



# The European Parliament

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## Summary

The European Parliament (EP) is one of the three key institutions of the 27-member European Union (EU), and the only EU institution whose members are directly elected. The current EP has 736 members. The most recent EP elections were held on June 4-7, 2009. Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) serve five-year terms.

Once limited to being a consultative assembly, the EP has accumulated more power over time. It performs important functions in the EU's legislative and budgeting processes, and exercises a degree of supervision over the two other main EU institutions, the Council of the European Union (Council of Ministers) and the European Commission. Although the EP does not formally initiate EU legislation, it shares "co-decision" power with the Council of Ministers in many policy areas, giving it the right to amend or reject proposed EU legislation. The recently ratified Lisbon Treaty increases the EP's role further, giving it amendment and veto authority over the vast majority of EU legislation (with some exceptions, such as tax matters and foreign policy). Moreover, supporters argue, as the only directly elected EU institution, the EP increasingly plays an important checks-and-balances role on behalf of Europe's citizens.

Members of the European Parliament caucus according to transnational groups based on political affiliation, rather than by nationality. No single group has ever held an absolute majority in the European Parliament, making compromise and coalition-building important elements of the legislative process. Following the June 2009 election, the center-right *Group of the European People's Party (EPP)* and the re-named center-left *Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats in Europe (S&D)* remain the two largest political groups. Every two-and-a-half years (twice per parliamentary term), MEPs vote to elect a President of the European Parliament to lead and oversee its work and to represent the EP externally. The EP has 20 standing committees that are key actors in the adoption of EU legislation and 36 delegations that maintain international parliament-to-parliament relations.

Although supporters point to the EP's growing institutional significance, the European Parliament faces several challenges of public perception. Some skeptics contend that the EP lacks the legitimacy of national parliaments and exercises little real power. Other analysts observe that the complexity of the EU legislative process contributes to limited public interest and understanding of the EP's role, leading in turn to a trend of declining turnout in European Parliament elections. Another issue is whether MEPs reflect national or European interests—many MEPs tend to campaign on national rather than European issues and many voters view EP elections as a national mid-term election. Criticism has also been directed at the costs incurred by what many consider duplicate facilities—while much of the work of the EP takes place in Brussels, monthly plenary meetings are held in Strasbourg, France, and administrative sections of the EP Secretariat are based in Luxembourg.

Ties between the EP and the U.S. Congress are long-standing, and the Transatlantic Legislators' Dialogue—the formal mechanism for EP-Congressional exchanges—is expected to continue its activities during the second session of the 111<sup>th</sup> Congress. Also see CRS Report RS21372, *The European Union: Questions and Answers*, by Kristin Archick and Derek E. Mix.

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## Role of the European Parliament

The European Parliament (EP) is one of the three key institutions of the European Union (EU). The EU is a treaty-based, institutional framework that defines and manages economic and political cooperation among its 27 member states (Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom). The EP is the only EU institution whose current 736 members are directly elected. Once limited to being a consultative assembly, the EP has accumulated more power over time. Analysts observe that the EP and its advocates have consistently sought to expand its role and responsibilities in the EU policy process. Many believe that successive EU treaties have granted enhanced powers to the EP in order to increase democratic accountability in EU policy-making.

The European Parliament performs important functions in the EU's legislative and budgeting processes, and exercises a degree of supervision over the two other main EU institutions, the Council of the European Union (Council of Ministers) and the European Commission. However, the EP does not initiate legislation. In most cases, that right rests with the Commission, which functions as the EU's executive and guarantor of the EU's treaties. The Commission implements and manages Council decisions and common policies, ensuring that member states adopt and abide by the provisions of EU treaties, regulations, and directives.<sup>1</sup> The Council, the EU's main decision-making body, is composed of ministers from the national governments and enacts legislation based on Commission proposals.<sup>2</sup> In most cases, the Council's adoption of legislation occurs jointly with the Parliament, in a process known as "co-decision."

