

## II

# The European Parliament

Charlotte Burns



## Chapter Contents

- Introduction 156
- The evolving European Parliament 156
- The powers and influence of the European Parliament 156
- The internal politics of the European Parliament 161
- Elections, the people, and the European Parliament 164
- Conclusion 165

## Reader's Guide

This chapter focuses upon the European Parliament (EP), an institution that has seen its **power** dramatically increase in recent times. The EP has been transformed from being a relatively powerless institution into one that is able to have a genuine say in the legislative process and hold the European Union's **executive** bodies (the Commission and Council, introduced in Chapters 9 and 10) to account in a range of policy areas. However, increases in the Parliament's formal powers have not been matched by an increase in popular **legitimacy**: turnout in European elections is falling. Thus while the EP's legislative power is comparable to that enjoyed by many national parliaments, it has struggled to connect with the wider European public. The chapter explores these issues in detail. In the first section, the EP's evolution from talking shop to co-legislator is reviewed; its powers and influence are explained in the next section; the EP's internal structure and organization are discussed next, with a focus upon the role and behaviour of the political groups, and finally, the European Parliament's representative function as the EU's only directly elected institution is discussed.



## Introduction

The European Parliament (EP) is the only directly elected European Union institution. Until 1979, it was an unelected, weak, and marginalized body. However, the EP has gradually extended its legislative prerogatives so that under the terms of the Treaty of Lisbon, it enjoys a range of powers comparable to those enjoyed by national legislatures. This chapter examines the development of the EP and its role within the European Union's political system. In order to understand the function and operation of the Parliament, it examines three key areas of importance:

- the legislative work of the Parliament—namely, its role in shaping EU policies and laws;
- its internal politics, both in relation to the organization of the chamber and the nature of **cooperation** and competition between the political groups; and
- the representative role of the Parliament, as a link between the electorate and EU decision-making processes.

While the EP has developed considerably as an institution, it still faces significant challenges in relation to its representative function, which weaken its claims to be the standard bearer for democracy within the EU's **governance** structures.

## The evolving European Parliament

The European Parliament started life as the Common Assembly of the **European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC)**, and was introduced by the **founding fathers** to lend some democratic legitimacy to a set of institutions dominated by the unelected **High Authority** (later to become the European Commission) and national governments. The Assembly's original 78 members were appointed from national legislatures, thereby providing a link with national parliaments and an avenue for their input to and oversight of the ECSC's activities. The Assembly's powers were limited to dismissing the High Authority. Under the **Treaty of Rome**, the Assembly became common to all three Communities and was awarded the further right to be consulted on Commission proposals before they were adopted by the Council. Member state representatives were not, however, obliged to take the Assembly's position into

account. Also, as members of the early Assembly were also national parliamentarians they were effectively part-time. This dual mandate circumscribed the ability of the chamber to fulfil its limited legislative prerogatives. Thus, from its early days, the European Parliament gained the reputation of being little more than an ineffectual talking shop.

The Treaty of Rome included, however, the right for the Assembly to draw up proposals on elections by direct suffrage. This right was subject to **unanimity** in the Council and, because the member states were reluctant to support an elected Parliament, fearing a challenge to their own autonomy, the first direct elections were not held until 1979. Since those first elections, the Parliament has, as anticipated by the Council, used its status as the only directly elected EU institution to push for increases to its powers. The Parliament has exercised this strategy so effectively that today, its members are regarded as equal legislative and budgetary partners with the Council, and can scrutinize and hold the Commission to account (see Box 11.1).

### KEY POINTS

- The European Parliament started life as an unelected Common Assembly to the ECSC.
- Its powers were limited to dismissing the High Authority and being consulted on legislative proposals, but the Council could ignore its suggestions.
- Until 1979, MEPs were national parliamentarians, hence the EP was a part-time institution, which, with its limited powers, led to it being dismissed as a powerless talking shop.
- Since 1979 direct elections have been held every five years and the EP has seen its powers increase, so that it is now regarded as an equal co-legislator with the Council.

