they voted Conservatives they have got a selection of xxxx So my job I see increasingly as to represent my party interests'.

Activities

We have presented initial work from aspects of this project in a number of papers at conferences in the UK and elsewhere. Later this year and in the future, further papers will be presented.

Consistent with the stated aim in our original application of integrating our research with other work of the European Parliament Research Group (EPRG), Scully hosted a two-day conference on 'The European Parliament at Fifty' at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth, in July 2002. This conference was attended by a mixture of academics, MEPs, members of the staff of the EP and graduate students. Papers from this conference are to be published in a special issue of the *Journal of Common Market Studies*.

The research team have addressed a number of organisations across the public, private and voluntary sectors on the findings of this research. This includes briefings to a special European Parliamentary Labour Party working group on electoral and selection reform, to the Richard Commission's assessment of the Powers and Electoral Arrangements of the National Assembly for Wales, and to various roundtable discussions of Britain's 1998-99 electoral reforms at regional and Euro levels (arranged by the Independent Commission on PR).

Further practitioner-oriented activities are planned, including our participation in a seminar on the outcome of Britain's recent electoral reforms to be arranged later this year by the McDougall Trust at the Lakeman Library for Electoral Research, and Farrell's lecture to a workshop of electoral administrators in EU applicant countries at the Robert Shuman Institute in Budapest in March 2003, organised by the European Peoples Party.

The ESRC has been duly acknowledged in all these contexts.

Outputs

Six papers deriving from this research project have been presented at conferences to date: one presented to the conference of the European Union Studies Association in Madison, Wisconsin (2002); one to a Workshop at the Joint Sessions of the European Consortium for Political Research in Turin (2002); one presented to the Aberystwyth conference described above; two presented at the 2002 meeting of the American Political Science Association in Boston; and a paper given to the 2002 meeting in Salford of the Elections, Public Opinion and Parties (EPOP) specialist group of the Political Studies Association conference. Later this year we shall be presenting another paper at the 2003 EPOP meeting in Cardiff.

Two papers are being published as journal articles in the *Journal of Common Market Studies* and the *Journal of Legislative Studies*; copies of our papers can also be downloaded from our dedicated website (www.MEPs.org.uk). Further papers and a monograph based on this project are planned, as detailed above under 'Dissemination'.

The transcripts of our MEP interviews have been anonymised, and we are in the process of negotiating with the Qualidata archive at Essex, as per their procedures, for their final preparation prior to their being made publicly available. Further elements of the data gathered in this project – including summaries of our research on MEPs' websites and of our constituency visits – will be made publicly available via our website.

Impacts

Great effort has been made to meet this objective, including the launch of the MEP website and efforts to link with websites in similar areas. Apart from presenting our findings, this website serves two other primary purposes: first, to provide user-friendly material for other scholars and practitioners on such matters as the different electoral systems in use across the 15 member states, and the candidate selection systems being used by the main parties; and second, to provide a 'forum' page in which people visiting the site can offer views and opinions about their MEPs and the representative function of MEPs generally.

In addition to the website, both investigators have developed links with relevant user communities to disseminate the findings of our research. We were members of a working group of scholars and practitioners established by the Cabinet Office to investigate 'Democracy in the European Union'. Findings from this research project substantially informed our contribution to the working group on the issue of the various electoral systems used in EP elections. (Our report is available at www.MEPs.org.uk.)

We have also participated in a series of roundtable discussions about the consequences of the electoral reform in the UK, such as Farrell's participation in a day-long workshop on EP elections organised by the Independent Commission on PR and held at the European Parliament offices in London in January 2003 (for details, see www.prcommission.org), and Scully's presentation to the Richard Commission's Swansea seminar in January 2003. There has also been great interest in our findings among practitioner groups outside of the UK (as witnessed, for instance, by Farrell's involvement in the Budapest conference in March 2003, as described above).

Future Research Priorities

Led by Farrell, the EPRG lodged an 'expression of interest' under the proposed EU Framework 6 Programme, for a study on Democracy and Accountability in the EU. It is intended that this will form the core of a bid for a large scale Integrated Project on Governance under the FP6 Programme to be coordinated by Manchester's Institute of Political and Economic Governance. This deadline for this bid is expected to be December 2003.

The main priority of the research team in the coming year will be to complete a monograph titled *Electoral Reform and Parliamentary Representation: The Role of the British MEP*. Planning for this volume is well advanced. It will centre on the data accumulated by this project, and will also integrate cross-national survey evidence, both from the MEP2000 survey and from surveys of the previous EPs, providing useful cross-national and overtime comparisons. It is envisaged that a full draft of this volume will be completed by late-2004; we intend to actively pursue publication with a leading academic press.

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