### Legislative Process

The role of the European Parliament in the legislative process has expanded steadily over time as the scope of EU policy has grown. Initially limited to offering non-binding opinions and proposing amendments ("consultation procedure"), the EP gained more power to affect EU legislation in the "cooperation procedure" of the 1986 Single European Act. The Maastricht Treaty of 1992 (which entered into force in 1993) substantially increased the EP's role, mostly in areas related to the EU's common internal market, with the introduction of the "co-decision procedure." In the "co-decision procedure," the EP and the Council share legislative power and must both approve a Commission proposal for it to become EU law. The Amsterdam Treaty of 1997 (which entered into force in 1999) simplified the "co-decision procedure" and extended it to many additional policy areas (ranging from the environment to social policy). As more decisions within the Council of Ministers have become subject to qualified majority voting (rather than unanimity) to allow for greater speed and efficiency of decision-making, the Parliament's power

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<sup>1</sup> The European Commission is composed of 27 Commissioners—one from each EU member country—who serve a five-year term. The head of state or government of each member country nominates their country's Commissioner. Commissioners, however, do not serve national interests, but rather represent the interests of the EU as a whole. One is selected to lead and represent the Commission as the Commission President. The others hold a distinct portfolio (e.g., agriculture, energy, trade), similar to U.S. department secretaries and agency directors, and are responsible for overseeing legislation and member state compliance, and for representing the Commission, on that issue. Seven Commissioners are double-hatted as Commission Vice Presidents in addition to their portfolios.

<sup>2</sup> Meetings of the Council of Ministers are configured according to the subject under consideration (e.g., foreign ministers would meet to discuss the Middle East, agriculture ministers to discuss farm subsidies).

of “co-decision” has come to be viewed as playing an increasingly important checks-and-balances role at the European level to the Commission and Council.<sup>3</sup>

On December 1, 2009, the Lisbon Treaty—the EU’s latest institutional reform effort—went into effect. The Lisbon Treaty roughly doubles the Parliament’s right of “co-decision” to 80 policy areas, including agriculture and justice and home affairs issues such as immigration and police cooperation. In doing so, the Lisbon Treaty gives the EP a say in most all legislation passed in the EU. Tax matters and foreign policy, however, are among the areas in which EU member states retain decision-making authority and to which the “co-decision procedure” does not apply (the Parliament may give a non-binding opinion). The Lisbon Treaty technically renames the “co-decision procedure” as the “ordinary legislative procedure,” although “co-decision” remains the more commonly used term.

### The “Co-decision Procedure”

The EU’s “co-decision procedure” can be summarized as follows: (1) if Parliament and the Council of Ministers agree on a Commission proposal, it is approved; (2) if they disagree, the Council forms a common position; the EP can then either accept the Council’s common position, or reject or amend it, by an absolute majority of its members; (3) if the Council cannot accept the EP’s amendments, a conciliation meeting is convened, after which the EP and the Council approve an agreement if one can be reached. If they are unable to agree, the proposal is not adopted.

Additionally, in the “assent procedure,” the EP must, by a simple “yes” or “no” majority, approve the accession of new EU member states and the conclusion of all official agreements with third parties, such as association and trade agreements with non-member states. If the Parliament does not consent, such agreements cannot enter into force.

## Budgetary Process

The EP and the Council exercise joint powers over allocation of the EU’s annual budget, such as the amount of funding dedicated to infrastructure as opposed to education.<sup>4</sup> It is similar to the way that the U.S. House and Senate Budget Committees allocate the President’s budget request to various programs. However, neither the EP nor the Council can affect the size of the EU budget—that amount is fixed through percentages contributed from member states’ gross national incomes (GNI) and value added tax (VAT) revenues, as well as from external customs duties.

