

THE UK POLITICAL LANDSCAPE¹

1) The compasses



England



Scotland

¹ This graphic and its description are based on the so-called 'political landscape' of the voting advice application EU Profiler. For positioning the parties, the EU Profiler academic team extensively researched the manifestos and other sources of the covered parties and positioned them on the statements of the EU Profiler. For more details on the EU Profiler and its methodology, please visit www.euprofiler.eu or contact Dr. Fabian Breuer (Fabian.Breuer@eui.eu).



Northern Ireland



Wales

2) Description

The elections in context

The 72 members of the European Parliament (MEPs) that represent the United Kingdom (UK) will be elected on Thursday, 4th June. In England, Scotland and Wales, the electoral system used to elect MEPs is a proportional regional closed list system, while in Northern Ireland (where 3 MEPs are elected), the Single Transferable Vote system is used. Electors in England will also vote in local (county council and unitary authority) elections the same day.

These elections come at a very bad time for the governing Labour Party and for the other establishment parties. Public support for the Labour government is at a very low level and attacks from opposition parties are increasing in number and ferocity, not least because the

next general election must be called by May 2010. More immediate is the fallout caused by a national newspaper's publication of the expense claims of several Members of Parliament (MPs). This has left all three main parties (Labour, Conservatives, and Liberal Democrats) having to defend (where possible) the behaviour of their MPs and having to argue that the often extravagant expense claims were made within the rules.

Opinion polls and vox pops indicate that this scandal has provoked fury among the British public. The establishment parties have now tried to respond to the situation – several individual MPs have been excluded from their parties and the scandal has also cost the Speaker of the House of Commons his job – but the public remains angry both at the time it has taken the parties to acknowledge the extent of the problem and at the nature of the excuses given to defend MP behaviour. The depth of feeling on this issue, coupled with the second-order and proportional representation nature of the European Parliament (EP) elections, promises to benefit smaller, anti-political establishment parties that do not normally fare well in UK parliamentary elections. The fact that a number of these smaller contenders also oppose the status quo on the European Union (EU) – with some even calling for outright withdrawal from the organization – is also likely to help them. That said, the European nature of the election will be limited to some extent anyhow as, in the UK, elections to the EP tend not to focus on EU issues very much at all.

The parties contesting the elections across the UK

The EU Profiler examined the four nations of the UK separately because the party systems in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland differ to a greater or lesser extent. The three large parties (Labour, Conservatives, and Liberal Democrats) as well as the British National Party (BNP) and the UK Independence Party (UKIP) will present candidates in England, Scotland and Wales. A number of smaller parties that were not coded in the EU Profiler (including the newly established Jury Team and the No2EU: Yes to Democracy list, as well as the Socialist Labour Party and the Christian Party) will also run across England, Wales and Scotland.

In England, in addition to the parties just mentioned, the EP elections will also be contested by the Green Party of England and Wales. In some regions in England, a number of smaller contenders (not included in the EU Profiler codes) such as Libertas, the Pensioners Party, Animals Count, and the Party for Cornwall will also run. In Scotland, the Labour Party, the Conservatives, the Liberal Democrats, the BNP, UKIP and the smaller parties mentioned above will also be joined in the contest by the Scottish National Party (SNP), the Scottish Green Party – both of which are included in the EU Profiler – and the Scottish Socialist Party (not included in the Profiler). In Wales, the EP elections will be fought by the parties mentioned above as well as by Plaid Cymru and the Green Party of England and Wales.

The party system in Northern Ireland differs completely from that of the rest of the UK because in Northern Ireland the most significant cleavage is the religious cleavage. The Protestant parties, the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) support the retention of Northern Ireland's place within the UK, whereas the Catholic parties, the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) and Sinn Féin (SF) support moves towards a united Ireland. All four of these parties are represented in the Northern Irish Assembly and UK Parliament, and they are all included in the EU Profiler. The Green Party, the Traditional Unionist Voice, and the Alliance Party will also take part in the EP elections, but are not included in the Profiler.

Individual party profiles

The governing Labour Party is just right of centre on the socioeconomic dimension of the EU Profiler. In fact, and somewhat surprisingly, the party is slightly further to the right on this dimension than the Conservative Party, and the only party further right on this dimension is UKIP. The explanation for this position lies in the fact that the Labour Party is relatively leftward leaning on economic matters (government spending, taxation, income redistribution etc) but adopts a position on social issues that might be described as 'non-libertarian'. This includes a relatively tough stance on law and order issues, a relatively restrictive policy on immigration, and a position that implies a curtailment of civil liberties if terrorist threats are to be contained.

