

# THINK PRAY Vote



## European Elections 2019

## This European election is unlike any other.

The UK Government and many others do not think the election should happen. It could even be cancelled before election day. The people elected may not ever take their seats and, if they do, they may not serve a full term. This election will take place in the midst of a national conversation which has often been polarising and confusing and has revealed many divides in our country.

While the European Parliament has real powers over a wide range of issues, in the UK these issues are incidental to the public debate. The main issue of this European Election is one which many people (but by no means all) view as already settled, and one over which the people standing for election will have little or no formal influence: Brexit.

Some may choose not to vote, others will cast their vote in protest. Polarised feelings about Brexit and frustration with this election mean that the campaign, nationally and on the ground, may be unpleasant in tone. At a time of heightened political feeling, we need a civilised and respectful debate.

What is the role of Christians at such a time? This briefing considers some of the political context in which the election is taking place, and invites you to consider what it means for you and how you might respond.

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The Church of Scotland



The United Reformed Church



### Why are we voting?

Almost three years after the United Kingdom voted by a narrow margin to leave the European Union and its parliament, voters are being asked to return to the ballot box to decide who they want to represent them in the European Parliament.

The intervening years haven't seen any real public or political debate about the kind of country we want to live in after Brexit. Instead we have been focusing on the withdrawal deal itself. The UK Government's deal has been repeatedly rejected

by the Westminster Parliament, and as a result, the two-year Article 50 process has been extended twice, now until 31 October 2019.

The UK Government hopes to prevent this election from taking place. However, whilst the UK remains a member of the European Union, we are obliged to participate in these Europe-wide elections.

### Turning up... even when it's difficult

The upcoming European elections raise a number of questions about democracy and our role as active and engaged citizens. As Christians, we are called to live and work for a better society, loving our neighbour and working for God's Kingdom of justice and joy. There are many ways in which we can do this. Voting in elections is one. Through voting we recognise our responsibility to participate in the political process, to show up and make our voices heard.

This responsibility is even more important in volatile and uncertain times.

Christians will disagree in good faith about the right attitude as we approach polling day, and will vote for different parties. However, living in a democracy as a disciple of Jesus, we are called to engage in the political process to seek justice, transformation and the wellbeing of our neighbour.

In the context of the upcoming European elections, it would be easy to become cynical about our ability to achieve this. These elections will dominate the news agenda, and the implications of the outcome are impossible to predict.

**But as Christians, we are called to show up and make our voices heard even when it is difficult.**

What does "turning up" look like for you? It could mean wrestling with the question of how to cast your vote, having reflected on the call to love our neighbour. It could mean registering to vote, or helping those around you to register. It may involve talking with others, particularly those with whom you disagree about the vote, and the issues beyond it. It may involve finding ways to challenge narratives which are divisive, aggressive or exclusive, recognising the need for safety and civility in the election process. The challenge to "disagree well" is one which is particularly necessary in this election.

“As God's chosen ones...  
clothe yourselves with  
compassion, kindness,  
humility, meekness  
and patience.”

Colossians 3:12, NRSV

## What can we do?

### Think

Find out what the different parties in your area are campaigning for. It's important to take time to understand the differences, and the things they are prioritising. You can find information about your region here: [democraticdashboard.com](http://democraticdashboard.com)



In previous elections, we have encouraged churches to organise or participate in hustings for candidates. This is much more difficult for European elections with regional constituencies and closed lists, let alone with the heightened feeling around this election. Any hustings meetings should be arranged with others and after taking the advice of the police and other authorities. Your church may wish instead to put its energy into opening up conversations in the church or community. JPIT's *Conversation Welcome* resource is designed to help local churches and community groups hold respectful, informed discussions about the big issues that divide our society. Find it at [www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/conversationwelcome/](http://www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/conversationwelcome/)

### Pray

*God of Justice,*

*you have given us the chance to vote.*

*Help us to reflect and use our votes wisely  
to tackle injustice where we see it,*

*and to pray for countries where people do not have the opportunity to vote.*

*God of Love,*

*you tell us to love our neighbours as ourselves.*

*Help us to participate in elections in ways  
which demonstrate our love for our neighbour,*

*and to wrestle with what the common good means for us today.*

*God of Transformation,*

*you have called some people*

*to put themselves forward as candidates.*

*Help them as we debate their ideas for a better world*

*and support them as they experience the strain and privilege of election.*

*We ask these things in the name of your son Jesus Christ,*

*Amen.*



- Use the prayer offered here in the run up to the election.
- Pray for candidates, perhaps by name, recognising the pressure that elections put on individuals and families.
- Pray for the political parties, that they will be guided by a desire to work for the common good of God's Kingdom.
- Pray for voters that we will use our votes wisely and with discernment.
- Pray for all those involved in organising the elections and ensuring integrity.

### Vote

And of course, don't forget to vote!



## The political context

The European elections have long been used by voters in the UK to make a political statement about domestic politics, as well as to elect MEPs. This year's elections are likely to be more of a reflection of people's views on Brexit than an expression of the parties they want to represent them in the European Parliament.

Two parties – the Brexit Party and UKIP – are seeking votes on a ticket of a fast exit from the EU without a deal. The two largest parties in England and Wales, the Conservatives and Labour, are both deeply divided about Brexit. The Liberal Democrats, Change UK and the Greens are calling for a “People's Vote” or second referendum, as are both the nationalist parties at Westminster, the SNP and Plaid Cymru.

It is not within the powers of MEPs to make either a faster Brexit or a second referendum happen. Those powers are reserved for Westminster MPs. It is clear that while the result will generate much discussion around what it means for Brexit, it will likely reveal little more than that the country is still highly divided about Brexit.