The budgetary procedure begins with the Commission proposing a preliminary draft budget to the Council. The Council examines the preliminary draft budget and establishes the draft budget, which is then sent to the EP for a first reading. The EP may approve the draft budget or vote to attach proposed amendments or modifications, returning it to the Council for a second reading. After a conciliation meeting with Parliament representatives, the Council then votes whether to take account of the Parliament’s proposed amendments and modifications and returns the draft budget as amended to the EP for its second reading. The EP must then vote to adopt the budget in order for it to become operational. If disagreements persist at this stage, the EP can reject the entire draft budget.

<sup>3</sup> In qualified majority voting in the Council of Ministers, countries are allotted a number of votes in rough proportion to their population size. Passage of a measure currently requires at least half of the member states (two-thirds if not a Commission initiative) and 255 out of the 345 total votes, representing at least 62% of the total EU population. Under the Lisbon Treaty, a simplified formula for qualified majority voting will be introduced in 2014 but not fully implemented until 2017.

<sup>4</sup> The EU’s 2009 budget is EUR 133.8 billion (approximately \$187 billion).

Until recently, the EP had the last word on “non-compulsory” expenditures, such as development aid, but the Council had the final say on “compulsory” expenditures, such as spending related to agriculture or international agreements. The Lisbon Treaty eliminates the distinction between “compulsory” and “non-compulsory” expenditures, and thus gives the EP the right to decide on the entire budget jointly with the Council. Of particular importance, the EP gains more control over agricultural spending, which accounts for over a third of the EU budget. The EP’s budgetary power is considerably greater than that exercised by most parliaments in EU member states, and this “power of the purse” gives the EP significant institutional weight in the EU.

Additionally, the EP examines the Commission’s implementation of previous budgets through the “discharge procedure.” In order to close the budget books of a given year, the EP must vote to grant “discharge” based on reports of the EU Court of Auditors and a recommendation of the Council. In cases of fraud or mismanagement, the EP may postpone or refuse discharge pending a resolution. With its decision, the EP also presents the Commission with binding recommendations and observations regarding implementation of the budget.

## **Supervision and Oversight Responsibilities**

The Parliament plays a supervisory role over the European Commission and the Council of Ministers. As described above, the Parliament’s co-decision and budgetary powers grant it a degree of control over the Commission and the Council in many areas. The EP also monitors the management of EU policies, can conduct investigations, inquiries, and public hearings, and may submit oral and written questions to the Commission and the Council.

The EP must approve the Council’s nomination for Commission President—thus, the relative strengths of the political groups in the EP (see below for more information) can affect who is nominated by the member states to this post. The member states and the EP’s largest political group, which is center-right in political orientation, supported the re-appointment of 2004-2009 Commission President José Manuel Barroso for the 2009-2014 term. Barroso is a former conservative Portuguese prime minister. However, the support of other political groups was needed in order to achieve the majority necessary to approve the nomination. After a series of meetings during which Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) scrutinized and questioned Barroso’s draft program of “political guidelines” for the next five years, the EP voted on September 16, 2009 to confirm his new mandate as Commission President, by a vote of 382 to 219 (with 117 abstentions).

The EP also has the power to accept or reject a newly proposed Commission as a whole (rather than individual nominees). Since 1995, the EP has held U.S. Senate-style confirmation hearings for newly designated Commissioners, who are nominated by the member states for five-year terms. On February 9, 2010, the EP voted to approve the so-called Barroso II Commission for the term ending in 2014.<sup>5</sup> Although a new Commission was supposed to have been in place by November 2009, it was held up because of delays in the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty by some member states. Following the treaty’s entrance into force in December 2009, the confirmation process for the new Commission was further slowed when the initial Bulgarian nominee withdrew her candidacy in mid-January 2010 after a contentious hearing before the Parliament. Some MEPs expressed serious concerns about her past financial dealings and questioned her

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<sup>5</sup> The previous 2004-2009 Commission served in a caretaker capacity until the new Commission was confirmed.

competence for her portfolio.<sup>6</sup> A similar situation occurred in 2004, when MEPs essentially forced the original Italian nominee to the Commission to withdraw due to concerns about his views on homosexuality and women's rights. Some observers view these episodes as signs of the EP's growing confidence and institutional clout.

