
Richard Sinnott

Department of Politics and Institute for the Study of Social Change
University College Dublin


September 18, 2003
Introduction
This final conference presentation aims to provide a summary of the results and of the implications of our research. Given the limited time available, it focuses mainly on the comparative findings while also taking into account the individual country studies and the specialized studies presented in the preceding sessions. For details of these specific studies, the reader is referred to the summaries and the working papers available from the project website. In interpreting the findings and in teasing out their practical implications, this summary makes use of the analytical framework presented in the first presentation this morning. The core element of that framework is reproduced here as Figure 1.

Administrative facilitation (nuts and bolts and personal circumstances) (arrow 1 in Figure 1)
Part of the explanation of the low turnout among certain socio-demographic groups that has been highlighted in several of the papers today is that the administrative arrangements for voting do not facilitate electoral participation by the groups in question. The evidence suggests that this applies (albeit in different ways and to different degrees) to working women with children, to young people, to students in particular and, in weekday-voting countries, to those with skilled, unskilled or service occupations that have rigidly specified working hours. As Figure 2 shows, all these groups have a lower than average propensity to vote in a European Parliament election; part of this difference is due to inadequate voter facilitation.

The administrative arrangements that either facilitate or fail to facilitate voting include voter registration requirements and procedures, the timing of the election (month and day), the hours of polling, the accessibility of polling stations, requirements regarding voting cards, the ease of availability of postal voting and, very importantly, the extent to which all these things are well known throughout the society.

The date and the day of voting in EP2004 are presumably now fixed. However, there is still time to improve on the remaining administrative factors and certainly on publicity relating to them. With this in mind, the European Parliament should immediately contact the relevant electoral management bodies in all member states to encourage maximum administrative facilitation of voting in EP2004. The Parliament should also arrange for a high-level spokesperson from the Parliament to address the Second Conference of European Electoral Management Bodies which is due to be held in Strasbourg in late January or early February 2004, again with a view to encouraging maximum effort in regard to the administrative facilitation of voting in EP2004.
Cognitive facilitation (political communication and political knowledge) (arrow 2)

The net propensity to vote in the next European Parliament election is +38 points among those who feel very well informed about the EU and ranges from +34 to +24 among those who resort to government offices or to EU information offices when seeking information about the Union (see Figure 3). At the other end of the scale, negative net propensities to vote ranging from -25 to -34 are found among those who are not at all well informed about the EU, who are not interested in EU information or who do not pay any attention to the EU.

These correlations confirm the key role of communication and knowledge in driving turnout/abstention in EP elections. A major part of the problem for the EP, however, is that the groups that are well-informed, that are plugged into various communication channels and that do have a high propensity to vote tend to be small (2 to 8 per cent), whereas the groups that are currently untouched by the EU communication process or who feel that they know nothing about the EU and have a very low propensity to vote tend to be quite large (20 to 35 per cent).

Communication and knowledge are important because voting is much easier for individuals if they live in a society with effective channels and processes of political communication. Such communication infrastructures enhance the attention, knowledge and understanding that citizens bring to political matters, thereby increasing their ability to deal with political issues and receive and process political signals. If citizens are not adequately knowledgeable about politics in general and about EU and EP politics in particular, then, when European elections occur, party and candidate campaigns pass over the heads of a substantial proportion of such citizens. This is the significance of the broken segments of arrows 3 and 4 in Figure 1 above, the broken segments being designed to indicate that the effect of efforts to mobilize voters depends very heavily on individuals' levels of information, knowledge and understanding.

The systemic characteristics involved here include long-term factors, such as the quality and reach of the educational system, explicit or implicit civics education in schools, the degree of media penetration in the society, and short-term factors, such as the volume and depth of media coverage of EU politics and EP elections, the effectiveness of EU and EP information offices and the resources available for political campaigning at European and national level. Obviously, in the context of the 2004 elections, attention must focus on the short-term factors but the long-term perspective must not be lost sight of.
There are two key practical implications in all this. The first is that effective information campaigns play a vital role in preparing the ground for the political campaigns. The second is that being effective means broadening the reach of those channels of communication that are associated with high propensity to vote and sharpening the message of those channels that have more extensive reach but are less strongly associated with propensity to vote. The high-impact, limited-reach channels are information offices, meetings, public information displays and trade unions. The low-impact, wide-reach channels are magazines and especially television. Note, however, that newspapers combine quite wide reach and quite high impact and also that television that involves an MEP or MEPs is more effective than television in general as a source of EU information. The question of the impact of MEPs on voter involvement will be considered in more detail in a moment.