## The powers and influence of the European Parliament

The European Parliament's powers fall into three key areas: it enjoys considerable influence in relation to the EU Budget; it has the right to scrutinize, appoint, and dismiss the Commission; and, in the context of EU law-making, the EP also has the right to amend



### BOX 11.1 THE EVOLVING EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

Year	Event	Parliamentary powers
1952	ECSC Common Assembly created	78 nominated members take office Right to dismiss High Authority
1958	Becomes EC Common Assembly	142 nominated members take office Right to be consulted on legislative proposals
1975	Treaty changes on Budget	Greater budgetary powers for EP Parliament given considerable influence over non-Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) spending
1979	First direct elections	410 elected members EP uses status as elected institution to push for greater powers
1980	<i>Isoglucose</i> rulings by the Court of Justice of the EU (CJEU) (see 'Legislative powers')	EP's right of <b>consultation</b> reinforced
1987	<b>Single European Act (SEA)</b> enters into force	<b>Cooperation procedure</b> introduced for some legislation, giving EP greater scope to delay, amend, and block laws <b>Assent</b> powers granted on some matters
1993	Treaty of Maastricht enters into force	<b>Co-decision</b> procedure introduced for some areas EP given approval power over nominated Commission
1999	Treaty of Amsterdam enters into force	Co-decision procedure extended and amended in the EP's favour EP given formal right to veto Commission President
2003	Treaty of Nice enters into force	Further extension of co-decision
2009	Treaty of Lisbon enters into force	Co-decision renamed 'ordinary legislative procedure' (OLP) and extended to 85 policy areas EP given equal budgetary status with the Council, and division between compulsory and <b>non-compulsory spending</b> removed EP political group leaders to be consulted on Commission President nominations and EP to elect Commission President EP allowed to request treaty change
2011	<b>Treaty on Stability, Coordination and Governance in Economic and Monetary Union</b> agreed	Four members of the European Parliament (MEPs) are included in the negotiations leading to the draft Treaty
2012	<b>Citizens' initiative</b> is launched	EU citizens have the right to call for new legislation
2014	Eighth European Elections	751 MEPs elected
2019	Ninth European Elections	751 MEPs to be elected



and reject Commission proposals for legislation. These powers have expanded enormously in recent years largely as a result of the EP's proactive engagement with the process of treaty reform.

### Budgetary powers

The first major increase in the EP's power came with the Budget Treaties of 1970 and 1975, under which the Parliament was accorded the right to amend the Community Budget within certain limits, to reject the Budget, to grant a discharge to the Commission for its execution of the Budget (to sign off the books and agree that the Commission has spent money appropriately), and be consulted on appointments to the Court of Auditors (see Corbett et al., 2011). These powers were subject to some important limitations. For example, the EP could request modifications to compulsory spending (largely agricultural policy), but could only insist on changes to non-compulsory spending, which, in the 1970s and early 1980s, made up only about 20 per cent of the overall Budget. Thus the EP's capacity to shape the Budget was limited. In order to extend its budgetary prerogative, the Parliament engaged in a series of battles with the Commission and Council in the early 1980s over spending levels and the allocation of funds between compulsory and non-compulsory expenditure. These persistent budgetary conflicts between the Council and EP were resolved in 1988 by a series of inter-institutional agreements that provided for annual Budgets within limits established by a multi-annual **financial perspective** that typically runs over six years.

Moreover, under the Treaty of Lisbon the distinction between compulsory and non-compulsory expenditure has been removed, thus extending the EP's scope to amend the Budget across all areas, thereby rendering it an equal partner within the budgetary realm. Today, the EP and Council act as a genuine **bicameral** budgetary authority, sharing a relationship based upon mutual respect and recognition of the need for stability and certainty when determining the EU's overall expenditure. Hence the EP has won a key democratic right to decide Europe's budgets and a long-standing cause of inter-institutional conflict has now been removed. However, the EP's new powers came into force at a time when Europe was looking to cut spending, thus the Parliament had to balance the desire to achieve its broad policy aims against the wider need to behave responsibly in the face of widespread hardship across the EU. Understandably,

the negotiation of the 2014–20 multi-annual financial framework was one of the most complex of recent times. Notably, the Budget was cut in real terms for the first time in the EU's history; however, the Parliament insisted upon the introduction of more flexibility over the allocation of spending, thereby making it easier to move funds to other areas as needed.

The EP has always enjoyed the right to dismiss the whole Commission. The Parliament has never exercised that right, but it has come close—most spectacularly in 1999, when the whole Santer Commission resigned (over a corruption scandal) in order to avoid a vote of censure from the Parliament. The EP had no powers of appointment under the original treaties, but carved them out over time using its role as an elected institution to pressurize new Commission Presidents to submit themselves to a vote of approval by the Parliament. Formal recognition of the EP's right to appoint the Commission came in the Treaties of Maastricht and Amsterdam, which gave the EP a right to veto the Commission President-designate and the whole team of Commissioners. The Treaty of Lisbon went further by requiring the Council to take into account the outcome of the elections to the European Parliament and to consult the party leaders within the EP before nominating a candidate who is then elected by an absolute majority of all MEPs. If the MEPs reject that candidate, then the Council must propose a new one. The EP took advantage of this rule to pursue the so-called **spitzenkandidaten** process in 2014, by insisting, despite strong opposition from the UK, that the nominated candidate from the largest political grouping following the 2014 elections, Jean-Claude Juncker of the European People's Party (EPP), become the new Commission President. Thus the EP now has a direct say in who becomes Commission President and the political balance of the Parliament plays a role in determining that candidate.

