The European Parliament (EP) is the only directly elected institution in the European Union. The first European Parliament elections took place in 1979 and they are now held every 5 years. This year the EP elections will take place in all 28 EU member states on 22nd–25th May 2014. EU citizens will vote for 751 Members of the European Parliament (MEPs). Any EU adult citizen can vote in the member state where they live, even if it is not their home country. UK voters will be electing 72 MEPs.

How are MEPs Elected?
In every EU member state, the electoral system used for the EP election must be based on the principle of Proportional Representation (PR). Smaller parties are often more successful in European elections than at national elections due to the use of PR. There are many different systems of PR and member states can choose which system to use.

The UK ‘closed list’ system of PR:
Under the UK’s ‘closed list system’, the country is divided into 12 voting regions (constituencies). In each electoral region, political parties submit a list of candidates and then the electorate votes for a particular party. Voters cannot choose to vote for an individual candidate, they can only choose between parties. If, for example, a party wins a big enough proportion of the vote to win two seats, then the two candidates at the top of that party’s list are elected. Closed list systems are criticised for reinforcing the power of political party leadership; a candidate’s position on the list is decided by party leaders and if a candidate is higher up the list, they are more likely to be elected. Closed-list systems are also criticised for making it difficult for voters to reject an individual representative if they feel that he/she has done a bad job in office. This can encourage candidates to prioritise loyalty to their party rather than concentrating on their relationship with the voters who elected them.

Ireland’s Single Transferable Vote (STV) system of PR:
Ireland uses the Single Transferable Vote (STV). Under STV voters choose the individual candidates in order of preference by writing 1, 2, 3, etc in the box beside the candidates’ names. Each constituency sets a quota to determine how many votes a candidate needs to be elected. If a candidate gets more votes than the quota, they are elected and their extra votes are transferred to the remaining candidates in the order of preference that voters had indicated on the ballot papers. Candidates with the fewest votes are progressively eliminated and their votes are also transferred to the more popular candidates.

Parties and Groupings in the EP
Once MEPs are elected from the 28 member states, they do not form political parties in the European Parliament based on their nationality (for example, there is no ‘British Party’ made up of MEPs from the UK). Instead, MEPs from many member states form parties (or groupings) in the EP based on their political stance (e.g. the centre-right European People’s Party (EPP) and the centre-left Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D)). Creating EU-wide groupings is meant to encourage MEPs to represent voters on a European level, rather than concentrating on national issues. EP parties are often very loose groupings with, for example, pro-European and Euro-sceptic parties sitting in the same group.
No EP grouping has an overall majority, but political groupings need to build a majority to influence law-making in the parliament. This is why the two largest groupings – the EPP and the S&D - build coalitions with smaller groups to pass or block legislation.

How the President of the European Commission is elected:
Under a new system set out by the Lisbon Treaty, which says EU leaders must ‘take account’ of the elections when choosing the next President of the Commission, the leading party in the European elections will put forward a candidate for the Presidency. MEPs will then vote on the nomination in June. This is an attempt to make the process more democratic, as Commission Presidents were previously elected by EU national leaders. The top 3 candidates for the Presidency are Jean-Claude Juncker, from the EPP, Martin Schulz from the S&D and Guy Verhofstadt of the European Liberals.
The European Parliament elections this May will be the first time EU citizens will be able to hold European leaders to account over the handling of the Eurozone crisis. A total of 30 parties are running for election in the UK; though the most prominent parties are running in every region, smaller parties are confined to specific regions only. Below is a summary of the main contenders, and the platforms they are running on.

**What do the parties want?**

**Conservative Party**

The Conservative party have pledged to hold a referendum on Britain’s membership to the EU by the end of 2017. Under the “Let Britain Decide” campaign, David Cameron has proposed to first renegotiate the terms of Britain’s EU membership and then hold a referendum on whether Britain should remain a member on the basis of those terms.

**UK Independence Party (UKIP)**

UKIP leader Nigel Farage urged voters to “join the People’s Army and cause an earthquake in Europe” in the party’s political broadcast – referring to the party’s belief that Britain should withdraw from the EU entirely in order to regain its sovereignty and trade freely with European and non-European countries alike.

**Liberal Democrats**

The Liberal Democrats are perhaps the most pro-European party running for election, although they do want institutional reform. Party leader Nick Clegg said he would “fight” to stay in the EU, believing that an exit would leave Britain “isolated and diminished in the world.”

**Labour Party**

The Labour Party has chosen to largely avoid the European issue, choosing instead to focus on domestic issues such as tuition fees and the NHS. Party leader Ed Miliband did state however that it was “unlikely” Labour would hold a 2017 referendum on Britain’s membership to the EU if it won the general election in 2015. Under Labour, a referendum on membership would only be held in the event of more powers being transferred from London to Brussels.

**Green Party**

The Green Party is running under a “Three Yeses” campaign - yes to a referendum, yes to major EU reform and yes to staying in a reformed Europe.