On the EU integration dimension the Labour Party occupies a quite pro-EU integration position. This position is explained by the party's general support for integration and the belief that the UK is much better off in the EU than outside it, as well as by the party's support for a greater role for the EU in foreign and defence policy. What keeps the Labour Party from being even more pro-EU integration is its rejection of any tax-raising powers for the EU, its call for a reduction of EU agricultural subsidies, and its refusal to hold a national referendum on any future European treaty.

The Conservative Party is positioned centrally on the left-right socioeconomic dimension. On economic issues, the party is relatively right-wing. For example, it favours a reduction in government spending and would like to see tax cuts, and it is also a strong supporter of further deregulation in the labour market. On social issues, its position is more mixed. The party has quite a restrictive position on immigration, but has liberal views on same-sex marriage and civil liberties.

On the EU integration dimension, the Conservative Party is positioned very centrally, suggesting that the party can neither be described as pro-EU integration nor anti-EU integration. On the one hand it rejects any tax-raising powers for the EU, it wants to see an end to EU agricultural subsidies, and it is very strongly against EU integration in defence and security policy. On the other hand, however, the Conservative Party continues to believe that the UK is better off in the EU than outside of it, and it also sees a role for the EU in cooperation on foreign policy.

The Liberal Democrats occupy a left of centre position on the socioeconomic dimension. On economic issues, the party is keen to continue to invest in social programmes even though it maintains it can achieve tax cuts at the same time, while on many social issues (law and order issues, same-sex marriage, civil liberties) the party adopts a libertarian position.

The Liberal Democrats are the most pro-EU integration party of all the pan-British parties – only Plaid Cymru is as pro-integration. Although, like many UK parties, the Liberal Democrats want to see a drastic reduction in EU subsidies to farmers, the party calls for a greater role for the EU in foreign policy and defence policy, as well as for stronger powers for the EP.

The British National Party (BNP) is an anti-political establishment party commonly classified by political scientists as a party of the extreme right. Much of its support, however, appears to come from alienated working-class voters who might otherwise support Labour or abstain from voting. The party has won local council seats in disadvantaged places like Stoke-on-Trent and threatens Labour in some English European Parliament regions. The BNP is best known for its hostility to immigration and its support for 'voluntary repatriation' of immigrants and those of non-European ethnic backgrounds. These extreme right-wing positions, however, are counteracted by the party's support for the welfare state (for example, opposition to the privatization of health care) and increased protectionism ('British jobs for

British workers'), facilitated by withdrawal from the EU. The result is that the BNP ends up being placed just to the right of centre on the socioeconomic dimension, while it shares an extreme anti-EU integration position with UKIP.

The UK Independence Party (UKIP) is the most right-wing party in the UK. As concerns economic issues the party calls for very substantial tax cuts, for a reduction in government spending, and for a drastic reduction in employment regulations. UKIP also adopts a right-wing stance on social issues: one of its most prominent policies is a five-year freeze on immigration, and its stance on law and order is also relatively strict. The party also stands out from most other parties in the UK parties in as much as it opposes any policies designed to protect the environment if these hamper economic growth.

Given that UKIP was originally created to campaign for a withdrawal from the EU, it is not surprising to see that the party is located right at the 'anti' end of the EU integration dimension. The party still calls for the UK to leave the EU, and adopts anti-EU stances in all policy areas. As such it is against any tax-raising powers for the EU, it calls for an end to EU agricultural subsidies, it sees no role for the EU in foreign or defence policy, and it rejects any further powers for the EP.

The Green Party of England and Wales is positioned on the left of the socioeconomic dimension. In England, it is the party furthest to the left, while in Wales only Plaid Cymru outflanks it. The party advocates strong social welfare programmes and favours an increase in income tax for higher income earners. It is also a firm supporter of workers' rights and is therefore against further deregulation in the labour market. On social policies, the Green Party (E&W) adopts a libertarian stance. For example, while the party does not want to see an increase in net migration, it does not propose to make immigration regulations more restrictive and, unlike a number of other UK parties, it does not call for immigrants to assimilate into the national culture. Similarly, there are libertarian elements to the party's policies on law and order, including for instance a strong emphasis on the rehabilitation of criminals. In addition, the party supports same-sex marriage, the legalization of soft drugs, and the right to assisted suicide (within a tight framework).

