

Introduction

The European Parliament (EP) is the only directly elected EU institution and, as such, is seen as providing democratic legitimacy for the EU. However, it does not have the powers of a normal national parliament in that it cannot propose new legislation: it can only accept, reject or put forward amendments to laws proposed by the Commission. This has contributed to an image problem for the EP, with many European voters unsure of its role and, consequently, exceptionally low turnouts in EU elections. The Parliament has also been dogged by organisational problems arising from its split locations and the number of different political groups within it.

History

Originally created as an appointed body under the Treaty of Rome in 1957, the European Parliament has gained greater prominence since it became a directly elected body in 1979. During the early 1980s, the EP attempted to gain greater power. Under the Single European Act (1986) it was given the power to veto the entry of a new member state, and under the Maastricht Treaty (1992) it gained the power of **co-decision** with the Council of the EU. The Lisbon Treaty (2007) extended the use of co-decision, so that the Parliament must also vote on all decisions made using **Qualified Majority Voting (QMV)** in the Council. Yet, despite this expansion of authority, the EP has still had to compete with the more powerful Commission. This tension between the elected and appointed branches of the EU came to a head in 1999 when the EP used its powers to force the resignation of the entire Commission led by Jacques Santer.

How does the European Parliament work?

The EP meets in Brussels and Strasbourg, as well as having offices in Luxembourg. EP elections are held every five years, and every EU citizen who is registered as a voter is entitled to vote. Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) do not sit in national blocks, but in seven Europe-wide political groups; the largest are the European People's Party (EPP) and the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D). The work of the EP is overseen by the EP President, a position that is currently held by the German S&D politician Martin Schulz. In accordance with the Lisbon Treaty, the Parliament has been reformed as of the 2014 elections; Germany lost 3 seats and the number of MEPs has been capped at 751 of which 73 are British.

MEPs are elected under proportional representation to represent regions (such as south-west England or Scotland). The number of MEPs each country has reflects its population. Whilst the EP represents the electorate's interests in discussions with the other EU institutions, it cannot propose legislation; only discuss, propose amendments, and vote to accept or reject laws proposed by the Commission. EP committees can produce 'own-initiative' reports that recommend legislation to the Commission, but the Commission is under no obligation to act on these. For a new EU law or budget to pass, it must have the support of both the EP and the Council of the European Union. The other significant power the EP has is that of 'democratic supervision' over the Commission – giving it the power to sack the whole Commission through a vote of censure.

Facts and figures

- ❖ Before June 2009, MEPs earned the equivalent of their national parliament representatives – this led to a great disparity in salaries particularly between the MEPs of western and eastern member states. A review led to the decision that MEPs should be paid the equivalent of 38.5% of a European Court Judge's salary. MEPs now earn €91,980 per year.
- ❖ Across the EU, the average turnout in the 2014 EU elections was 43.1% (just 36% in the UK). In 2009 it was 43%.
- ❖ 1.07m EU citizens have signed an online petition in favour of the EP sitting only in Brussels.
- ❖ The EP budget for 2014 is approximately €1.7 billion.
- ❖ The next EP elections will take place in 2019.

Arguments

For

- ❖ The Parliament is important in bringing democracy to an organisation largely run by un-elected officials.
- ❖ The Parliament allows many different views to be expressed about the European project.
- ❖ The Parliament has important roles in overseeing EU legislation and the operation of EU institutions.

Against

- ❖ The EU Parliament is not really a parliament because it doesn't have real powers; it is little more than a talking shop.
- ❖ The electorate doesn't take the EU Parliament seriously – meaning turnout is very low.
- ❖ The way the Parliament is run – on multiple sites – makes it hugely expensive. The cost of moving the Parliament to Strasbourg once every month is estimated at £135m per year.

“[The] European Parliament has a duty to encourage this interest in Europe by providing access to all the views expressed within it.”

Josep Borrell Fontelles, European Parliament President, 2005

Technical Terms

- ❖ **Co-decision:** A structure that means that EU decisions must be taken jointly by the Parliament and the Council of the European Union.
- ❖ **Qualified Majority Voting:** 'double majority' voting system whereby 55% EU Council members (15 states), representing at least 65% of the EU's population must vote in favour of a proposal for it to pass. Votes are distributed amongst member states in relation to the size of each country.

Links

- ❖ http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/public/default_en.htm