With the European elections around the corner, Martin Banks reports on the groups and associations who are presenting their “wish lists” to the new intake of MEPs.

The range of groups coming forward with election ‘manifestos’ and ‘pledges’ for prospective MEPs are as rich and varied as the mix of candidates themselves. They range from faith groups and animal welfare organisations to those representing industry and environmental causes.

Each, however, have one thing in common: they seek to steer election candidates to their cause and - if elected in the 23-26 May poll - persuade them to champion them during and after the campaign. They can do so by signing a ‘pledge’ or backing ‘calls to action’. The Parliament Magazine asked a number of NGOs and associations what they hope to achieve.
One such group is the European Transport Safety Council (ETSC), a Brussels-based organisation dedicated to reducing the number of transport-related deaths and injuries. Dudley Curtis, its communications manager, said, “We have produced a briefing for the European parliamentary elections to help inform interested voters, road safety advocates and current and candidate MEPs what we think the key priorities will be for road safety over the next parliamentary mandate in terms of EU action”.

He continued, “In addition, we sent a questionnaire to each of the political groups to get their feedback on these priorities. We will soon publish the results, so voters can see for themselves where the groups position themselves on key areas of European action on road safety”. Curtis said that such a proactive move is nothing new, adding, “We did the same ahead of the previous parliamentary elections, so this is not a new initiative for us.

However, European action is being criticised these days, more often than in the past. So, it’s more important than ever to explain how past EU initiatives, such as improved vehicle safety standards, have helped save lives in ways that would have been very difficult or impossible with countries acting alone. For us, it’s not a question of whether before or after the election is best.

Parliament has played a critically important role in road safety over many years, so we want to do our best to maintain existing relationships and develop new ones. And it’s always a good idea to be early when setting out priorities”.

“Parliament has played a critically important role in road safety over many years, so we want to do our best to maintain existing relationships and develop new ones” Dudley Curtis, European Transport Safety Council

IndustriAll Europe, which represents more than 50 million working people in more than 140 countries, has an election manifesto that calls on EU leaders and candidates to “put workers first”. It covers five areas, ranging from jobs (“a pay rise for workers across the EU”) to a “just transition” to a low-carbon economy.

Its general secretary, Luc Triangle, said its manifesto aims to bring the “voice of workers to the debate about the future of Europe that will take place throughout the campaign”. He added that, “With populist and far-right forces on the rise, we believe these are the most important European elections ever and that the future of the project is at stake.

Therefore, we want to set out a positive vision of what Europe could become: a social project which provides solutions to the challenges facing workers in all countries, like poverty, climate change and digitalisation. It’s important that, ahead of the elections, workers know there is a progressive
alternative to both the austerity policies of recent years and the scapegoating and division offered by the populists.

By asking political parties to support our manifesto ahead of the election, we’re also making sure that they will know which candidates share our vision for the future of the EU when they go to vote”.

BusinessEurope is one of the official partners of Parliament’s election campaign and its President, Pierre Gattaz, said that along with numerous other “pro-European voices”, it has “unrolled” a number of initiatives, including debates and awareness raising via the press and social media, videos with testimonies about “what can be achieved thanks to Europe.”

He adds, “More than 40 percent of our citizens are still undecided on whether to go and vote. We believe that casting a vote is the first step to be part of the solution, hence our slogan Europe is voting: make it your business”.

Meanwhile, Inclusion Europe, the EU-wide body representing people with intellectual disabilities and their families, has produced a manifesto for candidates. Its director Milan Šveřepa said, “We want to tell our members and the European inclusion movement how important the elections are and encourage them to cast their vote.

The manifesto is a tool of engagement in the run-up to the elections. We are putting forward the ideas that are important to people with intellectual disabilities and their families”. In doing so it wants to give those “who care about such issues some direction on which topics they may want to address with candidates”.

Šveřepa said, “We see that our approach is working very well. Our members are using our manifesto for their own campaigning for the elections. They have helped us to translate it into 13 different languages. Our manifesto aims to show our strong attachment to Europe and the EU and we think that this can be seen throughout the entire text”.

“We want to set out a positive vision of what Europe could become: a social project which provides solutions to the challenges facing workers in all countries” Luc Triangle, IndustriAll

Meanwhile, Laurianne Krid, director general at Fédération Internationale de l’Automobile (FIA), a consumer body comprising 105 mobility clubs representing over 36 million members from across Europe, the Middle East and Africa, said that by publishing a manifesto ahead of the elections, it wanted to “make sure decision makers know in advance what is at stake in the next legislative term”.

Krid added, “Our manifesto for mobility outlines six core themes that EU decision makers must address: consumer rights, road safety, connectivity, clean mobility, innovation and cross-border travel. In each, we want to see MEPs back approaches that truly consider the consumer impact and ensure that safeguards are in place to protect them. The Commission, Council and Parliament will have a lot on their hands over the coming years and our message to them is clear: put the user in pole position”.

A spokesman from the European Builders Confederation said that construction SMEs and craftsmen need an enabling political and financial framework that gives them the means to build a sustainable Europe. “This is where our manifesto comes in, with six clear requests for the 2019-2024 European legislative term: inclusive economic growth; a fair internal market; sustainable buildings; a digital single market; more, better and safer jobs and suitable standards”.
Joe Moran, a senior political adviser with Eurogroup for Animals, says it did not produce a manifesto before the elections, “as we want to see what kind of Parliament and Commission we are dealing with before we start laying out concrete priorities. There's no point in asking for the moon and the stars if only the moon is achievable”.

He adds, “We have, however, produced a detailed pledge as part of our 'Vote for Animals' campaign. This not only will allow us to identify our 'champions' early on in the next Parliament, but we also plan on using this to showcase to the millions of followers and supporters of our member organisations across the Union which parties and candidates support new measures to advance animal welfare.

We also used a pledge during the last election campaign so none of this is necessarily new for us. However, our concentration on securing clear commitments from the European parties through their programmes is new. It is key to giving ourselves the best chance of securing animal welfare in the programme of the next Commission.”

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He added, “Who the individual spitzenkandidaten are is less important than the fact that the spitzenkandidaten system exists, this is in itself crucial. In short, these elections give voters the chance to shape the priorities of the Union's executive, and that should excite us all. And we know that voters care about animal welfare”.

However, despite all the wish lists, pledges and manifestos landing on candidates’ desks, some believe there’s little to be achieved by such efforts. A well-placed source in the EPP, Parliament’s biggest group, told this magazine, “It is true that a lot of associations, NGOs and suchlike present their stuff and ask the MEPs to sign or endorse.

Before the elections, normally MEPs sign almost whatever is in front of them because they are looking for votes; the associations and NGOs also use this to bring themselves some publicity and establish better contact with the MEPS. It is a two-way street.” The source added, “In my view, neither the manifestos or declarations nor the signatures of the MEPS have any real added value other than as a supplementary tool to campaign for both sides: politicians and association”.

Former British Liberal MEP Andrew Duff said, “The production of worthy manifestos by business and NGOs is useful policy development for business and NGOs. For candidates it amounts to displacement activity. I only get around to reading my own party’s manifesto once the poll is closed and then never again”.

UK Socialist MEP Richard Corbett said, “Manifestos, suggestions for pledges, appeals for support for various causes, questionnaires and so on are all part of citizen engagement with candidates and a key part of the political process. Candidates should be ready to respond to such initiatives and to engage in debate.”

**About the author**

Martin Banks is a senior reporter at The Parliament Magazine

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