3. Institutional mobilisation (what’s at stake?) (arrow 3)

The shape of political institutions defines what is at stake in an election and, in this way, provides greater or lesser incentives to vote; in other words, institutions as such can be more or less effective in making people want to vote. In the case of the 2004 elections, the political institutions in question are of course the European Parliament itself, the various electoral systems used to elect its members and the nascent European party system that seeks to define the choices facing the voters. Given the limited powers of the European Parliament, the diversity of electoral systems used and the fact the European party system is only embryonic, institutional mobilisation in the context of an EP election tends to be weak.

While such mobilisation may be weak, it is not negligible. As Figure 4 shows, variations in perceptions and evaluations of the European Parliament as an institution are associated with higher or lower propensities to vote. Thus those who have a purely positive image of the EP ("likes only") have a substantially greater propensity to vote (+19 points) while the considerably larger groups that have both a positive and a negative view or that tend to trust the EP also show a positive propensity to vote (+11 and +8 percentage points respectively). On the other hand, the propensity to vote of those who have a purely negative image of the EP and of those who have no image one way or the other is significantly negative (-17 points in each case). The no-image group is particularly important because it constitutes 50 per cent of the citizens.

Looked at from a policy point of view, the problem with institutional mobilisation is that institutions are not easy to change, at least not in the short-term. However, the European Parliament is a partial exception to this observation as its powers and its role have increased substantially in a relatively short space of time. The problem therefore for the Parliament is not so much its limited powers as
much as the difficulty of conveying to the voters the significance of the powers that the Parliament
does have. In other words, realizing the full mobilizing potential of the Parliament-as-it-is requires
more effective communication of the nature and role of the Parliament. Ultimately, conveying the
reality of the powers of the Parliament to the citizens depends on the actions of the Parliament and
on the role it plays in the decision-making process. However, what the Parliament does also needs
to be spelled out and emphasized through effective communication strategies.

4. Campaign mobilisation (the message and the medium) (arrow 4)

At the end of the day and no matter what communication strategies are implemented, getting more
voters to the polls in June 2004 will depend on the campaigns of the parties and the candidates.
Previous research has shown that campaign contact does boost turnout and that active campaign
exposure (reading about and discussing the campaign) is particularly important. It has also shown
that candidates play a vital role in motivating voters to go out and vote¹. This candidate effect is
confirmed by the evidence in Figure 5 that shows that, even half-way through the term of the
Parliament (Spring 2002), the fact of having had some contact with MEPs is associated with a
higher propensity to vote. This association is particularly strong for the very small groups that have
been in more or less direct contact with an MEP by attending a meeting or by receiving information
from an MEP. However it is also quite substantial for those who have read about MEPs in
newspapers or magazines or heard about MEPs on the radio. Conversely, substantial negative
propensities to vote in the next EP election (of the order of -20 points) were found among the very
large groups that had not seen or heard anything about MEPs or had any contact with them.

In short, the profile of the Members of the European Parliament is a crucial determinant of voter
turnout and the evidence indicates that this effect is not confined to the immediate election
campaign but also operates throughout the life of the Parliament. The clear implication is that
contact between MEPs and voters and, more generally, overall exposure of MEPs in the media
should be intensified now and that such efforts should not be left to the formal start of the election
campaign.