On the EU integration dimension the Green Party (E&W) occupies a relatively moderate 'anti' position. The party is against the EU acquiring tax-raising powers; it wishes to see an end to EU agricultural subsidies; and it does not favour a greater role for the EU in foreign affairs or defence matters. It does, however, support an extension of powers for the EP. These positions are perhaps best explained by the Green Party's general commitment to decentralization and devolution which rests on the principle of bringing power as close to the people as possible.

The Scottish Green Party is distinct from the Green Party of England and Wales but, in general, its policies are very similar to those of the English and Welsh party. The only difference that the Profiler picks up between these two parties is that the Scottish party is even more opposed to further economic liberalization and restrictive financial policy than its English and Welsh counterpart. The Scottish Green Party has held seats in the Scottish Parliament (elected by a form of proportional representation) ever since devolution in 1999.

The Scottish National Party (SNP) is a civic nationalist party with anti-establishment traits. It calls for Scotland's departure from the UK and the establishment of an independent Scottish state within the EU. The party holds centre-left and somewhat pro-EU integration positions on most of the policy areas examined in the Profiler, although it strongly supports immigration into Scotland, a place that has historically lost population. The SNP's main rival, Labour, faces a major electoral challenge in June, thanks to Labour's own problems (both UK-wide and in Scotland, where the party has been in decline), and to the SNP's strength, magnified by the continuing popularity of Scotland's First Minister and SNP leader, Alex Salmond.

Plaid Cymru (Welsh for 'Party of Wales') is another civic nationalist party with anti-establishment traits. It calls for greater powers of self-government (and eventual independence) for Wales and strongly supports membership of the EU, with a pro-EU integration position similar to that of the Liberal Democrats. The party also exhibits many 'new politics' characteristics, being strongly in favour of environmental protection and a more liberal society (for example, the party is opposed to the harsher punishment of criminals). These policies help to position the party slightly to the left of the Greens, making Plaid the most left-wing party in Britain. Its supporters are found mainly in the more rural and Welsh-speaking parts of Wales. By contrast, Plaid's counterpart in Scotland, the more centrist SNP, has more broadly based support, attracting voters from various geographical, occupational, and age backgrounds.

The Democratic Unionist Party (the largest party in the Northern Irish Assembly) is positioned to the centre-right on the socioeconomic dimension, primarily as a result of its attitudes towards social issues. It has a strong position on law and order, and opposes euthanasia, the decriminalization of soft drugs and the legalization of same-sex marriages. The DUP is located relatively low on the EU integration dimension. Although the party supports remaining within the EU as part of the UK, it is against further integration and opposes the strengthening of the European institutions.

The Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) is found nearer the centre of the political spectrum on both the socioeconomic and EU integration dimensions. It is positioned just to the right of centre on the socioeconomic dimension, and this location is mainly explained by the party's position on social issues. It calls for more severe punishment for criminals, and it opposes laws liberalizing same-sex marriages and the personal use of soft drugs. On economic issues it is less right-wing and supports the expansion of the welfare state. On EU integration, the UUP is more moderate in its opposition to European integration than the DUP. It supports the continuing role of the UK within the EU, but opposes the acquisition of greater powers by the European Union.

The Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) is positioned on the centre-left of the socioeconomic dimension. It calls for higher taxes and increased public spending and it strongly supports workers' rights. The SDLP also favours further EU integration and is the only Northern Irish party to do so. The party supports a united Ireland's position within the EU and it advocates the strengthening of the powers of the EP.

Sinn Féin, the largest Catholic party, is the most left-wing party in the Northern Irish political system. It strongly supports the expansion of the welfare state, and favours increasing taxes to do so, it calls for greater environmental protection, and it is a particularly strong advocate of regulations that protect workers' rights. While Sinn Féin shares many positions with the SDLP as regards socioeconomic issues, the two parties' positions on EU integration differ markedly. Sinn Féin is the most Eurosceptic party in the Northern Ireland. While it has a neutral attitude with regard to the position of a united Ireland within the EU, the party strongly disagrees with the strengthening of the powers of the EP and any other moves towards increased supranationalism.