



# The European Parliament

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July 22, 2009

Congressional Research Service

7-5700

[www.crs.gov](http://www.crs.gov)

RS21998

**CRS Report for Congress**

*Prepared for Members and Committees of Congress*

## Summary

On June 4-7, 2009, the 27 member countries of the European Union (EU) held elections for the European Parliament (EP). The European Parliament is one of the three key institutions of the European Union, and the only EU institution whose members are directly elected. 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 supervision over the two other main EU institutions, the Council of the European Union (Council of Ministers) and the European Commission.

Although it does not formally initiate EU legislation, the EP has “co-decision” power in about three-quarters of EU legislation, giving it the right to amend or reject proposals. The Lisbon Treaty, if ratified, would increase the EP’s role further, giving it amendment and veto authority over the vast majority of EU legislation. 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. Supporters also claim that the EP’s influence is even growing in strictly consultative areas, such as the EU’s common foreign policy, and that the EP has become an important forum for debate on international issues.

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 *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 34 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 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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## June 2009 European Parliament Election

On June 4-7, 2009, the 27 member countries of the European Union (EU) held elections for the European Parliament (EP).<sup>1</sup> There were 736 seats at stake in this year's vote.<sup>2</sup> Voting for the EP takes place on a national basis, with the number of Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) elected in each country based on population size—Germany has the largest number (99) and Malta the smallest (5). MEPs serve five-year terms and have been directly elected since 1979.<sup>3</sup>

Once elected, national party blocs caucus according to transnational groups based on political affiliation, rather than by country. In the 2009 election, the center-right *Group of the European People's Party [Christian Democrats] (EPP)* retained its position as the largest political group in the European Parliament. The EPP nearly maintained its previous percentage of seats despite the defection of MEPs from the UK Conservative Party, who formed a new group called the *European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR)*, largely with the support of MEPs from Poland's Law and Justice Party and the Czech Civic Democrats.

In relative terms, the strength of the EPP increased significantly due to a sizeable drop in support for the EP's second largest group, a bloc of center-left parties that has been re-named the *Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats in Europe (S&D)*. Socialist and center-left parties, whether in government or opposition, did poorly across the board. Although circumstances and issues are different in each EU country, some analysts interpret this result as an indication of public preference for the approaches of center-right and conservative parties in the handling of the global financial crisis and recession. Due to economic circumstances, some observers had expected that the Socialists would gain seats.

Notably, although they still hold a relatively small number of seats and appear to have little cohesion among themselves, far right extremist parties made gains in the election. The political groups of the European Parliament will be covered in greater detail below.

At the first meeting of the new EP on July 14-16, 2009, the composition of the political groups was officially set, and Members elected Polish MEP Jerzy Buzek of the EPP as the European Parliament President. As in the previous parliament, observers expect the EPP and S&D to split the presidency mandate into two two-and-a-half year terms. EU member countries had initially hoped that the EP would vote during this opening session to confirm the re-appointment of Jose Manuel Barroso to a second term as President of the European Commission. However, it now appears that this vote will likely take place in mid-September 2009.

Approximately 375 million European citizens were eligible to cast a ballot this year. In European Parliament 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,

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<sup>1</sup> The member states of the EU are 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.

<sup>2</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. Under the yet-to-be-ratified Lisbon Treaty, there would be 754 MEPs in this term—should the Lisbon Treaty be ratified during the term, 18 additional MEPs could be added to the EP. The Lisbon Treaty would set the number of MEPs at 751 starting in 2014.

<sup>3</sup> Prior to direct elections, MEPs were appointed by their national parliaments.

from 63% in the first EP election of 1979 to this year's new low of 43%. National turnout this year ranged from about 90% in Belgium and Luxembourg (where voting is compulsory) to about 21% in Lithuania and under 20% in Slovakia. Turnout in the "Big Three" EU countries was approximately 43% in Germany, 41% in France, and 35% in the United Kingdom.<sup>4</sup>

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 activities of the EP. Low turnout also reinforces the perceptions of skeptics who question the democratic legitimacy of the EP and of the EU as a whole.

Approximately one-half of MEPs in the new European Parliament were re-elected, and one-half are new. Of the 27 EU countries, Lithuania elected the highest percentage of new MEPs. MEPs in the new EP range from 25 to 81 years of age. The percentage of women MEPs increased from just over 31% to 35.3% overall. Finland elected the highest percentage of women MEPs, 61.5%, and Malta the lowest—zero.<sup>5</sup>

## Role of the European Parliament

The European Parliament is one of the three key institutions of the European Union, and the only EU institution whose 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 significant 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 also functions as the EU's executive. 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>6</sup> The Council, the EU's main decision-making body, composed of ministers from the national governments, enacts legislation based on Commission proposals.<sup>7</sup> In most cases, the Council's adoption of legislation occurs jointly with the Parliament, in a process called "co-decision."

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.europarl.europa.eu>

<sup>5</sup> "Euro MPs build new alliances," *BBC News*, July 2, 2009.

<sup>6</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, external relations), 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. Five Commissioners are double-hatted as Commission Vice Presidents in addition to their portfolio.

<sup>7</sup> Council of Ministers meetings 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).

## Legislative Process

The scope of EU policy has grown over time, and with it the role of the European Parliament in the EU's legislative process. 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 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

### 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.

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 of "co-decision" serves as an important check and balance to the Commission and Council.<sup>8</sup> Reportedly, the EP currently has a say in about three-quarters of the legislation passed in the EU. Tax matters and foreign policy, however, are among the areas to which the "co-decision procedure" does not apply (the Parliament may give a non-binding opinion).