The EP also has the power to dismiss the entire Commission (although, again, not individual Commissioners) through a vote of censure. To date, the EP has never adopted a motion of censure. However, in 1999, the entire Commission opted to resign rather than face a formal censure by the EP over alleged corruption charges.

## Organization of the European Parliament

Members of the European Parliament serve five-year terms, and have been directly elected since 1979.<sup>7</sup> Voting for the EP takes place on a national basis, with the number of MEPs elected in each country based on population size. Germany, for example, has the largest number of MEPs (99), while Malta has the smallest (5).

The most recent EP elections were held on June 4-7, 2009, with 736 seats at stake.<sup>8</sup> Roughly 375 million European citizens were eligible to cast a ballot in 2009. In EP elections, EU citizens may vote—or run for a seat—in their country of residence, without necessarily holding citizenship in that country. Turnout has declined in every EP election, from 63% in 1979 to a new low of 43% in 2009. Although the overall number is comparable to turnout in U.S. mid-term elections, analysts observe that relatively low voter participation compared to national elections indicates a lack of awareness and understanding in the EU about the EP.

### Political Groups

Once elected, Members of the European Parliament caucus according to transnational groups based on political affiliation, rather than by nationality. A political group must consist of at least 25 MEPs from a minimum of seven EU member states. As in the last EP, there are seven political groups—containing over 100 individual political parties—in the new EP, plus a number of “non-attached” or independent members. Many group arrangements proved relatively stable and carried over from the previous term. However, numerous national parties shifted their group allegiance; one previous group collapsed; one new group was formed; and, reflective of shifting composition, two groups changed their name.

Each group appoints a chair or co-chairs, and maintains a bureau and secretariat to manage its internal organization. Prior to a vote, MEPs within each group study the legislative proposals in question with the support of committee reports, discuss prospective amendments, and seek to

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<sup>6</sup> Bulgaria quickly named a new nominee for its Commission post; her confirmation hearing before the Parliament was held on February 3, 2010. “Barroso has no plans to reshuffle portfolios,” *Europolitcs*, January 21, 2010.

<sup>7</sup> Prior to direct elections, MEPs were appointed by their national parliaments.

<sup>8</sup> There were 785 seats in the European Parliament of 2004-2009; under the EU's 2001 Nice Treaty, which entered into force in 2003, this number was reduced to 736 for the parliamentary term 2009-2014. The Lisbon Treaty sets the number of MEPs at 751 starting in 2014. With the Lisbon Treaty now ratified, it is expected that 18 additional MEPs will be added to the EP, temporarily raising the number of MEPs for the current term to 754.

arrive at a consensus group position. National and partisan divisions within groups routinely impact this process—and individual MEPs are not bound to vote according to the group position.

**Table I. Political Groups and Seats in the European Parliament:  
Results of the 2009 Election**

(736 seats total)

	Total Seats	%
European People's Party [Christian Democrats] (EPP; center-right)	265	36
Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats in Europe (S&D; center-left/socialists)	184	25
Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE; liberals)	84	11.4
Greens/European Free Alliance (Greens/EFA; greens and regionalists)	55	7.5
European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR; right-wing, anti-Federalist)	54	7.3
European United Left/Nordic Green Left (GUE/NGL; far-left and former communists)	35	4.8
Europe of Freedom and Democracy (EFD; euroskeptics)	32	4.3
Non-attached members	27	3.7

**Source:** [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/parliament/archive/elections2009/en/index\\_en.html](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/parliament/archive/elections2009/en/index_en.html).

