



**European
Movement
International**

EUROPEAN ELECTIONS 2019

MORE TRANSPARENT AND CLOSER TO CITIZENS?

Electoral Law Reform
Event hosted by Jo Leinen MEP

Danuta HÜBNER

Member of the European Parliament | EPP

Jo LEINEN

Member of the European Parliament | S&D

THURSDAY
19 November 2015

Nicolas SCHMIT

President of the Council | Luxembourg

18:30-20:00

Francisco FONSECA

Acting Director General | DG Justice

Room A3G-2
EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT
BRUSSELS

Followed by a Reception
offered by AFCO Chair Prof.Hübner MEP



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EVENT REPORT | 19.11.2015

European Elections 2019 | More Transparent and Closer to Citizens?

Background

Even though a legal basis for a uniform European electoral law has existed since the Treaty of Rome in 1957, the Electoral Law Act dating back to 1976 lays down only a few common principles for the conduct of European Elections. European Elections are thus largely governed by 28 different national rule-sets, election campaigns remain focused on national politics and persons and European citizens do not enjoy comparable voting conditions.

With the Report drafted by Jo Leinen (S&D), President of the European Movement International and Danuta Hübner (EPP), Chairwoman of AFCO Committee, the European Parliament is exercising its special right of legislative initiative for a reform of the European electoral law under Art. 223 (1) TFEU. The reform proposal inter alia builds on the new modus operandi for the election of the Commission President with lead candidates nominated by the European political parties and a strengthened role of the European Parliament. Putting forward concrete proposals for amending the 1976 Electoral Act as well as further recommendations, the report seeks to make the European Elections more transparent, more attractive and more European.

On 19 November 2015 the European Movement International organised an event following the European Parliament's endorsement of proposals to reform the Electoral Law of the EU, co-authored by Jo Leinen and Danuta Hübner.



Petros Fassoulas, EMI Secretary General opened the discussion stating that electoral law reform is long overdue and congratulating both Rapporteurs on the initiative, which is supposed to constitute a significant step towards bringing the European elections closer to EU citizens – something that European Movement International has been also striving for.

The first presentation came from the **EMI President, MEP Jo Leinen**, who had been advocating for a directly elected parliament since the 60s, taking an active part in the campaign that culminated with the first direct election of the EP in 1979. Since then though, we have been facing a serious stagnation in the electoral process, Mr Leinen argued. We are facing a major clash between the idea of how the European elections should look like, and what actually happens every 5 years. We have 28 national votes, instead of one, truly pan-European one. Mr Leinen underlined the importance of promoting a key element of this process, democracy at the European level. The Founding Treaties provide for elections held on a common day, according to harmonised procedures. These were later amended, which led to a step back by strengthening the national procedures. Mr Leinen suggested that we need for two votes: one vote for national, the other for transnational lists. The latter is drafted within the framework proposal for the European constituency with lead candidates at the top of the lists. The Rapporteurs aimed at making elections more European by suggesting that each political family decides on a lead candidate for the European Commission Presidency at least 12 month ahead of the EP elections, so that there is enough time for a real campaign. Even though in 2004 we got a genuine European status for European Parties, they were given no space to campaign for themselves. This is why the report's co-authors strive to make affiliation to European Parties visible on ballot papers and in the media, having equal visibility with national parties. Another development mentioned was the proposal to lower the voting age to 16. Mr Leinen also briefly reported on an informal meeting with COREPER earlier that morning, which proved to have a good outcome, and praised the Luxembourgish Presidency for their support thought the process.

Professor Danuta Hübner MEP, although optimistic about the progress made, cautioned that we are only half-way through the process, so there is a lot left to be done and absolute involvement of all parties needed. Having passed through the EP Plenary, the report needs unanimity at the Council and absolute majority back at the European Parliament. Then Professor Hübner emphasised why we need this change of the electoral act so much.



Anna Gumbau @annagumbau · Nov 19

Let's give Europeans the democratic procedure that Europe deserves.

Well said @danutahuebner :-) @EMInternational

Democracy starts with elections and a conscious vote on who represents you and takes decisions on your behalf at the European level. Thus, European elections constitute a crucial part of democracy. But relations between the European Union and its citizens are tenser than ever before, with reasons lying in various crises, testing the resilience of Europe and its capacity to act. The current lack of trust in Europe shows that democracy is not effective, does not satisfy the longed by citizens feel of participation in the decisions that affect them. So now the time has come to improve the procedures and enhance it.

Professor Hübner stated that two things were given a special emphasis in the context of the Electoral Law Reform; first, that participation in elections gives everyone the right to take part in decision making. Second, that the European Parliament is very diverse on nearly everything – also on the Electoral Law Reform. Divisions were encountered not only on the lack or having too much ambition put in the document, but even on the issue of gender equality the Co-Rapporteurs mention in the resolution. Hübner and Leinen's goal was to make the elections as fair and transparent as possible, *inter alia* by granting access to the electoral process to the citizens living outside the EU. Professor Hübner claimed we need to encourage Member States to adopt the idea of online voting, "I don't think that internet voting possess a bigger risk than paper voting", she said. This statement was supported by referring to the thoroughly investigated Estonian case.