This election presents huge difficulties for many. It is likely that large numbers of people will stay at home – as many always have in European elections – while many others will break with their traditional political allegiance and vote for parties they had not previously considered. People may choose to send a signal to Westminster with their vote, others may choose to look at issues beyond Brexit in the hope that candidates will have the opportunity to work effectively as an MEP.

The combination of proportional representation and low turnout increases the potential for racist and extremist parties to have their candidates elected.

We are called to participate even when it is difficult. We are called to challenge those who have values we believe to be incompatible with Christianity. It is hard to reconcile walking away from this election with our responsibility to build a society where we love our neighbour.

It will not be easy and we will need to learn from our mistakes. However, this election is a chance for us to begin to engage in these challenging debates that will shape our country for years to come.



## In the long term – the pain of finding new identities

Politics is undergoing a shift that goes way beyond this election. For decades there has been a long and slow process of change as people have started identifying less and less with the once significantly held labels of Labour and Conservative. These parties were formed around economic and class identities which have changed radically. Our party allegiances, in general, have become shallower and more pliable.

The 2016 referendum revealed a raw divide. This divide was not based on the traditional economic left/right political spectrum but on an open/closed axis around cultural change and world views. People cast their vote for many reasons in the referendum, but the terms “Leaver” and “Remainer” map closely to this new divide.

This opens up debates which are much more obviously linked with personal identities than economic questions. The US experience of dealing with some of these issues, in what is called their “culture wars”, shows the potency and ability of these ‘wedge’ issues to hurt, exclude and divide.

We do not know how this will work itself out in the context of UK politics. Our existing party system has managed these tensions for decades and may be capable of adapting to address them again. The result, however, may be much more substantial and even lead to changes to our democratic processes and institutions.

What is clear is that during this change there is a real potential for debates to toxify and damage. The boundaries of “legitimate debate” and appropriate language have already been stretched to breaking point. **Our role as Christians must be to engage as fully as ever but also to model behaviour that encourages constructive and peaceful dialogue.**

### Further resources:

Find out more about the elections and the European Parliament at [www.european-elections.eu](http://www.european-elections.eu)

Biblical reflections produced by The Joint Public Issue Team – [www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/election-resources/](http://www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/election-resources/)

Scottish Churches Parliamentary Office’s advice on running a People’s Politics model meeting – [www.scpo.scot/meet-your-msp/peoples-politics-model/](http://www.scpo.scot/meet-your-msp/peoples-politics-model/)



## Essential Information

On Thursday 23 May the UK is due to elect 73 Members of the European Parliament. Elections are taking place across the 28 member countries of the European Union for 751 MEPs to serve for the next five years.

### Register to vote!

To vote you need to register to vote by Tuesday 7 May. Register online at [www.gov.uk/register-to-vote](http://www.gov.uk/register-to-vote) or via your local Electoral Registration Office, which is usually run by your local authority. If you are not able to vote in person at your local polling station, you can apply for a postal or proxy vote.

To be eligible to vote, you need to be 18 years of age or over on polling day and a British citizen, a qualifying Commonwealth citizen or a citizen of another European Union country resident in the UK.

If you are a citizen of another EU country (other than Ireland, Malta and Cyprus) resident in the UK, you can either vote in the UK or in your home country. To vote in the UK, you need to be registered to vote and also complete a special registration form and send this to your local authority by 7 May. This is available from [www.yourvotematters.co.uk](http://www.yourvotematters.co.uk). Registration deadlines vary from country to country.

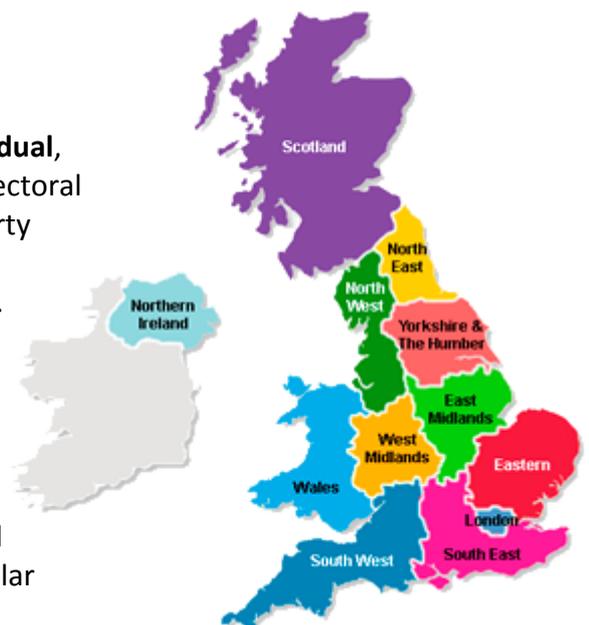
### What does the European Parliament do?

The European Parliament is one of the core institutions of the European Union. It is involved in shaping European legislation and budgets and supervising the work of the European Commission. It is the second-largest directly elected parliament in the world, by number of constituents, as it is elected by the citizens of all 28 European Union member states. It meets in Brussels and Strasbourg.

### How does voting work?

Unlike other UK elections, you vote for a **party** and not an **individual**, apart from in Northern Ireland. The country is divided into 12 electoral regions and each region elects between 3 and 10 MEPs. Each party ranks their candidates in each electoral region in the order they would like them to be elected, in what is known as a 'closed list'. You get a single vote, which you cast for your party of choice. The seats in the region are allocated in proportion to the number of votes cast for each party.

In a closed-list system, where you vote for a party rather than a particular candidate, it is harder for voters to question individual candidates and impossible to show your preference for a particular candidate within a list.



# THINK PRAY VOTE

Produced by The Joint Public Issues Team: the Baptist Union of Great Britain, Church of Scotland, Methodist Church and United Reformed Church working together for peace and justice.

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