**Note:** Percentages are rounded.

No single group has ever held an absolute majority in the European Parliament, making compromise and coalition-building important elements of the legislative process. Some analysts assert that distinct ideological definitions between groups are becoming more complicated, as voting blocs form increasingly according to specific issues and interests. Nevertheless, the two largest groups have tended to dominate the Parliament historically.

In the 2009 elections, the *Group of the European People's Party [Christian Democrats] (EPP)* retained its position as the largest political group in the EP. The EPP is center-right in political orientation and contains MEPs from Germany's Christian Democratic/Christian Social Union (CDU-CSU), France's Union pour un Mouvement Populaire (UMP), Spain's Partido Popular (PP), Italy's People of Freedom, Poland's Civic Platform, and numerous other Christian Democratic, conservative, center-right, and centrist national parties. The chair of the EPP is French MEP Joseph Daul.

In relative terms, the strength of the EPP in the 2009 elections increased significantly due to a sizeable drop in support for center-left parties. Although circumstances and issues differed in each EU member state, some analysts interpreted these results as indicating greater public preference for the approaches of conservative and center-right parties in the handling of the global financial crisis and recession.<sup>9</sup>

The *Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats in Europe (S&D)* is the EP's second-largest political group. The S&D is center-left in political orientation and includes Germany's Social Democratic Party (SPD), France's Socialist Party, the UK Labour Party, Spain's Socialist Party, and numerous other Socialist, Social Democratic, and center-left parties. The chair of S&D is German MEP Martin Schulz.

<sup>9</sup> "Voters steer Europe to the right," BBC News, June 8, 2009.

The EPP and the S&D have a history of cross-ideological legislative partnership, and cooperated in a “Grand Coalition” in the 2004-2009 EP (S&D was then called the PES—the Socialist Group in the European Parliament). Critics argue that the consensus-seeking of the Grand Coalition makes politics in the European Parliament stale and paradoxical. Other observers note that maximizing consensus and unity lends the European Parliament greater institutional weight. As a general rule, most MEPs prefer consensus outcomes that are endorsed by a large and broad majority. It appears that another EPP-S&D Grand Coalition is likely for 2009-2014.

The third-largest group is the *Group of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE)*. ALDE is centrist and liberal in political orientation. In European political terminology, “liberal” connotes an emphasis on free market economics, individual rights, social equality and equal opportunity, and de-centralized government. ALDE includes the UK Liberal Democrat Party, Germany’s Free Democrat Party (FDP), and Ireland’s Fianna Fail. The chair of ALDE is Belgian MEP (and former Belgian Prime Minister) Guy Verhofstadt.

The *Greens/European Free Alliance Group (Greens-EFA)* is largely comprised of Europe’s numerous Greens—leftist in political orientation with a strong emphasis on pro-environment politics and human rights—and several independent or regional parties (e.g., Scottish, Welsh, Basque, and Catalanian) with a leftist or center-left outlook. The co-chairs of the Greens-EFA are French MEP Daniel Cohn-Bendit and German MEP Rebecca Harms.

The UK Conservatives, increasingly uncomfortable with the strong pro-integration stance represented by the EPP, broke with the EPP in 2009 and formed a new *European Conservatives and Reformists Group (ECR)*. The UK Conservatives’ major partners in the ECR are Czech Civic Democrats and Poland’s Law and Justice Party. The group is right-wing in political orientation and strongly opposed to a “federalist” Europe. The chair of ECR is Polish MEP Michal Kaminski.

The *European United Left/Nordic Green Left Group (GUE-NGL)* consists of parties that are strongly leftist in orientation, some with a Green emphasis. Member parties include Germany’s Die Linke, the French Communist Party, and the Irish party Sinn Fein. The group is pro-EU and pro-integration, but strongly critical of existing EU structures, policies, and overall direction. The chair of GUE-NGL is German MEP Lothar Bisky.

