

2010-06-08

Who are the Members of the European Parliament?



Researcher: Jan Å Johansson
www.ooiceurope.com

Introduction

This research has been done in order to enlighten the public of the social composition of the European Parliament (EP), an assembly that gets more and more political influence in the European Union. The EP is meant to represent the citizens of the European Union but, due to the distance between the electorate and the Members of the European Parliament (MEP), the accuracy of this representation is seldom analysed. How a European Parliament best represents the citizens of the European Union (and if the current composition is acceptable or not) must, therefore, be debated. Statistics on the split between men and women that sit in the EP exist, but a more thorough scrutiny has not been done.

MEPs' social background

First, it must be said that no one can change their social background. One's actions are more important in understanding the effects of social issues within the society.

Equal representation of men and women in the parliament, for example, is seen as an important ideal in most countries. According to the European Parliament press service, the outgoing European Parliament of 2009 had 31 percent women and the incoming EP in June 2009 had 35 percent. However, the female representation varied a lot between the individual member states.

Also, that ethnic minorities should be represented in a national parliament is an accepted norm. When it comes to representation of all social groups in a society, the standards might differ from country to country. In some countries (Scandinavia, for example) the idea is that the parliament should represent all social categories in the society. In other countries, the parliamentarians are all seen as leaders and should therefore have a high education and a successful background in their respective business or career, regardless of the party's political ideology.

In Scandinavia, the United Kingdom, and Germany, trade unions have a long tradition of working in politics; blue collar workers with little of formal education have had a fairly strong representation in national parliaments. Workers and trade unionists have been elected from the left as well as from the conservatives, liberals, and Christian Democratic parties.

It must also be noted that different countries have different histories and traditions of what defines "good representation" in an elected parliament.

The following table should be seen as indicative (not exact) due to the differences in definitions and statuses of various professions across the 27 member states. The interesting thing is to compare the EP data with the composition of occupations in the society as a whole. Each MEP's occupation immediately before getting elected as a member of the European Parliament has been counted. For those that were full-time politicians when elected, the occupation before they became full-time politicians has been checked. Discrepancies in data may exist due to the change in availability of MEP's CV brought about by the development of the Internet. Therefore, results from 1996 and 1999 should not be directly compared with the results from 2010.

Table. Members of the EU Parliament by profession in the 7th EP (2010), 5th EP (1999)¹ and 4th EP (1996)².

	Number of MEPs April 2010	Percentage of MEPs April 2010	Number of MEPs July 1999	Percentage of MEPs July 1999	Number of MEPs Feb 1996	Percentage of MEPs Feb 1996
Politicians	395*	53,67	198	31,63	121	19,33
Civil servants	36	4,89	99	15,81	134	21,41
Legal professions, lawyers, judges	34	4,62	54	8,63	63	10,06
Journalists, editors	26	3,53	38	6,07	40	6,39
Business people, entrepreneurs, directors, management in business	73	9,92	35	5,59	30	4,79
University employees (academic staff)	34	4,62	32	5,11	40	6,39
University professors	10	1,36	26	4,15	25	3,99
Teachers	11	1,49	30	4,79	46	7,35
Engineers	4	0,54	24	3,83	34	5,43
Employees of NGO:s & Trade unions	28	3,80	20	3,19	8	1,28
Economists	6	0,82	18	2,88	15	2,40
Middle management private sector	16	2,17	0	0	0	0
Farmers, agronomes	11	1,49	13	2,08	16	2,56
Political EU functioneers	13	1,77	0	0	0	0
EU functioneers	3	0,41	0	0	0	0
Cultural sector (writers, artists, actors)	5	0,68	11	1,76	8	1,28
Physicians	9	1,22	9	1,44	20	3,19
Nurses	1	0,14	0	0	0	0
Social workers	2	0,27	0	0	0	0
Non-professional workers	3**	0,41	8	1,28	12	1,92
Diplomats	5	0,68	2	0,32	4	0,64
UN consultant	1	0,14	0	0	0	0
Veterinarians	1	0,14	2	0,32	3	0,48
Architects	0	0	2	0,32	3	0,48
Clergy	3	0,41	2	0,32	2	0,32
Students	4	0,54	1	0,16	2	0,32
Translator	1	0,14	0	0	0	0
Rally driver	0	0	1	0,16	0	0
Police	1	0,14	0	0	0	0
Military officer	0	0	1	0,16	0	0
<i>Total</i>	<i>736</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>626</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>626</i>	<i>100</i>

¹ Research by Jan Å Johansson & Jonas Sjöstedt, then MEP, November 1999.

² Research by Prof Sören Wibe, then MEP, March 1996.

Notes:

* Of the 395 members that were full-time politicians before being elected to the European Parliament, 209 could be traced back to a previous profession. These 209 members had a past as follows: 41 directors, management or similar, 35 legal professions, 24 university employees, 21 civil servants, 15 teachers, 14 physicians, 13 university professors, nine journalists or editors, seven employees from NGO:s or Trade unions, five diplomats, four farmers, four middle management in the private sector, three economists, three from the cultural sector, three clergy, one each had been student, architect, worker in the public sector, nurse, translator, engineer and police officer.

** Of the three non professional workers, one was a secretary to a medical doctor, one a metal worker but full time trade union trustee, and one an air stewardess, but also trade unionist.