The EP's right to approve the wider Commission does not allow for the dismissal of individuals, but the Parliament has successfully used its rights of appointment to force individual candidates to step aside or to push for a reorganization of individual portfolios (see Box 11.2). However, an interesting anomaly has emerged under the terms of the Treaty of Lisbon in relation to the EP's rights of appointment. Under Article 17(8) TEU, if the Parliament decides to veto the appointment of the European Commission, the candidate for **High Representative** for Foreign Affairs, who sits as a vice-president in the Commission, can simply resign from the Commission, yet carry on



### BOX 11.2 APPOINTING THE COMMISSION

Officially, the EP is limited to endorsing the whole Commission. However, the Parliament has made clear over the years that it is prepared to veto the entire team rather than accept an inappropriate candidate. As such, the EP has carved out a de facto right to veto individuals. Thus, the EP's committees hold hearings with the relevant Commissioners-designate in order to determine their suitability, and there are usually some casualties. Hence, in 2014 the EP's energy committee rejected Slovenian nominee, Alenka Bratusek, over concerns about the way she had been nominated, but also, crucially, because she seemed to have little knowledge of her proposed energy portfolio. Hungarian nominee, Tibor Navracscs, saw citizenship removed from his portfolio following concerns about his close links with a national government that had been accused of flouting civil liberties. The Spanish nominee for the Energy and Climate portfolio, Miguel Arias Cañete, was forced to relinquish links to the energy sector; and Frans Timmermans, a deputy Commission President, saw his portfolio expanded to include sustainable development to assuage wider concerns expressed within the Parliament, especially by the Socialist Group, that the environment had been downgraded within the new Commission. Thus, the EP has played a key role in shaping both the membership and organization of portfolios within the Commission.

with his or her duties as High Representative, thereby potentially sowing the seeds for future inter-institutional battles. That being said, it seems unlikely that the Council would insist on keeping a candidate in the post of High Representative who did not enjoy the support of the majority of the EP.

When it comes to scrutinizing the executive, the EP's scope is more limited. It can invite Commissioners, Commission officials, and Council presidency representatives to Committee meetings to explain and justify decisions. The Commission also submits its annual work programme to the EP. However, the main leverage that the Parliament possesses to hold the Commission to account is via its powers of appointment and dismissal, and members of the Council are held to account by their own national parliaments.

#### Legislative powers

Perhaps the area in which the Parliament has made the biggest strides since 1979 is in the legislative sphere. In 1979, the EP was limited to offering its opinions on legislation, which the Council could

duly ignore (the consultation procedure). The European Court of Justice (ECJ), in Case 138/79 *Roquette v Council* [1980] ECR 3333 and Case 139/79 *Maizena v Council* [1980] ECR 3393 (the *Isoglucose* cases), gave the EP the opportunity to delay legislation: the Court declared invalid a Council **regulation** that had been adopted without waiting for the EP's opinion, arguing that the Council had breached Treaty rules. From then on, the EP had some scope to exercise influence if the Council was impatient to adopt a particular policy, because the EP could simply delay adopting its opinion in order to secure concessions in the final piece of legislation. Nevertheless, the EP's scope to amend legislation remained fairly limited until 1987, when the first major increase in its legislative power came with the introduction of the cooperation procedure in the Single European Act (SEA). Under the cooperation procedure, the EP gained a second reading of legislation and a conditional right of veto, which meant that the Parliament could reject the legislation, but the Council could overturn its rejection if the member states were unanimous. Moreover, if the Commission supported the EP's amendments, the Council could adopt those amendments by **qualified majority voting (QMV)**, but could reject them only by unanimity. Consequently, the introduction of the cooperation procedure heralded the start of an era of closer collaboration between the Commission and Parliament, because if the EP were to increase its chances of amending legislation, it would need to secure the support of the Commission.