The members of the *Europe of Freedom and Democracy Group (EFR)* are “euroskeptics” and critics of the EU who oppose further European integration and demand greater transparency in the EU. Its largest contingents are from the UK Independence Party (UKIP), which advocates UK withdrawal from the EU, and Italy’s Lega Nord. The co-chairs of EFR are British MEP Nigel Farage and Italian MEP Francesco Enrico Speroni.

Many of the “non-attached” or independent members of the EP hail from far right extremist parties, which made gains in the 2009 EP elections in a number of countries, such as the Netherlands, Austria, and Hungary. However, these far right MEPs still hold a relatively small number of seats and appear to have little cohesion among themselves. Analysts note that they have been unable to form a political group and as a result are likely to have minimal impact in the current EP; membership in a political group gives MEPs more influence as groups receive more funding and more speaking time in the EP than do non-attached members.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> “Euro MPs build new alliances,” BBC News, July 2, 2009; Stephen Castle, “Far right is left out at EU’s assembly,” *International Herald Tribune*, July 15, 2009.

## **The EP President**

Every two-and-a-half years (twice per parliamentary term), MEPs vote to elect a President of the European Parliament. The majority coalition in the EP (previously and usually an EPP “Grand Coalition” with the Socialists) has traditionally agreed to split the position of EP president over each five-year term. At the opening session of the new EP in mid-July 2009, Members elected Polish MEP Jerzy Buzek of the EPP as the new President of the European Parliament. Buzek, a former prime minister of Poland, is the first ever EP President from one of the central and eastern European member countries that joined the EU in 2004. Martin Schulz of S&D is expected to take over as EP President for the second half of the EP’s current term.

The President of the EP represents the EP externally, and in relations with the other EU institutions. The President oversees the work of the Parliament and is responsible for ensuring that its rules of procedure are followed. The President is assisted in managing the Parliament’s internal organization and affairs by a Bureau composed of 14 Vice-Presidents and six Quaestors drawn from across the EP’s political groups. The signature of the President is the final step in approval of the EU budget, and the President co-signs, together with the President of the Council, legislation adopted under the co-decision procedure. In addition, the President seeks to affect broader EU policies by promoting a few key issues as EP priorities. Since his election in July 2009, Buzek has stressed employment, energy security and the environment, foreign policy and human rights, and EP reform as priorities for his presidency.<sup>11</sup>

## **Committees**

The EP has 20 standing committees. These committees are key actors in the adoption of EU legislation. Each committee appoints a chairman, three vice-chairmen, and has a secretariat. The appropriate committee (e.g., the Committee on the Environment, Public Health, and Food Safety would deal with legislation on pollution) appoints a Member as “rapporteur” to draft a report on the Commission proposal under consideration. The rapporteur submits a draft report to the committee for discussion, which is then voted on and possibly amended. The committee’s report is then considered in plenary, amended, and put to a vote. The EP thus adopts its position on the issue. In terms of their importance and strength, EP committees rival those in the U.S. Congress and surpass the role of committees in most national European legislatures. Ad hoc committees may also be established to investigate or oversee specific issues. For example, in 2006, the EP formed a Temporary Committee that examined the role of EU member states in hosting secret CIA detention facilities and aiding CIA flights related to the rendition of terrorism suspects.

## **Delegations**

The European Parliament plays a role in the EU’s international presence through its 36 delegations, each composed of about 15 MEPs. These delegations maintain parliament-to-parliament contacts and relations with representatives of most countries around the world. For example, the EP has interparliamentary delegations for relations with the United States and the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, as well as with Iran, Israel, the Palestinian Legislative Council, and the Korean Peninsula.

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<sup>11</sup> For more information, see the website of the EP President, <http://www.ep-president.eu>.

## **Administration**

A Secretariat of approximately 5,000 non-partisan civil servants provides administrative and technical support to the Parliament. In addition, MEPs have their own staff assistants and political groups also have their own staff.