Last but not least, Professor Hübner MEP mentioned the issue of thresholds for the member states where there is not one currently, Spain and Germany. This procedure is designed to counter the increasing fragmentation of the European Parliament, which happens when individuals create not-affiliated groups causing loads of obstacles in decision-making.



Sebastiano Putoto @agitpops · Nov 19

"We should have got the balance right", comments @danutahuebner on #electorallaw. WORD.

👤 European Movement, EMBelgium, JEF Europe and 7 others

We were criticised by half of the #EuroParl for not being ambitious enough, the other half for being too ambitious.

Nicolas Schmit, President of the Council and Luxembourg Minister, congratulated EMI for the electoral law debate, especially at the moment when we need the European Movement, beyond the political parties and divisions, more than ever before.



Petros Fassoulas @PetrosFassoulas · Nov 19

It is now that we need, more than ever, a European Movement, argues @nicolasschmit2 of @EUCouncil Presidency at @EMInternational event

Minister Schmit recalled the 1976 initiative of “The election [that] will bring Europe closer to its citizens” by Helmut Schmit and Giscard d'Estaing, calling it a very courageous decision, and congratulated the Rapporteurs on the complex work on the report. He outlined the discussions on the reform in the Council have not yet started, with polite talks featuring COREPER. There needs to be a debate within the General Affairs Council due to some very sensitive issues put forward in the proposal for some member states and exchange amongst them, but also due to the special nature of this particular legislative procedure, he argued. The Dutch Presidency is now ready to take the topic further.

Mr Schmit put in the spotlight the most interesting ideas of the proposal. First one was the threshold, to which a solution needs to be found. He admitted that parliamentary fragmentation was indeed an issue, so the aim of thresholds would be not to lower democratic expression, but to allow the European Parliament to function properly; not to exclude parliamentarians or sensitivities, but to ensure that democracy has a real meaning. Secondly, the Minister expressed his personal support for internet voting – even though there might be some reluctance in the Council - describing it as a very interesting solution not only for the European, but also national, elections. He stated that the digital revolution cannot be ignored while talking about democracy, as it gives us tremendous possibilities, ensuring better and more participation of citizens. “Good luck” was Minister Schmit’s comment on the idea of Spitzenkandidaten linked to transnational lists. This provision is on the margins of what could be seen as a treaty change, he argued. Even though we might be heading there in practice, such a legislative change can be a critical point.

Minister Schmit concluded by advising the Council and Parliament to work together on this issue of crucial importance for the European citizens, which should not look as some obscure deal between parties and institutions, but should truly aim at a transparent approach leading to positive results, which make elections better and allow for broader civic participation.

Marie-Hélène Boulanger, Head of Unit “Union citizenship rights and free movement” at DG JUST, who stepped in the very last minute for Director General Fonseca, said that the European Commission clearly supports the electoral law reform, even though officially it is not part of the legislative process. With its high standard of representativeness, political accountability and democratic legitimacy of the European Union, this proposal can be a milestone in the democratic revolution of the European project.

In 2013 DG JUST issued the recommendation prompting the European political parties to nominate candidates for the function of Commission President, Spitzenkandidaten, which was a significant step forward towards the emergence of the European political sphere. Ms Boulanger told us that the last-minute introduction of joint lists was a very ambitious step by the Rapporteurs, but also a strong signal of the European dimension of the proposal. It would be followed carefully by the Commission. The threshold can make the functioning of European parliament more efficient by ensuring stable majorities. In times of crisis in democracy and people disillusioned by politics, extending the vote for third countries and more inclusive ways of casting votes, through e-voting, is a welcomed development. Ms Boulanger also commented on the matter of gender equality – high on the Commission agenda itself – as an “important step in the right direction”. The Commission fully supports this project which targets citizens’ values, citizenship rights and democratic participation, creating a more direct link between voting and pan-European dimension.

Allan Päll, Secretary General of the European Youth Forum, followed the panel discussion with an intervention on lowering the voting age to 16, one of the most widely discussed and lobbied for proposals. He claimed we cannot find any other age group more supportive of changes to electoral law than young people. Mr Päll welcomed the Rapporteurs’ support for extending the voting right to 16, as courageous and dismissed the myth that young people are not interested in politics. The European Youth Forum had just released a study on participation of young people in democratic life tracing the shifts happening in the way that democracy is seen; there is more and more attention and demand towards true participative democracy; lack of trust in political institutions is painfully exposed in the elections’ low turnout, he argued.

The report is excellent, but will not solve a crucial issue behind the above mentioned crisis. People do want to feel that their voice matters and they can make a change; so the question is what actually motivates people to turn up at elections and give their mandate to someone. Citizens and young people have not benefited from the institutions themselves, there is still high unemployment rate and poverty level. In the age of economic crisis people have not seen the institutions positively influencing their lives, thus the political link necessary to make the vote matter is not visible. Allan Päll expressed his optimism about encouraging reforms, but once again emphasised the groundbreaking importance of having a constant debate and inclusion of citizens in between elections and invited everyone to think through what can be done in addition to the changes in electoral law.



[Read More!](#)

European Movement International [Background Briefing on the European Electoral Reform](#);

Jo Leinen's [interview](#) for EurActiv, "Parliament mulls 'first steps' to reform EU elections before 2019"

Check the procedure's file and read the EP report on the Electoral Law Reform [here](#).

[Contact us!](#)

If you have any further inquiries, we will be happy to address them.

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