The cooperation procedure was repealed by the **Lisbon Treaty** in 2009, but its introduction was a turning point for the Parliament. For over a decade, the procedure was the major vehicle for the EP to secure its policy preferences and it paved the way for further increases in the EP's powers in the **Maastricht Treaty**, which introduced the co-decision procedure, renamed in the Treaty of Lisbon as the **ordinary legislative procedure (OLP)**. Initially, the OLP applied to only 15 treaty articles, but its scope was extended in the Amsterdam, Nice, and Lisbon Treaty reforms, so that it now covers 85 policy areas. The OLP makes the Parliament a genuine co-legislator with the Council, because the agreement of both institutions is necessary for legislation to be adopted. It introduced a third reading, an unconditional right of rejection for the EP, and a **conciliation** process, which is triggered after the EP's second reading if the Council cannot accept the Parliament's amendments (see Chapter 14). This



process involves a committee composed of delegations of equal size from both the Council and EP, who negotiate a compromise that both sides are prepared to accept. The Commission is also present and tries to help both sides to reach agreement. If either the EP or the Council fails to adopt the compromise text negotiated by the **conciliation committee**, then the proposal falls.

There is no doubt that the OLP has allowed the EP to shape legislation and to exercise genuine policy-making power. In particular, the Parliament has been able to improve environmental standards, to promote civil liberties, and to improve consumer rights (see Box 11.3). The OLP has also had a profound effect upon inter-institutional relations. While the introduction of cooperation increased informal contacts between the Commission and Parliament, the OLP has facilitated the development of direct informal relations between small negotiating teams from the Council and Parliament from the first reading of legislation onwards. This informal dynamic has been institutionalized in the form of **trilogues**, that is, meetings of representatives from the Commission, the EP, and the Council aimed to facilitate compromise. A key advantage of this arrangement is that it is clearly easier to reach agreement quickly if there are only a few people involved in negotiations. However, this informality raises questions about the **transparency** of decision-making, which is of particular concern for the Parliament. The EP has long called for increases in its powers on the grounds that it is the only directly elected European institution, and therefore guarantees transparency and **accountability** within EU decision-making procedures, thereby addressing the EU's **democratic deficit** (see Chapter 24). However, with **rapporteurs** (MEPs responsible for drafting legislative opinions) increasingly meeting representatives from the Council informally behind closed doors, there is limited opportunity for MEPs drawn from the wider Parliament to feed their views into the negotiations. In response to concerns about the secretive nature of these processes, the Parliament has adopted new internal rules to try to guarantee that the Parliament's negotiating team in inter-institutional negotiations is acting on the basis of a mandate agreed within the relevant parliamentary committee. Nevertheless, the EP has discovered that, with the increase in its powers and responsibility, it faces a trade-off between **efficiency** and legitimacy: it is easier to negotiate with small groups of people, but doing so reduces the scope for the wider deliberation that transparent decision-making demands.



### BOX 11.3 THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AS A POLICY ACTOR

The European Parliament has been able to improve the quality of life for Europe's citizens through its legislative powers. It has carved out a reputation as an environmental champion by amending legislation to strengthen air and water quality standards. It has bolstered consumer protection with regard to access to the Internet under the telecoms package, insisted on fair treatment for workers under the Working Time Directive (Directive 2003/88/EC), and played a key role in ensuring that the Services Directive facilitating the free market in services (Directive 2006/123/EC) did not weaken consumer or workers' rights. Post-Lisbon, it has also become a key actor in relation to trade policy by gaining the formal right to amend or reject trade deals, leading in 2012 to its rejection of the Anti-Counterfeiting and Trade Agreement (ACTA) following EU-wide protests about the implications of the act for civil liberties.

### An advocate for constitutional change

The Parliament has also been proactive in seeking to enhance its power through advocating constitutional reform under which the EP and the wider European citizenry would be given an enhanced role in determining the shape and function of the European Union (Corbett, 1998; see Chapter 24). In the run-up to the SEA, the EP's Institutional Affairs Committee prepared a draft Treaty of European Union, which was part of a wider set of factors promoting treaty change. In subsequent treaty negotiations, the Committee again prepared detailed reports, and advanced the case for further reform with lobbyists, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and national governments. As a consequence of this activity, MEPs were formally included in the **intergovernmental conference (IGC) reflection groups** preparing the Amsterdam and Nice Summits, and under Treaty of Lisbon, the EP has gained the formal right to request treaty changes (see Chapter 3). In recognition of this new role, the EP was asked to assent to changes to the Treaty of Lisbon allowing for the creation of the **European Stability Mechanism (ESM)** in 2011. Later that same year, the President of the **European Council** requested that a delegation from the Parliament be involved in the negotiations and drafting of the new Fiscal Treaty for the **euro area**. Thus the EP has an increasing role in drafting treaty changes

and can th  
ability to t  
of the EP i  
of **supran**  
intergovern  
EU has bee  
eurozone c

### KEY POINTS

- The Euro powers in bicameral
- The EP ca President
- The EP's p realm. It a policy area questions making.
- The EP ha bring Euro realized in closely inv