## **Location**

Strasbourg, France, is the official seat of the EP; plenary sessions are held there for one week a month. For two weeks a month, the EP's standing committees meet 300 miles to the northwest in Brussels, Belgium, where the European Commission and the Council of Ministers are located. Generally, there is also one "part plenary" session (two days) in Brussels each month. One week is set aside for meetings of the political groups, which are usually held in Brussels. MEPs must have offices and lodgings in both cities. Meanwhile, administrative services sections of the EP's Secretariat are based in Luxembourg, about mid-way between Strasbourg and Brussels. Most EP staff, however, live in Brussels and either commute to France or communicate via telephone or e-mail during full plenary sessions. The costs of having three addresses are high in terms of both time and money, and continue to be a contentious issue (see below).

## **Languages**

Simultaneous interpretation of all parliamentary and committee debates is provided in the EU's 23 official languages. All parliamentary documents are translated into and published in 21 of these languages (Irish and Maltese are sometimes excepted), and some documents must be translated into all 23. Such extensive translation services represent a significant administrative cost.

## **Challenges**

The European Parliament faces several challenges of public perception. Some skeptics contend that the EP, despite being a directly-elected body, lacks the legitimacy of national parliaments and exercises too little power relative to the other EU institutions. Such observers characterize the EP largely as a debating chamber with little binding influence on EU policy. Others maintain that the legislative process of the EU is overly complex and often deals with highly technical issues, leading to a lack of public understanding about the role and significance of the EP. Limited public awareness and understanding of the EP's activities, they argue, is reflected in the consistently declining turnout in European Parliament elections since 1979. Low voter participation, in turn, feeds back into skepticism of the EP's legitimacy as a representative institution, and fuels wider charges of a democratic deficit and a lack of transparency in EU policy-making.

EP advocates assert that "co-decision" and its institutional supervisory roles have substantially enhanced the Parliament's influence. The Lisbon Treaty, in effect, gives the EP veto authority over the vast majority of EU legislation. Observers have noted that the EP has already put some of its new powers acquired under the Lisbon Treaty to use. In mid-February 2010, the EP rejected a U.S.-EU agreement negotiated by the Commission and approved by the Council of Ministers that would have continued allowing U.S. authorities access to European financial data (known as the SWIFT agreement) to help counter terrorism. By a vote of 378 to 196, MEPs blocked the

extension of the SWIFT accord on privacy and civil liberty grounds. Prior to the Lisbon Treaty, the EP did not have the authority to veto such international agreements.<sup>12</sup> Supporters also claim that the EP's influence is growing even in strictly consultative areas, such as the EU's common foreign policy, where the "co-decision procedure" does not apply and where decisions rest largely with the member states. They maintain that the EP has become a forum for debate on international issues, and uses its power of assent on cooperation accords with third parties, as well as Parliamentary resolutions, to promote issues such as human rights.

Closely related to the question of the EP's legitimacy is the issue of whether MEPs reflect national or European interests. The Parliament claims to represent the people of Europe, while the Council speaks for the national governments, and the Commission represents the interests of the EU as a whole. Some analysts observe that the political groups of the EP represent a nascent form of EU-wide politics. Studies on voting behavior in the EP have shown that ideology holds greater influence than nationality, with MEPs voting with their party groups almost 90% of the time.<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, some observers contend that MEPs often promote parochial national interests. Past examples include Italian and Spanish MEPs defending olive growers, and British and Irish MEPs joining forces to oppose tax harmonization measures. And some point out that many MEPs campaign on national rather than European issues. With 27 different national elections for the EP, European citizens vote based on a wide array of different issues. Many voters essentially view EP elections as a national mid-term election—an indication of voter opinion as to the performance of the national government—rather than as a vote on Europe-wide issues.

