



London and the South East

www.lme-lse.org.uk



Policy Paper

No 1

January 2007

Note: The 'Polish Voter' in the title stands representative for the whole group of EU-foreigners living in Britain. We would like to thank Lewis Baston from the Electoral Reform Society and David Walker who contributed to this document in a personal capacity.

1. Introduction

What is the EU-Vote?

There are over one million non-British EU citizens living in the UK, a very large percentage of them in and around London. According to a mixture of statistics coming from the Office of National Statistics, Electoral Commission and local council data, they are more than four times less likely to be registered for elections than British citizens.

As of now, none of the political parties in London and the South East of England have developed an electoral strategy to entice this part of the electorate to vote for them, or to participate in the electoral process at all. Against the backdrop of poor turnout at local and regional elections, the activation of the EU-electorate can be a crucial strategic advantage, especially in marginal constituencies.

Some examples show a limited recognition of the potential. In the run up to the Scottish Elections in May the SNP is targeting Polish voters explicitly. In other specific local neighbourhoods, like Lambeth North, where there is a strong Portuguese community, some election flyers have been produced in Portuguese in the last council elections, but without a wider strategy to approach this community on issues specific to them.

The Principle of Participation

Voting is the basic right and expression of participation in the democratic process. Encouraging EU-citizens to vote in the UK in elections in which they are entitled to vote is as much about active participation and empowerment as it is to encourage British citizens to vote in European elections, using their rights to contribute towards the shaping of the EU.

Obviously business and public sector regulation are the most developed areas within the EU – however, the EU can only work if citizen participation is encouraged and recognised as equally important. The EU is not only about reducing trade barriers and negotiating agricultural standards and quotas. In addition to freedom of movement of labour, we have to recognise the freedom of movement of participatory rights, encouraging EU-citizens to not only contribute economically in a place of their choice within Europe, but also to contribute socially, culturally and politically.

Only in this way can we make Europe work on a local level.

Local, Regional and European Voting Rights

All non-British EU citizens are eligible to vote in three out of four types of elections. As with British EU citizens living in other EU countries, they can vote and stand in:

- Local government elections
- Elections for regional tiers of government, as in Scotland, Wales and London
- European Parliament elections

However, they are not eligible to vote in general elections (except for Irish and Cypriot citizens).

Local and regional elections are seen by the main political parties and by the electorate as elections of secondary importance, and attract lower turnout (30-40 per cent as opposed to 60-70 per cent). The electoral strategy employed in these elections for example as far as target group selection is concerned always looks with one eye at the next General Election. Transfer of power to the Mayor of London and the GLA on the one hand, and growing *aquis communitaire* on the other, make these elections more important than ever in their own right, as does the possible decentralisation of some powers to local government.

2. The Need for a Strategy

The very large numbers of potential EU voters in London and the South East mean a huge opportunity, both to strengthen the bonds between European citizens and to influence the political balance within London and the localities. The interests of foreign residents, particularly EU foreigners, are important in the realities of the situation in London – they are sensitive to many of the qualities London needs to develop as a world city. And in a low turnout regional or local election, a mobilisation of the resident EU voters could have a strong impact on the overall result. For the parties, there is a chance to engage with a new electorate, pilot new methods of communicating and adding to the debate, and keeping in touch with the realities of London.

Political parties who wish to ask EU-foreigners for their votes and had a convincing narrative for this electorate could surely benefit from a strategy to encourage participation.

Three key elements would have to be recognised in a strategy:

1. A first step would be to increase awareness amongst UK-based EU-foreigners of their democratic rights as EU-Citizens. This would serve to encourage people who make use of the right to move and work to any other EU-country, to also engage in the political process there, as an EU-citizen.
2. Secondly one would need to entice them to register with their local authority as eligible voters in order to create the formal basis for their participation in the political process in the UK, and to encourage the local authorities (in line with their duties under the Electoral Administration Act 2006) to maximise registration of these voters.
3. Finally, local authorities also have a duty to promote voting in their areas, including participation by EU voters. For the Labour Party, an electoral strategy and narrative is required to motivate this group to vote and to give incentives for why their votes should be for Labour.

3. Levels of Access - Labour's Chances to capitalise

Locally

On a local level, district and unitary councils and London boroughs have a legal duty to maximise electoral registration. In this light, councils should be encouraged to reach out to EU-foreigners in order to get them on the electoral register. The means of communicating to councils can be through formal and informal channels, including encouraging Labour councils to take this statutory duty seriously and putting pressure on opposition controlled councils through members' questions to do the same.