5. Individual mobilisation (preferences and identity) (arrow 5)

The end product of most of what has been described so far is that each individual is possessed of a
greater or lesser state of mobilisation in regard to the upcoming election. Such individual

¹ For both points, see Jean Blondel, Richard Sinnott and Palle Svensson, People and Parliament in the
summary of this book is available on the website of the present project <http://www.ucd.ie/~dempart/>
mobilisation is of two kinds - preferences and identities. Preferences can be about policies or about European integration itself. Through the Eurobarommetor, we have extensive evidence on the latter. Analysis of this evidence (Figure 8) shows that positive attitudes or preferences regarding integration are associated with positive propensities to vote and that the more intense the preference, the stronger the association. Negative propensities to vote are found among two groups - the relatively small numbers of people who are opposed to integration and the much larger groups who express indifference. As an example of the latter syndrome, the propensity to vote of the 43 per cent of European citizens who express indifference regarding the integration project is -25. This reinforces the point made repeatedly above that one of the biggest problems posed by the EP2004 elections is indifference and lack of knowledge and understanding of what the EU as a whole is about. Tackling this indifference and this knowledge gap must be a major priority in preparing for EP2004 and is one that, if successfully realized, would produce a significant increase in participation.

The potential mobilizing effect of European attitudes is confirmed by evidence of the association between having a sense of European identity and propensity to vote in an EP election (see Figure 7). The net propensity to vote among the relatively small group who are very proud to be European (15 per cent of the sample) is +35 points. The much larger group who have some sense of European identity (who say that they feel, for example, Irish and European\(^2\)) have a propensity to vote of +25 points. On the other hand, those who only identify with their nationality and exclude any European identity have a propensity to vote of -6. The implication is that appealing to people's sense of European identity (and seeking to build that identity where it is weak) is another potentially fruitful element in the preparations for EP2004.

**Conclusions**

The final step leading to turnout/abstention is the interaction between individual facilitation and individual mobilisation (see the arrow labelled costs/benefits in Figure 1). The facilitation/mobilisation framework provides a way of making sense of the many specific factors that affect the individual's decision at this point. It also provides a way of thinking about the problem in terms of the policy-levers that may be employed with a view to increasing turnout. This analysis implies that:

- Citizens must be facilitated to vote by appropriate administrative arrangements and by effective communication of those arrangements; because the incentive to vote in a European

\(^2\) But don't go as far as saying that they feel "European and Irish".
Parliament election is weaker than in national elections, the need for such facilitation is more acute in a European election context than it is in a national election context.

- Citizens must also be facilitated in voting by increasing their knowledge and understanding of the powers of the Parliament and of the role it plays in the Union's institutional system. More generally, their knowledge of the processes and issues of European integration needs to be cultivated so that they can absorb and process the mobilising signals coming from the institutions and from the parties and candidates. In this sense, cognitive facilitation constitutes the medium through which mobilisation processes must pass if they are to affect individual citizens. Poor cognitive facilitation impedes the signals; good cognitive facilitation amplifies them.

- The messages that an institution sends to potential voters are a function of the shape and, ultimately, of the power of the institution. The problem with this institutional mobilisation in the case of the European Parliament is that the substantial powers that it does have are not adequately conveyed to the voters. This makes the Parliament even more dependent on an effective communication strategy.

- The evidence indicates that, in an EP election, campaigning can raise turnout. It also suggests that candidates are quite important in this context, even in countries where the electoral system gives a very limited role to individual candidates. The evidence also indicates that contact between MEPs and the citizens increases the propensity to vote and that this effect is discernible even in the mid-term period of the Parliament. This finding emphasises the importance of the role of the MEPs between now and June 2004.

- Individuals feel mobilised to vote in European Parliament elections for two reasons. The first is because, in the context of European politics or national politics or a combination of both, they have preferences relating to the parties, the candidates or the issues. The second reason is that they have a sense of identity or citizenship that generates a feeling of solidarity, or communal participation, or sense of duty, each of which provides an incentive to vote. Individuals will then vote or not vote depending on the balance between the benefits of voting and the costs of voting. The former are increased by mobilisation, the latter are reduced by facilitation. It is up the Parliament, the parties and the candidates to work on all aspects of both processes to ensure that more of the citizens of an enlarged Union make a decision to participate in EP2004.