

WHAT IS THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT?

30 years after EU citizens elected their representatives directly at European Union level for the first time, 2009 will see the European Parliament's seventh elections. They will take place from 4 to 7 June 2009. It will be the first time since the accession of Romania and Bulgaria that all 27 EU Member States vote on the same dates.

The European Parliament, in the words of the 1957 Treaty of Rome, represents 'the peoples of the States brought together in the European Community'. Having begun as a simple assembly of members of national parliaments appointed to the European Parliament, it has been directly elected since 1979 – and remains the only directly elected body of the European Union.

The European Parliament has been increasingly transformed from a purely consultative assembly into a legislative parliament; exercising powers similar to those of national parliaments. It has steadily acquired greater influence and power through a series of treaty changes. Today the European Parliament, as an equal partner with the Council of Ministers, passes the majority of European laws. Parliament's powers would be further increased if the new EU treaty (Lisbon Treaty) came into force (ratification is still underway at the time of writing, December 2008).

The European Parliament e.g. attaches importance to the protection of human rights both inside and outside the Union and has used its power as one way of promoting respect for fundamental rights. It has, for example, rejected a series of financial protocols with certain non-member countries on human rights grounds, demanding that those countries release political prisoners or subscribe to international undertakings on human rights protection. Find information about the organization, powers and role of the European Parliament, in all official EU languages on the [European Parliament website](#).

Powers

The European Parliament – like national parliaments - has [three fundamental powers](#): legislative, budgetary and supervisory.

Legislative power

Most European laws are decided in what is called the co-decision procedure between the Council and the European Parliament. There are only a few areas today in which Parliament is only consulted. The co-decision procedure puts the European Parliament and the Council on an equal footing. Together they adopt legislation proposed by the Commission. Co-decision has enabled the European Parliament to have a major impact on European decision-making and to push through e.g. much stricter anti-pollution rules for fuel and motor oils, stricter and more visible health warnings on cigarette packets and the ban of heavy metals in the manufacture of vehicles.

The Parliament has no power to initiate legislation – this power remains with the European Commission. However, the European Parliament frequently adopts, at the instigation of one of its committees, reports designed to steer EU policy in a particular direction. They are called own-initiative reports and are not legally binding, although the European Commission is required to take a position on such reports.

If the Lisbon Treaty comes into force, even more policy areas would fall under the co-decision procedure (that would be called the "ordinary legislative procedure"). This would mean that the Parliament would have practically equal powers to those of the Council.

Example of the influence of the European Parliament

Development Policy

CONCORD

In 2005, in the framework of the review of the EU instruments for external action, the European Commission put forward the proposal to create a “Development and Economic Co-operation Instrument” that included development co-operation with developing countries and economic co-operation with industrialised countries. Two distinct policy areas with distinct objectives were mixed up in a single document.

The European Parliament closely followed CONCORD recommendations and played a key role in the outcome of the negotiations: finally a single instrument for development, targeting only those countries in need of development assistance, was established. Furthermore, the European Parliament introduced spending targets for basic health and basic education, which was also a demand of civil society organisations.

Budgetary power

Together with the Council, the European Parliament is one of the two heads of the EU budgetary authority, which decides each year on its expenditure and revenue. It has the final say on a considerable amount of EU spending. The preliminary work on Parliament’s decision-making in this area is done by its Committee on Budgets in cooperation with the other standing committees. Since 1986 annual expenditure has been part of a multi-annual framework - the ‘financial perspectives’ - adopted jointly by Parliament and the Council. Parliament has the last word on most expenditure in the annual budget. Parliament and the Council consider the Commission’s budgetary proposals in two readings (between May and December). Parliament can reject the budget if it believes that it does not meet the needs of the Union. In that case the budgetary procedure then starts all over again.

With the Lisbon Treaty the Parliament would gain greater powers over the entirety of the EU budget, not just on parts of the expenditure as today.

Example of the influence of the European Parliament

Cultural Policy

Culture Action Europe

In the cultural policy field, the influence of the European Parliament lies mainly in budget-related decisions such as the negotiations of the Culture programme and years designated by the European Union as focusing on cultural topics or annual pilot programmes. In those processes, the Culture and Education Committee proved to have an important impact on both the objectives of the actions and their financial means. Many European Parliamentarians are firm believers in the potential of arts and culture in strengthening the European project and involving citizens in European debates.

Supervisory power

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Composition

Number of Parliamentarians

The number of European parliamentarians per Member State is laid down in the Treaties; there will be 736 Parliamentarians elected in June 2009. (If the Lisbon Treaty comes into force before the 2009 elections, 750 Parliamentarians need to be elected).

