

The first elections by direct universal suffrage

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The first elections by direct universal suffrage

The first elections to the European Parliament by universal suffrage were held in June 1979. Parliament and the Commission organised a huge publicity campaign to encourage European citizens to show their support and turn out for the vote. The elections were designed to change the basis of Community legitimacy directly by allowing citizens to take part in the decision-making process of the European Economic Community (EEC).

However, the turn-out was relatively low. Across Europe, nearly 40 % of the electorate did not bother to vote. Turn-out is obviously influenced by the electoral legislation in force. In Belgium and in Luxembourg, where voting is mandatory, participation is naturally higher (90 %) than in Great Britain, where voting is optional and held on a weekday (32 %). Moreover, the elections to the European Parliament, which are sometimes held at the same time as elections at national or regional level, are often used by voters to project national issues onto the European ballot and Community decisions.