Table 11.1 C

Political group
European People's Party (EPP)
Group of the Progressives and Democrats (S&D)
European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR)
Group of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats (ALDE)
Confederal Group of the European Greens (GUE/NGL)
Green Left (EUROPEAN GREEN PARTY)
Group of the Greens/European Free Alliance (G/EFA)
Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy (EFDD)
Europe of Nations and Freedom (ENF)
Non-inscribed Members
Total



and can therefore bring more democratic accountability to the process. Moreover, the empowerment of the EP in this area allows for greater involvement of **supranational** actors in what were traditionally intergovernmental arenas, despite claims that the EU has become more intergovernmental since the eurozone crisis (see Chapters 5 and 26).

### KEY POINTS

- The European Parliament gained significant budgetary powers in the 1970s and acts as one half of the EU's bicameral budgetary authority.
- The EP can appoint and dismiss the Commission President and College of Commissioners.
- The EP's powers have extended furthest in the legislative realm. It acts as a co-legislator with the EU Council in 85 policy areas. However, the use of informal meetings raises questions about the wider transparency of EU decision-making.
- The EP has long pressed for constitutional change to bring Europe closer to its citizens; many of its goals were realized in the Treaty of Lisbon. The EP itself is now more closely involved in the process of treaty change.

## The internal politics of the European Parliament

The European Parliament has been characterized as an institution composed of strong committees and weak parties. The committees have been viewed as a key vehicle through which the EP can exercise its legislative prerogatives and hold the EU executive to account. However, as the Parliament's powers have expanded, the political groups have emerged as ever more important actors, for it is they who hold the power of patronage within the Parliament, and who act as a key conduit between Brussels and national political parties. The EP's political groups are cross-national—in other words, they are composed of members from different countries who share the same broad ideological convictions. To form a political group requires 25 MEPs representing a quarter of the member states. There are currently eight political groupings and a cohort of MEPs who have chosen not to affiliate themselves (see Table 11.1). The two largest groups are the European People's Party (EPP), a centre-right political group, and the Social and Democratic Alliance (S&D), a centre-left political group.

Table 11.1 Composition of the European Parliament, post-2014 elections

Political group	Political orientation	Number of MEPs
European People's Party (EPP)	Centre-right Christian Democrat and Conservatives	217
Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D)	Centre-left	190
European Conservatives and Reformists Group (ECR)	Centre-right Conservative, Eurosceptic	74
Group of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE)	Liberal	70
Confederal Group of European United Left/Nordic Green Left (EUL/NGL)	Left-wing	52
Group of the Greens and European Free Alliance (Greens/EFA)	Environmental and regionalist	50
Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy Group (EFD)	Eurosceptic and right-wing	45
Europe of Nations and Freedom (ENF)	Eurosceptic and right-wing	38
Non-inscrit Members (NI)	Various	15
Total		751



The groups play a central role within the EP, because they control appointments to positions of responsibility and set the EP's calendar and agenda. Their importance is perhaps best illustrated by 'the powerlessness of those non-attached members who are not in political groups, who are unlikely, for example, to ever hold a powerful post within the Parliament' or to be able to draft an important report (Corbett et al., 2011: 78). In short, it makes sense for MEPs to affiliate themselves with large groups, but forming such groups can be challenging. For example, in the 2014 elections, the far-right did well in a range of states, especially in France, where the Front National (FN) came first overall, securing 24 seats, which in theory should have placed Marine Le Pen in a powerful position to form a political group within the Parliament. However, it was a year before Le Pen was able to persuade enough MEPs from seven states to form a group, the Europe of Nations and Freedom (ENF), with her. This delay was because other right-wing parties, most notably the **UK Independence Party** (UKIP) one of the largest of the **Eurosceptic** national delegations, were reluctant to partner with Le Pen, as association with the FN was seen by many as politically toxic. Thus, UKIP leader, Nigel Farage, joined forces with (among others) Italy's **Five Star Movement**, which is not a natural fit. The Five Star Movement is a populist anti-Euro, anti-austerity party, but does not share UKIP's wider anti-European agenda. Moreover, many of Five Star's members regard themselves as centrist or left-of-centre, rather than on the right, insisting that the group be renamed Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy (EFDD). The EFDD therefore captures the complex dynamics at work within the Parliament where there are now many Eurosceptic MEPs, in the EFDD, the European Conservative Reform Group (ECR), the ENF, and among the *non-inscrit*, but the diverse nature of that scepticism and disagreements over many policy areas make it very difficult to maintain harmony within and across such eclectic groupings for a full five-year parliamentary term.