While the London & South East Labour Movement for Europe (LME/LSE) can contribute to an information/action campaign targeting councils in London and the Southeast, outlining the missed groups and opportunities, more work should be done on local CLP level to engage with EU-citizens in a move to specifically motivate them to register their vote first and to vote Labour. Their impact is likely to be highest in inner London boroughs, although the growth of communities of EU voters elsewhere (e.g. new Poles in Southampton) means that the possibilities can be applied in nearly all areas.

London-wide

Since EU-citizens in London are also eligible to vote in the Mayoral and GLA elections, which are coming up in 2008, there is an added incentive to encourage this missed electorate.

In a local context where there are specific Europeans, like Portuguese or Polish one could approach them as individual national groups but in a London context for Mayoral and GLA elections and for the European Parliament there need to be general messages for the EU electorate.

The Mayor's focus on the recognition of London's cosmopolitan nature would fit in well with this strategy, as it would truly involve all Londoners, not only the British citizens and descendents of former colonial dependents who have established themselves as immigrant communities.

EU-citizens make up a large, significant group of more recent immigrants and need to be recognised as groups to be involved. At the moment they do not obviously fall within the multi-cultural framework which is mostly geared up to deal proactively with ethnic diversity, rather than cultural diversity. With Europeans making up about 10 per cent of the population in London this wider understanding of cultural diversity needs to be remedied.

Also, discriminatory parties such as the BNP would have it much harder to achieve electoral success. This is an important aspect for the upcoming London-regional elections in 2008. Due to the proportional representation system and against the backdrop of recent electoral fortunes for the BNP, the activation of the EU electorate could make a real contribution to limit the influence of the extremist parties.

Furthermore, given the historical experience of some EU-countries, and the different environmental standards of others, European citizens could be engaged on messages such as anti-fascism, housing, transport (working EU foreigners benefit

particularly from improvements to the bus service in London) and environmental policies.

EU-wide

For EU-elections, EU-citizens can chose to either vote in the UK for local European candidates or via a postal vote to vote for the European candidates of their home country.

Since strengthening the UK's progressive policy in Europe should be high on Labour's agenda, it would be preferable to encourage as many resident EU-citizens as possible to be registered to vote for EU-elections here, which again – if Labour gets their EU-voter-strategy right – significantly increases the chances of (Labour) candidates.

Most specifically, since all EU-citizens can work and live in the UK due to rights they have as EU-citizens, their vote could contribute significantly to keeping candidates from radical anti-EU parties like UKIP in check who do not want to contribute to the EU but instead only want to undermine EU-institutions in their development.

4. Who are the European Citizens in London?

In all the above, we assume that there is a strong potential for EU-citizens to support Labour policies, both on a local and regional and EU-level.

Statistics

Total European/Local Government Electorate and Electorate Entitled to Vote through European Union Citizenship, December 2004	Electorate Qualifying through European Union Citizenship	Total European/Local Government Electorate	Percentage of European/Local Electorate Qualifying through EU Citizenship
London borough			
City of London	333	6,018	5.5
Barking and Dagenham 1,756		119,372	1.5
Barnet	8,004	214,421	3.7
Bexley	1,369	171,904	0.8
Brent	10,252	180,665	5.7
Bromley	3,458	228,983	1.5
Camden	11,378	144,326	7.9
Croydon	5,010	246,866	2.0

Ealing	11,685	215,814	5.4
Enfield	6,048	194,611	3.1
Greenwich	5,055	160,176	3.2
Hackney	6,904	129,274	5.3
Hammersmith and Fulham 10,460		116,144	9.0
Haringey	9,495	152,486	6.2
Harrow	3,739	162,049	2.3
Havering	947	175,668	0.5
Hillingdon	3,852	181,145	2.1
Hounslow	5,759	165,583	3.5
Islington	6,904	120,297	5.7
Kensington and Chelsea 14,608		98,629	14.8
Kingston upon Thames 3,340		99,014	3.4
Lambeth	13,016	203,055	6.4
Lewisham	5,650	177,731	3.2
Merton	6,184	135,678	4.6
Newham	7,651	171,815	4.5
Redbridge	2,319	181,192	1.3
Richmond upon Thames 4,614		120,146	3.8
Southwark	7,664	180,173	4.3
Sutton	2,069	131,315	1.6
Tower Hamlets	5,180	145,444	3.6
Waltham Forest	5,547	159,399	3.5
Wandsworth	11,378	211,816	5.4
Westminster	15,402	135,810	11.3

Source: Office of National Statistics, as reported in House of Commons Written Answers 16 January 2006. Data excludes citizens of Ireland and Cyprus.

