

How democratic is the European Union?

Democracy is a core tenet of the European Union, yet the linguistic, geographical and cultural diversity of the region poses challenges when assessing pan-EU electoral procedures. **Dr Mark Franklin** discusses how the PIREDEU project has managed to address this highly pertinent issue



Can you outline the main objectives of the PIREDEU project? What issues does it address and what prompted its inception?

The EU is governed by a complex set of institutions that have some claim to democratic legitimacy. The infrastructure that we set out to design would provide the means for evaluating the functioning of electoral democracy in the EU by conducting studies of voters, candidates, parties and the media during the run-up to – and immediate aftermath of – elections to the European Parliament.

This Infrastructure Design Study is one of only two such studies funded under the EU's Seventh Framework Programme for Research (FP7). Objectives of such a study can be approached from different viewpoints. From one perspective there is the design study itself. Its aims were to produce and evaluate a design that would achieve objectives at a higher level – objectives of the proposed infrastructure, should it come into being. Linking these two levels there was a so-called 'feasibility study' or 'pilot study' that tried to simulate the infrastructure-in-action, so as to provide a realistic test of the feasibility of the design.

Prior to the implementation of PIREDEU, academic evaluations of electoral processes at EU level recorded only limited success. What reasons can be attributed to this?

The main reason is lack of an extensive time series of election studies at the European

Parliament level. The proposed infrastructure would address this problem by ensuring the future conduct of additional studies that would extend the time series. A related problem was limited funding for each of the studies actually conducted, limiting the number of questions that could be asked in voter and candidate studies, thus also limiting the utility of the growing time series. Other limitations also flow from funding problems. The most important was the inability to ensure complete comparability across countries and over time, both in questions asked (some quite important questions were omitted from particular studies), and in their wording.

Some of the surveys commissioned under the project asked respondents to identify the 'most important problem' in their respective countries. Can you highlight some of the key issues raised here? What would you pinpoint as some of the surveys' most surprising or telling findings?

Most concern was expressed regarding economic conditions in general, and unemployment in particular. That said, the study revealed only five countries in which more than half of those surveyed stated a general concern for the economy. These countries were Greece, Cyprus, Lithuania, The Netherlands and Romania. Additionally, there were only seven countries where more than half the respondents noted concern about unemployment (Greece, Spain, Ireland, Lithuania, Hungary, Portugal and Slovakia). In Italy, only 28 per cent highlighted unemployment and only 8 per cent were worried about economic conditions generally – an extraordinarily low level of concern for a country generally considered to be quite vulnerable.

Other concerns never reached double digits in terms of percentages of people in the EU as a whole, but certain issues were incredibly salient in certain countries. For example, two thirds of the Cyprus sample were concerned about 'executive and administrative efficiency', a concern evinced by no-one in any other country, suggesting that this particular form of words may have been a catchphrase in Cyprus at the time of the survey.

Obtaining information on 27,000 citizens is a colossal task. What specific challenges and hurdles have you encountered, and how have these been addressed over the course of the project?

Actually, interviewing 27,000 people is not particularly problematic from an academic perspective, though it requires enormous efforts on the part of the survey agency and its employees. What was harder was deciding which questions to ask in what languages and how to draw the samples of individuals to be interviewed. Perhaps the greatest challenge was to produce 31 different questionnaire instruments in 22 languages. Here we were faced with the problem of wanting to use the exact same question wording in each language. One discovery we made in this process was that past comparative studies of public opinion have very largely translated all questions from scratch on all occasions, so that if a question had been asked before this would only be strictly true of the question as asked in the master questionnaire (generally in English). Since then, we have discovered that survey agencies themselves sometimes keep archives of questions asked in different languages, but this is quite a recent development.



Electing a new stance on research

Electoral democracy is a highly complex process, which is only further complicated by the diversity of political parties and voters. An innovative research initiative based at the **Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies** at the EUI seeks to develop an infrastructure to gain a better understanding of European voting

DEMOCRACY IS A defining feature of the European Union. The EU has shown that it is possible to hold free and fair elections for a single parliamentary body across a very diverse region. However, it is this diversity in language, cultures and political systems that has made it so difficult to study electoral democracy across the Union.

A new collaborative project involving 14 institutions in nine countries – with collaborators from all EU-27 states – seeks to gain a better understanding of research on electoral democracy in the EU. Providing an Infrastructure for Research on Electoral Democracy in the European Union (PIREDEU) is a three-year design study formed under the banner of the EU Seventh Framework Programme (FP7) with the aim of assessing the feasibility of improving the European Election Studies (EES), thereby providing a platform for research into citizenship, political participation, and democracy in the EU.

