

European elections: A historical perspective

Between 23 and 26 May 2019, 427 million European Union (EU) citizens had the opportunity to vote for Members of the European Parliament. This was the ninth time that EU citizens could vote directly for the policy- and decision-makers who will represent them in EU politics. European elections are consequently one of the most important events in the EU political cycle. With a view to this year's European election and challenges to come for the new Parliament, many EU observers attached special historical significance to this ninth European election. Looking back, while the very first European election was held forty years ago, in 1979, the journey to holding European elections was long and complex.

No democratisation without participation

Participation is a central element of democratic systems. Of all the possibilities for political participation, a direct election is the strongest instrument for citizens' involvement in politics. In 1952, when the predecessor to today's European Parliament, the Parliamentary Assembly of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), was inaugurated as the political authority representing citizens within the newly developing supranational political system of European integration, it seemed self-evident that it should be directly elected. The 1951 [Paris Treaty](#), establishing the ECSC, and the 1957 [Rome Treaty](#), creating the European Economic Community (EEC) and providing the historical framework for the present-day EU, therefore specified direct elections to the assembly first as an option and then as a constitutional obligation. Until 1979, however, instead of citizens directly electing Members, each of the EEC Member States' national parliaments appointed their representatives. Called European Parliament since 1962, the body's democratisation had fallen short of the claim formulated in the Treaties. Subsequent concepts of the future political design of European integration therefore demanded the organisation of European direct elections, to fulfil the requirement of democratisation.

Long journey to European elections

Shortly after the signature of the Rome Treaty, the new EEC Assembly's Committee on Political Affairs and Institutional Matters created a working group, tasked to draft a report on direct elections. In May 1960, based on the working group's preliminary findings, the EEC Assembly voted on a [draft convention](#) on direct elections, prepared by Fernand Dehousse, a Belgian Member. It proposed an assembly of 426 Members (three times more than the existing EEC Assembly), elected by direct vote, for a term of five years. To garner support for its draft convention, the Assembly argued that the process of European integration could not succeed without direct citizen participation. However, the EEC Council of Ministers did not reach a decision on the draft, due to reluctance on the part of the French Government.

Later statements took up the Assembly's arguments for holding direct elections. In 1972, a [report](#) on the Parliament's future development by a European Commission working group, headed by the French law professor, Georges Vedel, stated: 'The introduction of direct elections would considerably contribute to the Community's democratisation and consequently, to its authentication, its legitimacy'. Updating the Parliament's 1960 draft convention, a [new draft](#), prepared in 1974, by the Dutch Member, Schelto Patijn on behalf of the Parliament's Political Affairs Committee, emphasised that: 'the process of European unification cannot succeed without the direct participation of the people affected'. Parliament therefore considered 'direct universal suffrage as an indispensable element in achieving further progress towards integration and establishing a better equilibrium between the Community institutions on a democratic basis'. Likewise, the [report](#) on a concept of a European Union, by the Belgium Prime Minister, Leo Tindemans, published in 1975, argued that direct elections would give the Parliament a new political authority. Moreover, Tindemans' report made clear that direct election to the Parliament, alongside the strengthening of the entire political and institutional framework of the Community, should figure among the long-term goals of European integration.

Electoral Act

The first big step on the journey to European direct elections was taken when, in September 1976, 16 years after the Parliament had first submitted proposals for European elections, the Council of Ministers issued the [Act](#) concerning the election of the Members of the European Parliament by direct universal suffrage. Largely based

on the Parliament's 1974 draft convention, the Act set the number of Members of Parliament at 410. Furthermore, it confirmed a future uniform electoral procedure for all Member States, but without indicating a clear schedule for its implementation. In that respect, the Act contradicted the Parliament's 1960 draft convention, but was in line with the 1974 draft convention, which was less ambitious and demanded a lower level of electoral uniformity across the Member States.

Crucially, direct elections were closely connected to the issue of extending the Parliament's powers. To give meaning to the expected democratisation through European elections, substantially increasing the Parliament's powers seemed imperative. The question was how best to organise this democratisation: by holding European elections first, and then increasing the Parliament's powers, or the other way around. Parliamentary debates revealed a circular reasoning regarding the problem; however, the dominant opinion that emerged was that the Parliament would need to secure democratic legitimacy by holding direct elections first and then obtain more powers. On that basis, the Parliament demanded timely ratification of the Act by the Member States. The Council of Ministers decided that European elections should be held for the first time on a common date in 1978.

First European election, 1979

Despite the Council's plan to hold elections in 1978, the first direct European election took place in 1979, as it was impossible for some Member States to adopt the relevant electoral laws in time for the election to take place earlier. A milestone in European integration history was reached when 180 million European citizens were called to vote for Members of the Parliament in June 1979. High-ranking politicians, such as the former German Chancellor, Willy Brandt, the leader of the Italian Communist Party, Enrico Berlinguer, and the former French Minister of Health, Simone Veil, stood for election. The turnout in the first European election was around 63 %. Based on the election result, [seven political groups](#) were constituted at the Parliament's opening session in July 1979. The Members voted for Simone Veil to become the first President of the first directly elected European Parliament. A Jewish survivor of the Nazi concentration camps, Veil's election can be seen as a symbolic stand against the nationalism that was one of the causes of the First and Second World Wars.

Building EU legitimacy and identity

With the introduction of European elections in 1979, the European Parliament is the world's first international parliament representing a democratic system based on the element of participation that allows the greatest citizen involvement in politics. Held in five-year cycles over the past 40 years, direct elections have contributed both to deepening European integration and to strengthening the EU's legitimacy. Despite its complexity, the EU's decision-making systems are democratic, thanks in part to the directly elected Members of the Parliament. Moreover, in the last four decades, the Parliament has changed and developed enormously, gaining far-reaching legislative powers.

European elections 1984 to 2019

Alongside the constant increase in Parliament's powers, however, turnout in European elections has persistently declined. While in the 1984 election the turnout, at 61 %, was close to the turnout in the first election, it fell to a historic low of 42 % in 2014. Over the years, European elections have also encountered political and institutional developments. For instance, the 2014 election introduced the '[Spitzenkandidaten process](#)', an approach whereby European political parties nominate their lead candidate ahead of the European elections, and the largest party after the election is considered to have a mandate to provide the Commission President.

In the 2019 European election, the turnout, at 51 %, increased for the first time since the first direct election in 1979, and reached the highest level of the last 20 years. In other words, more than 50 % of EU citizens eligible to vote took part in the election, making it the largest transnational election ever held. The electoral issues in the 2019 election, such as economic, monetary and environmental policy, did not differ significantly from those in past elections. In 1989, for example, environmental issues, especially water and air quality, were a clear common theme, just as climate protection issues figured largely in this year's election.

European elections: a core element of EU's political identity based on democracy

The EU's political identity today is strongly rooted in the value of democratic principles. While the 1957 Rome Treaty did not mention democracy as a value underpinning the movement towards a 'closer union', democracy today forms a fundamental tenet of EU self-identification. In fact, the debates on holding European direct elections in the 1960s and 1970s widely contributed to defining the EU's political identity as based on democracy. Introduced with the first European election in 1979, EU citizens' right to vote for the Members of the Parliament is a core element of the EU's democratic system.