Some things must be observed:

The border between being a politician by profession and previous professional career can in some cases be blurred. We have tried, therefore, to look at the different backgrounds and professions of the MEPs at the time of their election to the EU Parliament. Some have also had multiple professions at the same time as half-time politicians, entrepreneurs, university employees, trustees, etc.

Sometimes the title “civil servant” does not say much, but the majority of MEPs that had this occupation had senior-level positions.

More professional politicians get elected to the EP today than in the 1990s. In other words, many more of the MEPs today have had a long political career in national governments, national parliaments or at regional or local political level. The importance of the European Parliament has increased due, in part, to the considerable raise in MEP salaries after the 2009 election.

At least 88 % of the MEPs have a university bachelor degree or higher. If 88 % of the 387.931.840 eligible voters in EU 27 had the same, the EU would have around 340.380.000 citizens that are highly educated. The education system in the member states is not currently structured to allow so many people to be educated.

In another example: of the 736 MEPs, 23 are university professors (even if 13 of them have full time political careers before becoming MEPs). This means that 3,125 percent of the MEPs have such a title. If the same percentage existed among the 387.931.840 eligible voters in the EU, the EU-27 would have around 12,1 million university professors.

Ethnic background

An individual's ethnicity is self-defined. The interesting thing here is not the question of race, but—in a European Union that wants integration and free movement of persons –the number of MEPs that have first or second hand experience with migration.

The creation of a euro zone requires a higher mobility of the work force in the future. But are people in Europe willing to move to another member state, learn another language well enough for a professional career, and adjust to another culture and mentality, etcetera? Also, can their elected politicians really know what all this means and requires from the people?

A vast majority of the MEPs represent the member state where they were born and where they belong to the ethnic majority. In fact, so few MEPs come from an immigrant background or an ethnic minority, they can be described in full in this report:

The first group: Representatives from minority languages in member states. For example: Hungarian speaking MEPs from Romania and Slovakia, Turkish speaking MEPs from Bulgaria, a Swedish speaking MEP from Finland (who managed to keep his seat in spite of a reduction in the size of Finland's EP delegation) and Roma minorities in various member states. It should be noted that one Hungarian member of EP belongs to the Roma minority. In total, during the history of the directly elected EPs since 1979, three MEPs have come from Roma minorities in the EU (two from Hungary and one from Spain).

The second group: Representatives from member states with areas outside the European continent. France has at present one member from Guadeloupe in the West Indies (a French overseas department) and one from New Caledonia (special status in France).

The third group: Representatives who were born in one member state but have immigrated to another member state that they now represent in the EP or members whose parents immigrated from one member state to another member state that they now represent in the EP. In total there might be four or five such members.

The fourth group: Three MEPs were born in a European state that is not a member of the European Union. One French member was born in Norway, one French member was born in the former Soviet Union and one Swedish member was born in Bosnia.

The fifth group: Eight MEPs were born in countries on other continents. One Italian member was born in Egypt, two French members were born in Morocco, two French members were born in Algeria, one French member was born in Vietnam, one British member was born in Sri Lanka and one British member was born in India.

The sixth group: Six MEPs have parents that were born in countries on other continents. Three of them are French MEPs, two are British MEPs and one is a German MEP.

The seventh group: Three MEPs have one parent that was born on another continent. One Dutch MEP has a Turkish parent, one Belgian MEP has a Moroccan parent, and one French MEP has a parent from Martinique (a French overseas department).

The total of MEPs above is around 30 persons, less than 4 percent of the total number of MEPs.

The rest of the MEPs (around 96 %) are almost exclusively drawn from the white Western European middle and upper class. The vast majority have an academic education. Many MEPs are political professionals with long careers in politics behind before being elected as MEPs. In general, they have made a political career at the regional level or via their national Parliament. Some have even been ministers. Those that were not professional politicians when elected to the EU Parliament were recruited by their political parties, almost without exception, from successful careers as lawyers, physicians, university professors, business people, and so on.

The directly elected European Parliament was founded in 1979 and for around the first twenty years the position of MEP was seen as an opportunity for younger politicians to show their competence for further political careers, or as a “thank you” to older politicians for previous work. Occasionally, a celebrity was nominated to attract voters in the election. The increased salary is designed to recruit more politicians that are at the peak of their careers. Rather than being a minister in government or in national opposition with potential to be in the next government, the hope is that rising political figures will opt to become MEPs instead.

In total, not more than 30 MEPs out of 736 have had first or secondhand experience with family migration. This is not impressive in a European Union where, for decades, so many member states have taken in immigrants to fill up job vacancies or welcomed political refugees from different parts of the world.

Conclusions

The educational and professional profile of the MEPs is not proportionate to the professional profile of the electorate. The MEPs are, to a large extent, the elites of the European Union. Whether this is right or wrong is a matter for debate.

Around 66% of those that have trouble paying their bills at the end of the month did not vote in the EP elections of 2009.³ Are the current MEPs, with their present social backgrounds and experiences, able to identify with these voters' daily problems?

Mobility and integration between member states are said to be keystones in the European Union. Can the MEPs understand the implications of this when so few (4%) of them have firsthand experience with migration?

³ 2009 Post election survey. European Parliament Eurobarometer (Standard EB 71.3) - spring 2009. Fieldwork 12 June - 6 July 2009. Coverage EU 27, 26 830 European Union citizens.