**British National Party (BNP)**

The BNP also want Britain to withdraw from the EU entirely, but they also want to freeze immigration and restore trade ties with countries such as Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

**Scottish National Party (SNP)**

Party leader Alex Salmond stated that a vote for the SNP would guarantee that Scotland’s interests were represented in Brussels. He distanced himself from the “ravid euroscepticism” of Westminster, believing that a more social Europe would be beneficial to Scotland. He plans for Scotland to join the EU if it becomes independent.

**Plaid Cymru**

Like the SNP, the party wants to secure Welsh interests at the EU level. This includes encouraging skilled migrant workers to move to Wales and fighting to make Welsh an official EU language.
The 2014 European elections in the UK took place on Thursday 22nd May, alongside local elections in certain regions. The United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) made history by winning their first ever election, taking 27% of the vote, and a total of 24 seats. The anti-EU party now has MEPs in Scotland, Wales and every region of England.

The European elections have often been referred to as the last real test of nationwide sentiment in the UK before the next general election in 2015. Following UKIP’s victory, party leader Nigel Farage declared that the ‘UKIP fox is in the Westminster hen house’ – but the party only have one MEP in London.

The first-past-the-post electoral system used in the general elections also makes it harder for smaller parties to win seats.

UKIP claimed that they missed out on another seat in the European Parliament because of votes going to another Eurosceptic party with a similar name. An Independence from Europe appeared first on the alphabetically ordered ballot paper and gained 23,000 votes in the South West region.

The Labour Party did well in London, winning half of the region’s eight seats. This helped to push the Tories, who won the 2009 European elections, down to third place. Prime Minister David Cameron wrote an article in the Irish Times, which also appeared in newspapers in France and Germany, in which he interpreted his party’s poor performance and the low voter turnout (34.19%) as a sign that voters are not happy with the way the EU is working.

The Lib Dems suffered a heavy defeat in the elections, losing all but one of their MEPs. The BNP saw a 5.1% decrease in votes since 2009 and lost their only MEP, leader Nick Griffin.
**General European Results**

The 2014 election for the European Parliament was marked by the victory of Eurosceptic and protest parties on both sides of the political spectrum, which together gained approximately a quarter of the 751 seats. Nevertheless, the centrist blocs Christian Democrats (EPP) and centre-left Socialists (S&D) retained a majority in the European Parliament.

**Turnout**

After declining for decades, voter turnout increased during this election, though only by 0.1% compared to the 2009 election. Turnout was highest in Belgium, where voting is obligatory and only 10 percent abstained, while Slovakia had the lowest turnout of only 13%. Enthusiasm was also low in other Eastern European states, despite the fact that these countries receive more money from the EU than they contribute. In general, around 160 million or 43.1% of the 375 million eligible voters in Europe cast their ballots.

**Significant gains for Eurosceptics**

In two principal European states, France and the UK, anti-EU parties came out on top; both the French National Front (FN) and UKIP increased their number of MEPs to twenty-four and won a national election for the first time. As a consequence of these results, French President Hollande and UK Prime Minister Cameron emphasized the necessity to take this election outcome seriously.

In other member states, far-right parties gained substantive support; the Greek 'neo-Nazi' Golden Dawn party and the Hungarian anti-immigration Jobbik party, for example, both won three seats. Furthermore, Udo Voigt has been voted in as an MEP for the German National Democratic Party, which some have argued should be banned due to its neo-Nazi character.

The election results in Germany were also surprising given that seven seats were won by a new party called Alternative for Germany (AfD) - the only moderately Eurosceptic party in the generally pro-EU country. Although not against the EU itself, AfD argues that the euro is fundamentally flawed.

On the left end of the political spectrum, Eurosceptic parties also succeeded in gaining a considerable share of the votes. The anti-EU Five Star Movement (M5S) managed to gain just over a fifth of all Italian votes. In Greece, the Coalition of the Radical Left (Syriza) triumphed with 26.6% of the votes. Although Syriza wants Greece to remain in the Eurozone, it is pushing to renegotiate the 'catastrophic' Greek bailout. The new Spanish anti-austerity party “We Can” (Podemos) that is rooted in the indignados movement managed to win five seats. Podemos does not oppose the Euro either, but wants to increase public control over a wide variety of sectors such as energy, transport and information technology.

**Continued prevalence of centrist blocs**

Despite the general trend of winning Eurosceptic parties, there were notable exceptions such as the Netherlands. The anti-EU and anti-immigration Freedom Party (PVV) was predicted to cause a political watershed, but finished third after two pro-EU parties. In Italy and Germany as well, pro-EU parties were victorious. The Democratic Party (PD) of Italian Prime Minister Renzi as well as the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) of German chancellor Merkel received strong support - 41 and 35% of the votes respectively.

This sustained though declined support for parties that take a relatively positive stance towards the EU preserved the traditional stronghold in the European Parliament of the EPP and S&D. These two main groups gained almost 30% and over 25% of votes respectively; pro-EU blocs still prevail by almost 70% overall. This led Mr Barroso, President of the European Commission, to conclude that these blocs continue to have 'a very solid and workable majority'. The question remains, therefore, whether and to what extent the generally Eurosceptic vote by the European electorate will be acted upon by the MEPs in Brussels.