Yet, as the allocation of posts within the EP is determined by group size and, within the groups, by the size of each national delegation, there are strong incentives to keep these groups together. But allotting posts requires intensive intra- and inter-group negotiation and coordination. The most important positions within the Parliament are:

- the President, who acts as the EP's figurehead, chairing the Plenary and representing the Parliament in external negotiations and meetings;
- the Vice-Presidents who support the President and help to run the Parliament; and
- the committee chairs, who organize and run committee meetings.

The negotiations between the parties over these posts are typically conducted by party elites behind closed doors, a process that has attracted opprobrium for its lack of transparency. Moreover, the *spitzenkandidaten* procedure has further complicated the picture: Martin Schulz, the European Parliament President from 2012 to 2014, guaranteed the support of the Socialist group for the EPP's Commission President candidate, Juncker, in return for Juncker's support for Schulz to serve another term as EP President. This kind of horse-trading for posts within the Parliament undermines the EP's claim to be the standard bearer for transparency within the EU's institutional structures.

A key position within the EP is the role of committee chair, who is responsible for organizing the calendar and agenda of meetings, chairing meetings, and participating in inter-institutional negotiations under the OLP. The role is important because the committees are the locus for the vast majority of parliamentary work, and they play a key role in enabling the Parliament to exercise legislative power and hold the EU's executive to account. In the 2014–19 Parliament, there are 20 standing committees divided functionally into different policy areas. The EP also appoints temporary committees to report on topical or urgent issues. The membership of each committee roughly mirrors the ideological balance of the wider Parliament. The committees are the repositories of policy expertise, and are, among other things, responsible for appointing teams of negotiators who can engage in intra- and inter-institutional negotiations.

Within the committees, MEPs are selected as *rappor-teurs* to draft reports, and their work is aided by 'shadow' *rappor-teurs*, who are drawn from another political group and can feed in alternative political perspectives to the *rappor-teur* and committee, as well as keeping their own party and the wider EP informed about the positions being developed. The *rappor-teurs* and shadow *rappor-teurs* are central members of the team responsible for negotiating with the Council under the OLP. They also play an important role in

BC  
PA  
The EP  
German  
EP also h  
establish  
Authorit  
its activ  
are locate  
carried o  
located i  
and repre  
decamp t  
the major  
business i  
Strasbourg  
Lisbon to  
Strasbourg  
to MEPs a

shaping th  
as a result  
Once co  
subject to  
nary (the m  
in Strasbou  
wrote on the  
and adopt a  
secure the s  
est political  
command a  
and resoluti  
litical partie  
both in the  
group negot  
glance the b  
changed as  
liberal ALD  
cess of left-w  
has seen EU  
cooperation  
majorities ha  
indeed the J  
super-grand  
ALDE (Votev  
tion suggests  
a business-as  
tween the tw  
the ALDE for



#### BOX 11.4 THE SEATS OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

The EP was originally located in Strasbourg on the Franco-German border as a symbol of the new European unity. The EP also has offices in Luxembourg, which were originally established there to allow it work alongside the ECSC High Authority. However, the Parliament has increasingly centred its activities upon Brussels, where the other EU institutions are located. Today, the vast majority of parliamentary work is carried out in Brussels; some administrative staff are still located in Luxembourg and, once a month, MEPs, their staff, and representatives from the Commission and EU Council decamp to Strasbourg for the EP's Plenary session. Although the majority of MEPs would far rather conduct all of their business in Brussels, French opposition to losing the Strasbourg EP seat led to a commitment in the Treaty of Lisbon to maintaining it. Thus the monthly adjournment to Strasbourg will continue despite the cost and inconvenience to MEPs and the European taxpayer.

shaping the position adopted by their political groups as a result of their policy expertise.

Once committees have crafted their reports, they are subject to amendment and adoption by the EP's Plenary (the meeting of all MEPs), which is typically held in Strasbourg (see Box 11.4). During the Plenary, MEPs vote on the various reports and motions for resolution, and adopt amendments to legislation. The MEPs must secure the support of a majority, and because the largest political group, currently the EPP, cannot on its own command a majority, the adoption of amendments and resolutions requires cooperation between the political parties. Thus securing the support of a majority both in the committees and in Plenary requires inter-group negotiation. Following the 2014 elections, at first glance the balance of power within the Parliament has changed as the right-of-centre ECR has replaced the liberal ALDE as the third largest group, and the success of left-wing *Podemos* in Spain and *Syriza* in Greece has seen EUL/NGL overtake the Greens. However, cooperation between the two largest parties to secure majorities has long been the norm in the Parliament; indeed the Junker Commission was supported by a super-grand coalition composed of the EPP, S&D, and ALDE (Votewatch, 2014). The emergence of this coalition suggests that the 2014–19 session will operate on a business-as-usual basis, with ongoing cooperation between the two larger groups, which can also draw on the ALDE for support on important votes.