Another major concern is costs, which the EP has long been under public pressure to reduce. The fact that MEPs and their staffs regularly shuttle between three cities leads to travel and hotel bills that, in the past, have consumed roughly 15%-20% of the EP's budget. Yet, the suggestion that the EP should consolidate its operations in one city has met with strong opposition in the host countries of France, Belgium, and Luxembourg, which fear the loss of symbolism and prestige, in addition to jobs and other economic benefits. Strasbourg was originally chosen as the seat of the EP to serve as a symbol of peace between France and Germany, and both countries argue it should continue to do so. Construction of multi-million-dollar buildings in Brussels and Strasbourg in the late 1990s to accommodate the growth in MEPs following EU enlargement also stirred controversy.

After many years and several failed attempts, MEPs succeeded in 2005 in reforming the Parliament's salary and expense regime. Some MEPs had long complained about pay disparities because they received the same salary as members of their respective national parliaments. For example, Italian MEPs had earned roughly three times more than their Spanish counterparts. Previous efforts to reform the pay system had foundered on the concerns of some member states about the costs of the reforms. Under the new deal, which began in 2009 with the new EP, all MEPs will be paid the same amount in exchange for instituting a reimbursable system for business and travel expenses; previously, MEPs received a flat-rate travel allowance that did not require receipts and contributed to what some consider the Parliament's "gravy train" image.

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<sup>12</sup> "MEPs hail historic rejection of SWIFT deal," Agence Europe, February 13, 2010.

<sup>13</sup> See Simon Hix, Abdul Noury, and Gerard Roland, *How MEPs Vote* (Brighton, UK: Economic and Social Research Council), 2002.

## The European Parliament and the U.S. Congress

Ties between the EP and the U.S. Congress date back to 1972, when a U.S. Congressional delegation first visited the EP in Brussels and Luxembourg. Since then, with a few exceptions, Congressional-EP exchanges have taken place twice a year, and have provided the opportunity for sustained dialogue. The U.S. Congress-EP exchange is the oldest and widely considered the most prestigious of the EP's interparliamentary dialogues.

In 1999, the EP and the U.S. Congress launched the Transatlantic Legislators' Dialogue (TLD) as their official response to the U.S.-EU commitment in the 1995 New Transatlantic Agenda to enhance parliamentary ties between the EU and the United States. With the TLD, the two sides have committed to regular meetings twice a year to discuss a wide range of topical political and economic issues. The EP's Delegation for Relations with the United States represents the EP in the TLD and is led by a chairman, who is elected by the delegation's members and has responsibilities equal to those of a committee chair. The most recent TLD meeting took place in December 2009 in New York City (the venue for the TLD usually alternates between the United States and Europe). Congress and the EP have also conducted video conferences on specific areas of mutual concern. However, some American analysts observe that the TLD remains relatively obscure, with ambiguity regarding which U.S. members actually belong, and no role given to the U.S. Senate.<sup>14</sup>

Many MEPs would like to enhance cooperation with the U.S. Congress even further. In March 2009, the EP adopted a resolution, which among other measures, asserted that the U.S. Congress and the EP should promote closer ties between legislative committees and should create a reciprocal legislative "early-warning" system to identify potential legislative activities that could affect relations between the United States and the EU. In January 2010, the EP also deployed two staffers to Washington to establish a EP-Congress liaison office; these EP staffers will seek to keep the EP better informed of legislative activity in the U.S. House and Senate by attending hearings, following legislation, and establishing working relationships with Members of Congress and their staffs. The EP also hopes that the U.S. Congress will consider the possibility of setting up a similar Congressional liaison office in Brussels.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> For more information, see the European Parliament's website on the Transatlantic Legislators' Dialogue, [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/intcoop/tld/default\\_en.htm](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/intcoop/tld/default_en.htm). Also see the section on the TLD in CRS Report RL34735, *Transatlantic Regulatory Cooperation: A Possible Role for Congress*, by Raymond J. Ahearn and Vincent Morelli.

<sup>15</sup> European Parliament resolution (A6-0114/2009), adopted March 26, 2009.