Distribution of European Parliamentary seats between Member States												
Changes in the European Elections 2009												
Member state	2007	2009 <i>Nice</i>	2009 <i>Lisbon</i>	Member state	2007	2009 <i>Nice</i>	2009 <i>Lisbon</i>	Member state	2007	2009 <i>Nice</i>	2009 <i>Lisbon</i>	
Germany	99	99	96	Czech Republic	24	22	22	Slovakia	14	13	13	
<i>France</i>	78	72	74	Greece	24	22	22	Ireland	13	12	12	
<i>Italy</i>	78	72	73	Hungary	24	22	22	Lithuania	13	12	12	
<i>United Kingdom^a</i>	78	72	73	Portugal	24	22	22	Latvia	9	8	9	
<i>Spain</i>	54	50	54	Sweden	19	18	20	Slovenia	7	7	8	
<i>Poland</i>	54	50	51	Austria	18	17	19	Cyprus	6	6	6	
<i>Romania</i>	35	33	33	Bulgaria	18	17	18	Estonia	6	6	6	
<i>Netherlands</i>	27	25	26	Finland	14	13	13	Luxembourg	6	6	6	
<i>Belgium</i>	24	22	22	Denmark	14	13	13	Malta	5	5	6	
									Total	785	736	751

^a Includes Gibraltar, but *not* any other BOT, SBA or Crown dependency
^b The speaker is not counted officially, thus leaving 750 MEPs.
Italicised countries are divided into sub-national constituencies

Source http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/European_Parliament_election,_2009, 18 August 2008

Elections procedures

European Parliamentarians are elected through direct universal suffrage by varying electoral procedures depending on the Member States. The European elections are organised within each Member State's electoral boundaries, under national electoral laws and mainly under a national electoral campaign. The duration of a mandate is five years.

Political groups

The European Parliament is unique among supranational assemblies because it organizes itself around ideological rather than national groups. Thus in the European Parliament, parliamentarians sit in political groups, not in national delegations. There are currently seven political groups, plus some 'non-attached' Members. Each political group has a chairman, a bureau and a secretariat.

In some cases a group is the formal representation of a European political party in the Parliament, in others it is a political coalition of a number of European parties, national parties and independent politicians. Each Group is assumed to have a set of core principles, and Groups that cannot demonstrate this may be disbanded.

Political Groups in the European Parliament		
Logo	Name	Political position
	<u>EPP-ED</u> Group of the European People's Party and European Democrats	Christian Democrats
	<u>PSE</u> Socialist Group	Socialists
	<u>ALDE</u> Group of Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe	Liberals
	<u>GUE/NGL</u> Group of the European United Left / Nordic Green Left	Communists –Socialists-Workers
	<u>The Greens/ EFA</u> Group of the Greens / European Free Alliance	Greens
	<u>UEN</u> Union for Europe of the Nations Group	National conservatives
	<u>ID</u> Independence/Democracy Group	Eurosceptics, Eurocritics

Gender parity

Women currently represent 30% of the members of the European Parliament with important variations between Member States and political groups. There are no common binding measures to promote the equal representation of women and men in the European Parliament. As the European Parliament is elected according to national electoral rules, national quotas or parity measures are applied to the European Parliament where they exist (five European countries have introduced quotas by laws, in sixteen countries some political parties have voluntary quotas). For more information go to <http://www.5050democracy.eu/>

Working procedures

Plenary

The European Parliament has its official seat in Strasbourg. That is where the 12 plenary sessions are held. One plenary session per month takes place and lasts one week. The remaining week is devoted to meetings of the political groups. The European Parliament meets and debates in public. Everyone can attend plenary and committee meetings.

Committees

Two weeks in every month are set aside for meetings of the Parliament's committees in Brussels. Standing committees, of which there are currently 20, do the preparatory work for the Parliament's plenary sessions and can be considered as the "heart" of the political process within the European Parliament. The committees draw up reports on legislative proposals coming from the European Commission and own-initiative reports. For the different reports, the committees choose rapporteurs who will draft the report and who are, thus, in a lobbying process, the most important contacts. Before the Parliamentarians vote during plenary sessions, the political groups consider the reports from the Parliament's committees and often table amendments to them. The main work on a report is done within the committee; the reports will rarely be changed decisively in the plenary session. Each committee appoints a chair, three vice-chairs, and has a secretariat.

Find here [a list of the committees](#).