In December 2007, EU leaders signed a new reform treaty—the Lisbon Treaty—that would roughly double the Parliament's right of "co-decision" to 80 policy areas, including agriculture and issues such as asylum and immigration. The future of the Lisbon Treaty, however, has been thrown into doubt following its rejection by Irish voters in June 2008. In order for the Lisbon Treaty to come into force, all 27 member states must ratify it—EU leaders had initially hoped that this process would be complete before the June 2009 European Parliament election. While Germany, Poland, and the Czech Republic have also not yet completed their formal ratification procedures, a second referendum in Ireland—the only country to decide the matter by referendum—is expected to take place in early October 2009.

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.

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<sup>8</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 requires a double majority: at least half of the member states (two-thirds if not a Commission initiative) and 255 out of the 345 total votes. Votes must also represent at least 62% of the total EU population.

## **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>9</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—the 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 and final approval.

The EP must then vote to adopt the budget in order for it to become operational. In this final stage of the process, the EP has the last word on “non-compulsory” expenditures, such as development aid both within the EU and internationally. The Council, however, has the final word on “compulsory” expenditures—mainly agriculture—that make up most of the EU budget. If disagreements persist at this stage, the EP can reject the entire draft budget.

The Lisbon Treaty, if ratified, would eliminate the distinction between “compulsory” and “non-compulsory” expenditures, and would thus give the EP more control over, for example, agricultural spending. 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 considerable 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 submits 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 can affect who is nominated by the member states to

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<sup>9</sup> The 2009 EU budget is EUR 133.8 billion (approximately \$187 billion).

this post. The member states and the EPP support the re-appointment of current Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso; however, the EPP will need other political groups to vote with them in order to achieve the majority necessary to approve the nomination. S&D, ALDE, and others objected to a proposal to hold this vote in July 2009, arguing that such a date was too soon, and that they wish to more fully examine Barroso's program and priorities for a possible second term. The vote is now likely to take place in September 2009.<sup>10</sup>

The EP also has the power to accept or reject the newly proposed Commission (as a whole, rather than individual nominees). Since 1995, the EP has held U.S. Senate-style confirmation hearings for newly appointed Commissioners, who are chosen by the member states for five-year terms. In 2004, some MEPs threatened to veto the incoming Barroso Commission because of controversy over some of its proposed members. MEPs demanded either a re-shuffling of Commission posts or new appointments—Barroso withdrew his proposed team in order to avoid rejection by the EP, and revamped it to ensure parliamentary approval. Many MEPs assert that the new Commission should be formed in November 2009, after Ireland's referendum on the Lisbon Treaty.

The EP can also dismiss the entire Commission (although, again, not individual Commissioners) through a vote of censure. In 1999, the entire Commission opted to resign rather than face a formal censure by the EP over alleged corruption charges. Some observers view these episodes as an indication that the threat of carrying out its powers of check and balance has served to increase the EP's institutional clout.

## Organization of the European Parliament

### Political Groups

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 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.

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<sup>10</sup> A new European Commission is due to be formed in late 2009.



**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).

**Notes:** 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:

The *Group of the European People's Party [Christian Democrats] (EPP)* holds the largest number of seats. 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.

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.

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 that the consensus-seeking of the Grand Coalition made 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, have broken with that group and formed a new *European Conservatives and Reformists Group (ECR)*. The Conservatives' major partners in the group 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.

## **The EP President**

Every two-and-a-half years (twice per parliamentary term), MEPs vote to elect a President of the European Parliament. This individual represents the EP externally, and in relations with the other EU institutions. He or she oversees the work of the Parliament and is responsible for ensuring that its rules of procedure are followed. 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 affects broader EU policies by promoting a few key issues as EP priorities.

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, Members elected Polish MEP Jerzy Buzek of the EPP as the new President of the European Parliament. Buzek 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 term.

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. MEPs were elected to these positions during the EP's opening session in mid-July.

## **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 34 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.

## **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 lacks the legitimacy of national parliaments, exercising too little power relative to the other EU institutions. Such observers characterize the EP as a large 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 observe that “co-decision” and its institutional supervisory roles have substantially enhanced the Parliament's influence. The Lisbon Treaty would give the EP veto authority over the vast majority of EU legislation. 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. Supporters also claim that the EP's influence is even growing in strictly consultative areas, such as the EU's common foreign policy, where the “co-decision procedure” does not apply. They assert 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. Yet, critics counter that EP views on international relations may have little effect because foreign policy decisions rest with the member states.

Another question related to 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 represents 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. On the other hand, some observers contend that MEPs very often promote parochial national interests, with many MEPs campaigning on national rather than European issues. With essentially 27 different national elections for the EP, citizens vote based on a wide array of different issues and many are unsure what exactly is at stake in the outcome. 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 related to the EP's duplicate facilities. Construction of multi-million dollar buildings in Brussels and Strasbourg in the late 1990s to accommodate the growth in MEPs following EU enlargement stirred controversy. In addition, the fact that MEPs and their staffs regularly shuttle between 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 as a symbol of peace between France and Germany, and both countries argue it should continue to do so.

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 receive 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 starts this year 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.

## **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, Congressional-EP exchanges have taken place at least once a year, and have provided the opportunity for sustained dialogue. The Delegation for Relations with the United States represents the EP in the Transatlantic Legislators' Dialogue (TLD) with the U.S. Congress—it is the oldest and widely considered the most prestigious of the EP's interparliamentary delegations.

In 1999, the EP and the U.S. Congress launched the 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 TLD delegation 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 April 2009 in Prague, Czech Republic. Congress and the EP have also conducted video conferences on specific areas of mutual concern. Some MEPs have called for making the TLD more "operational," however, by creating a formal early warning system to allow each side to weigh in on legislation-in-progress that could adversely affect their interests.<sup>11</sup> 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.

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<sup>11</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).

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