It might be expected that MEPs would vote according to national preferences, forming national blocs regardless of ideological differences. While there are occasional instances of such national defections, studies of the Parliament's voting behaviour show that, as a general rule, the MEPs behave ideologically (Hix et al., 2007). In other words, they vote with their political groups, not with their fellow nationals. Even the new cohorts of MEPs from the 2004 and 2007 accession states quickly acclimatized to the norms of voting behaviour in the EP, and vote according to ideological preferences (Hix et al., 2011). Hence while the EP is unique as a parliamentary chamber, given its multinational and multilingual composition (see Box 11.5), to all intents and purposes it behaves as an ordinary parliament, organizing and voting along classic left–right ideological lines (Hix et al., 2007). Another prevalent assumption about MEPs is the idea that they 'go native'—that is, that they become socialized into a more pro-European perspective, thanks to their experience of living and working among fellow Europeans in an EU decision-making institution. However, evidence shows that becoming an MEP has little impact upon individual preferences and voting behaviour: if they are pro-European, they stay pro-European; if they are Eurosceptic, they stay Eurosceptic (Scully, 2005).

#### BOX 11.5 MULTILINGUAL EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

The EP has 24 official languages (18 more than the United Nations). Documents are translated into all languages and, during committee meetings and plenary sessions, a host of interpreters are present to provide running translation of what is being said. A key logistical issue (apart from the space issues associated with providing interpreters' booths) is the number of language combinations required (currently 552). For less common combinations, translation has to run through a relay of interpreters into more common languages (typically German, French, and English) and from there to the next language, so, for example, a relay could go from Czech to English to Swedish. This peculiarity means that debates in the EP are often based upon set-piece speeches, with limited scope for spontaneity or the cut and thrust typically associated with national chambers. It also circumscribes the capacity for joke-telling, both because of cultural differences (Latvians may not share an Italian's sense of humour), and because the need to relay interpretation means that the punchline may be heard at different intervals and the bursts of laughter to a joke made several minutes earlier can be off-putting to those speaking later.



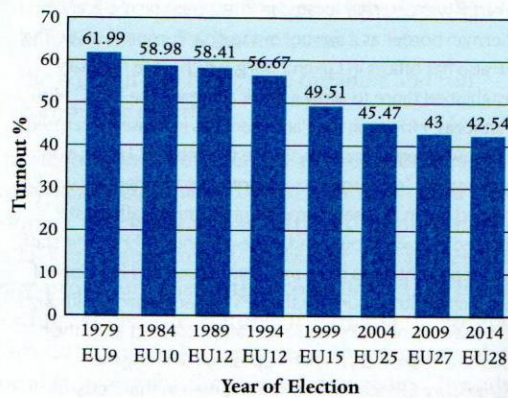
## KEY POINTS

- Members of the European Parliament sit and vote in cross-national political groups, which control appointment to important posts.
- Detailed policy work in the EP is carried out by its committees. Committee *rapporteurs* play a key role in shaping group opinions and in representing the Parliament in inter-institutional negotiations under the OLP.
- The Parliament votes along ideological, rather than national, lines and the voting behaviour of MEPs is increasingly cohesive.
- There is limited evidence of MEPs 'going native'.

## Elections, the people, and the European Parliament

Elections to the European Parliament are held every five years. The rules governing European elections are different from those that typically apply to national elections, because EU citizens resident in another EU state (for example, Bulgarians living in Germany) are entitled to vote in local and European elections, but not in national elections. Citizens resident in an EU state can also stand for election even if they are a non-national, thus Danny Cohn-Bendit, a German citizen, was elected as an MEP in both Germany (1994–99, 2004–09) and France (1999–2004, 2009–14). Since 1999, European elections have been conducted on the basis of **proportional representation (PR)** across the whole EU, although there are differences between the member states in the systems that they use. For example, in the UK, the European elections are decided by a regionally based **list system**, but in Italy a national list is used. An inevitable consequence of this disparity is that the number of constituents whom each MEP represents can vary enormously: for example, in the UK, there are about 5 million constituents in each region, whereas in Italy, because a national list is used, each MEP represents approximately 57 million citizens. Where MEPs represent a large constituency, it is challenging to build a relationship between the elected politician and the citizen which may provide a partial explanation for the EP's declining popularity and legitimacy, as indicated by the fall in turnout at successive European elections (see Figure 11.1).