PILOT STUDY

PIREDEU, coordinated by the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies at the European University Institute, used the 2009 European Parliament (EP) elections as the basis for a pilot study to investigate the scientific and technical feasibility of this infrastructure. Furthermore, the pilot study afforded the opportunity to study candidates, voters, manifestos, media coverage

and influence, all in the context of an actual election to the European Parliament.

At the conclusion of the elections, a survey was conducted in each EU-27 state, using 31 different questionnaire instruments in 22 languages. This array of instruments was required in order to overcome disparities which could arise from nations which have more than one official language, or that have significant minority populations who could not have been interviewed had the questionnaire not been tailored to their needs.

This yielded highly valuable information, as Project Coordinator Dr Mark Franklin outlines: "The data we collected started with their propensity to vote for each party and also gave information about the respondents regarding their age, educational qualifications, political attitudes and policy preferences". Among the project's many findings is one that comes as a disheartening surprise: the lack of interest in EP elections that causes turnout at these elections to be so low actually has negative consequences for national elections as well, lowering voters' interest and willingness to participate in all elections, not just European ones.

Armed with its findings, the EES will now petition for funds to create a comprehensive database for the European social science community which will feature the most essential

information required for a recurrent audit of the most important aspects of the electoral process in the EU.

PROVIDING A CLEARER PICTURE

In the pilot study, PIREDEU gathered information on campaign strategies and issue agendas for 1,350 electoral candidates from 200 political parties across 27 nations. It has found that there is a great disparity in the manner in which individual nations regard their political candidates: in some cases, candidates are viewed as interchangeable representatives of their party, while in other countries, individuals carry greater visibility than the parties for which they stand. Franklin regards this as an important aspect of voter behaviour that requires further study: "EU Member States run the gamut between these extremes, and in many countries we actually do not know to what extent the individual characteristics and policy pronouncements of candidates are important to voters".

It has been suggested that the nature of the electoral process may differ between Member States, with some making it easier or more difficult for voters to distinguish between candidates when casting their vote. This raises the question of the candidate's role within a party, be it as a leader or a mouthpiece, and whether this matches the



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expectation of voters. Franklin explains that the focus of the pilot study on the pan-European Parliamentary elections helps to elucidate some of these issues: "European Parliament elections are, perhaps paradoxically, good opportunities to study these features of electoral dynamics precisely because the issue content and role of policy preferences at these elections are so muted. These are circumstances in which candidate relevance, if any, should be able to show itself to maximum advantage".

IMPACT TO DATE

The PIREDEU team have recently submitted their Final Report on the Feasibility Study to the EU's DG Research, which will provide the basis of the next phase of their research. However, their work to date has already had a considerable and tangible impact, as Franklin elaborates: "We have already disseminated the substantive results of the project's feasibility study which, because it constituted a fully-fledged election study in its own right, has given rise to scholarly papers and articles". To date, over 40 papers have utilised data gathered through PIREDEU, and this has proven popular with those directly involved in the European politics: "The project's final conference was attended by officials working in the European Parliament who expressed considerable interest

in some of the findings, even going so far as to commission a special report on turnout at these elections," comments Franklin.

AN ONGOING INVESTIGATION

While the initial funding period is drawing to an end, there is still much life in the PIREDEU initiative, and Franklin is keen to see the project reach its full potential. "We hope that PIREDEU may act as a model for national election studies, and particularly for the development of an infrastructure of national election studies," he remarks. "The first steps towards the establishment of such an infrastructure have already been taken by the founding of the Consortium for European Research with Election Studies (CERES), which, it is planned, will serve as an umbrella association for both national election studies and European Parliament election studies." PIREDEU is the first project of this kind to address and attempt to eliminate problems of data linkage at the point at which the data collection effort is designed.

With the success of the pilot study and the first steps taken to establish an infrastructure for research on electoral democracy in the EU, PIREDEU has demonstrated a considerable commitment to furthering knowledge about European parliamentary voting, and has provided the basis to develop research in this field in the foreseeable future.

INTELLIGENCE

PIREDEU

PROVIDING AN INFRASTRUCTURE FOR RESEARCH ON ELECTORAL DEMOCRACY IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

OBJECTIVES

To assess the feasibility of an upgrade to the European Election Studies that will provide an infrastructure for research into citizenship, political participation, and electoral democracy in the European Union.

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DR MARK FRANKLIN received his PhD from Cornell University in 1970 and his BA from Balliol College, Oxford in 1964. He has since held teaching positions at a number of institutions, including Trinity College Connecticut, and the University of Houston, Texas. In September 2006 Franklin became the first holder of the Stein Rokkan Chair in Comparative Politics at the European University Institute in Fiesole. His main teaching and research interests lie in British, European and American government; political economy and methodology; and the attitudes and behaviour of elites and mass publics.