These figures are likely to seriously understate the eligible numbers of EU foreigners. The Electoral Commission/ONS study *Understanding Electoral Registration* (2005) found that 19 per cent of EU qualified voters were unregistered, compared to 5 per cent of UK citizens. The influx of EU nationals since 2004 will have significantly increased the proportions of potential voters, and probably by introducing a large number of work-seeking young people added to the difficulties of finding and registering them. The proportions for some boroughs, particularly Hackney, seem rather low given the high levels of EU voters in other comparable authorities.

Sense of Belonging

We will have to differentiate between different groups of EU citizens living in London and the South East.

First of all, there is a differentiation between EU 15 (-1) or EU 10 citizens, now joined by a limited number of Bulgarians and Romanians. While there is a split between “lifestyle migrants” (for example French, German, and Scandinavian EU –citizens who come to live in the UK because of London’s cosmopolitan appeal, because their job brings them here, or because they like to just “live abroad”) and economic migrants (who mostly come from the recent EU-expansion states and mainly migrate to find better-paid jobs).

While their individual reasons to move to the UK may play into the electoral topics of interest to these migrant groups, another differentiation is more central to initially engaging European voters:

1. Migrants who move to the UK/London & the Southeast only for a few years to progress in their career or to generate income for their family who will often remain back home.
2. Migrants who stay here for an open-ended time, who make their living in the UK and build an existence, but maintain their citizenship of the home country.
3. Migrants who stay here and eventually become British citizens. While adopting British citizenship, often to help with overcoming bureaucratic obstacles, many EU-citizens still remain closely attached to their cultural community and thus are accessible for different topics than born English nationals.

If not involved actively in the local communities AND the political process locally, there is an increased danger of contributing to the already deeply split society we live in, as these groups will live mainly within their own community or with other similar people, instead of participating fully in their new home, whether temporary or permanent. To communicate with existing cultural-national communities, a British political party needs ‘interlocutors’ with that community and an ability to communicate in the right language, and strike the right notes, with the community. Labour in many areas has been successful at finding interlocutors and integrating communities such as the Bangladeshi community into local politics. The same may be possible for EU voter communities.

Also, in general, EU-citizens from Southern and Eastern EU-countries are more likely to remain close to their direct cultural community, while Western and Northern Europeans often do not so much live within their direct community, but more in a diverse community of other Europeans in London. The latter group specifically can obviously be targeted on the basis of cross-European topics and issues, such as the environment, the EU, benefits and social care, as well as foreign policy and the economy at large.

5. Is there an affinity to vote Labour?

Europeans and the UK Conservatives:

The UK Conservative Party is quite distinctive in its free market outlook and its insistence on the role of the individual in contrast to society and broader social models at large. On the basis of these underlying principles, it sits quite to the right of other European conservative parties. Consequently, there is a fair chance that even fairly conservative immigrants will find the Conservatives too far right in comparison with the conservative programmes they are used to in their countries of origin.

Also, there are examples from countries such as Poland, whose descendants are seen as rather religious and conservative in values. However, due to past Conservative criticism of Polish immigration in general and arguments about the need to control it, there is only a small likelihood that the majority of this group can be persuaded to vote Conservative. The British context of religion in politics is also different, in that while the Catholic Church is associated with conservative politics in Poland (and other countries), most British Catholics are of Irish origin and supportive of the political left in Britain.

The same will be true for different groups, for similar reasons.

Europeans and the Social Model of Labour

Most European countries are unified in a general understanding of the positive role of the European welfare-state and overall social model (although this looks different in different countries). However, it comes together in having a common understanding of the ground-rules and responsibilities within societies, which has a much closer fit with a social model propagated by labour policies, locally and nationally, rather than with the individualist mantra of the conservative party.

This is why Labour has a prime opportunity to engage a majority of EU-citizens in the political process on its side, and should not miss the opportunity to engage with all possible voter groups.

Europeans and the Trade Unions

The UK trade union movement has recognised the needs of migrant workers, and the fact that they are often – at least initially – in a vulnerable position in the UK labour market. Successful trade union organisation among EU foreigners in Britain enables new channels of communication to be opened with them, and further integrates them into labour movement values.

6. The Challenge

- Acknowledge the existence of the EU-citizens in the UK
- Aim to register them onto the electoral register in their local communities.
- Develop an electoral strategy to capture their imagination
- Set this strategy in the framework of the wider Labour campaign. Policy areas such as transportation, housing and jobs are feasible connection points