Figure 11.1 Turnout in European Parliament elections 1979–2014



Source: European Parliament, available online at <http://www.europarl.europa.eu>.

How can we explain this poor turnout at European elections, particularly as public opinion surveys show that the EP is the best known (93 per cent of those polled have heard of it) and the most trusted of the EU institutions (37 per cent of those polled trust the EP) (Eurobarometer, 2014)? One potential explanation is that European elections are second-order, so they are viewed as less important than national elections and voters may use them to express dissatisfaction with the governing party of the state (Reif and Schmitt, 1980). Parties also contribute to the problem: election campaigns are organized and financed by domestic political parties rather than by the European political groups. Thus candidates do not seek re-election as a member of the S&D or EPP, but as a French Socialist or a German Christian Democrat. Moreover, the parties often campaign on national, rather than genuinely European, platforms, although the 2014 elections saw many national campaigns focus upon European, and more specifically eurozone, policies, which may partly explain the relatively small decline in turnout compared to earlier European elections (see Figure 11.1). The fact that these were the first European elections in which the outcome determined the choice of Commission President may also have played a role.

Nevertheless, the EP faces a major hurdle: it has predicated its calls for empowerment upon its status as a democratically elected body that can bring the voice of Europe's citizens to the heart of the EU's decision-making processes, but its legitimacy is undermined

by the decl  
Parliament  
it is not suf  
across the E  
systems and  
act as a cor  
holding the  
policy-maki  
vote for the  
the EP unde  
tem of EU g  
of Lisbon so  
extending th  
role for nat  
Thus, under  
and 2 of the  
ter in relati  
tional parlia  
better achieve  
sion must rev  
yellow cards  
the establishm

## Conclusion

The European  
diary of treaty  
transformed fr  
key policy actor  
The EP has dev  
groups, which b  
logical left-right  
creased, there h  
legitimacy: turn



1  
2  
3  
4  
5  
6  
7  
8



by the declining turnout for European elections. The Parliament can take some comfort from the fact that it is not suffering alone: turnout is falling in elections across the EU. However, elections legitimate political systems and executives. The EP has argued that it can act as a corrective to the EU's democratic deficit by holding the executive to account and participating in policy-making. Yet if fewer than half of EU citizens vote for the Parliament, not only is the legitimacy of the EP undermined, but so too is that of the wider system of EU governance (see Chapter 24). The Treaty of Lisbon sought to address these concerns by further extending the EP's powers and by including a greater role for national parliaments in decision-making. Thus, under the 'yellow card system' (Protocols 1 and 2 of the Treaty of Lisbon), if a third (or a quarter in relation to freedom, security, and justice) of national parliaments feel that draft legislation could be better achieved by domestic legislation, the Commission must review the act. Between 2012 and 2014, two yellow cards were issued by national parliaments on the establishment of common EU rules on the right

to strike, and on the creation of a European Public Prosecutors' Office (European Commission, 2013a, 2014a) demonstrating that national parliaments are now more able to exercise their prerogatives under the principle of **subsidiarity**.

### KEY POINTS

- The European Parliament is directly elected every five years. The number of constituents represented by each MEP varies widely.
- European elections are typically regarded as being less important than national elections, both by the electorate and by national political parties, which fail to campaign on European issues; this has contributed to declining turnout.
- Party leaders are consulted on the choice of candidates for Commission President following European elections.
- National parliaments are now able to block proposed EU legislation.

## Conclusion

The European Parliament has been the major beneficiary of treaty change in the European Union, being transformed from a marginalized institution into a key policy actor within the system of EU governance. The EP has developed a set of transnational political groups, which behave cohesively and vote along ideological left-right lines. Whilst the EP's power has increased, there has not been a matching increase in its legitimacy: turnout in European elections continues

to fall. Moreover, MEPs are now faced with a wide range of powers covering most policy areas, and, in order to enhance decision-making efficiency, they engage in informal practices that further undermine the transparency and legitimacy of EU policy-making processes. Thus the two key challenges that the EP now faces are how to increase its appeal to the wider European electorate, and how to contribute to efficient and open governance in the EU.



### QUESTIONS

1. Why was the European Parliament created?
2. How and why have the EP's power increased?
3. Do MEPs vote according to nationality or ideology? To what extent are MEPs free from national control?
4. What impact has the empowerment of the European Parliament had upon inter- and intra-institutional relations?
5. How is it possible to account for the turnout in European elections?
6. What impact does the emergence of a larger bloc of Eurosceptic parties have upon the operation of the Parliament?
7. What are the principal challenges facing the EP and how should it address them?
8. What function does the European Parliament serve in the EU system of governance?