



The European Parliament

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November 5, 2010

Congressional Research Service

7-5700

www.crs.gov

RS21998

Summary

The 736-member European Parliament (EP) is a key institution of the European Union (EU), a unique political and economic partnership composed of 27 member states. The EP is the only EU institution that is directly elected. The EP plays a role in the EU's legislative and budgeting processes, and works closely with the two other main EU bodies, the European Commission and the Council of the European Union (Council of Ministers). Although the EP does not formally initiate EU legislation, it shares legislative power with the Council of Ministers in many policy areas, giving it the right to accept, amend, or reject proposed EU laws.

Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) serve five-year terms. The most recent EP elections were held in June 2009. The EP currently has seven political groups, which caucus according to political ideology rather than nationality, plus a number of “non-attached” or independent members. The EP has 20 standing committees that are key actors in the adoption of EU legislation and a total of 41 delegations that maintain international parliament-to-parliament relations. The EP is led by a President, who oversees its work and represents the EP externally.

Once limited to being a consultative assembly, the EP has accumulated more power over time. Experts assert that the EU's latest effort at institutional reform—the Lisbon Treaty, which entered into force on December 1, 2009—has increased the relative power of the EP within the EU significantly. The Lisbon Treaty gives the EP a say over the vast majority of EU legislation (with some exceptions, such as tax matters and foreign policy) and further strengthens the EP's budgetary responsibilities. It also gives the EP the right to approve or reject international agreements and expands the EP's decision-making authority over trade-related issues.

Many analysts note that the EP has not been shy about exerting its new powers under the Lisbon Treaty, and in some areas, with implications for U.S. interests. In February 2010, the EP rejected the U.S.-EU SWIFT agreement allowing U.S. authorities access to European financial data to help counter terrorism. Although the EP eventually approved a revised U.S.-EU SWIFT accord in July 2010, it did so only after several EP demands related to strengthening data privacy protections were agreed to by the United States and the other EU institutions.

Although supporters point to the EP's growing institutional clout, others assert that the EP still faces several challenges of public perception. Skeptics contend that the EP lacks the legitimacy of national parliaments and that its powers remain somewhat limited. Some analysts observe that the complexity of the EU legislative process contributes to limited public interest and understanding of the EP's role, leading to declining turnout in European Parliament elections and wider charges of a democratic deficit in the EU. Criticism has also been directed at the costs incurred by what many consider duplicate EP facilities in several European cities.

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 111th Congress. Also see CRS Report RS21372, *The European Union: Questions and Answers*, by Kristin Archick and Derek E. Mix, and CRS Report RS21618, *The European Union's Reform Process: The Lisbon Treaty*, by Kristin Archick and Derek E. Mix.

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The European Parliament: A Key EU Institution

The 736-member European Parliament (EP) is a key institution of the European Union (EU). The EU is a political and economic partnership that represents a unique form of 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 EU is the latest stage of a process of European integration begun in the 1950s to promote peace and economic prosperity in Europe; the EU has been built through a series of binding treaties, and its members have committed to harmonizing laws and adopting common policies on an extensive range of issues. EU member states work together through common institutions to set policy and promote their collective interests.

As the only EU institution that is directly elected, the European Parliament represents the citizens of the EU. Once limited to being a consultative assembly, the EP has accumulated more power over time. Successive EU treaties have enhanced the EP's role and responsibilities in order to improve democratic accountability in the EU policy-making process. Experts assert that the EU's new Lisbon Treaty—which took effect on December 1, 2009—has increased the relative power of the EP within the EU significantly. The Lisbon Treaty contains a wide range of internal reforms aimed at improving the effectiveness of the EU's governing institutions, increasing democratic transparency within the EU, and giving the EU a more coherent voice and identity on the world stage. Among other measures, the Lisbon Treaty strengthens the EP's role in the EU's legislative and budgeting processes. Many Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) view the EP as one of the big “winners” of this latest round of EU institutional reform.

Other EU Institutions

The **European Commission** upholds the common interest of the Union as a whole. It is independent of the member states' national governments. As the EU's executive, the Commission has the sole right of legislative initiative in most cases and implements EU decisions and common policies. It also serves as the guardian of the EU's treaties, ensuring that member states adopt and abide by their provisions. The 27 Commissioners, one from each EU country, are appointed by agreement among the member states to five-year terms. One Commissioner serves as Commission President. Each of the other Commissioners holds a distinct portfolio (e.g., agriculture, energy, trade), similar to U.S. department secretaries and agency directors.

The **Council of the European Union (Council of Ministers)** represents the national governments. As the EU's main decision-making body, the Council enacts legislation based on proposals put forward by the Commission and agreed to (in many cases) by the Parliament. A minister from each country takes part in Council meetings, with participation configured according to the subject under consideration (e.g., agriculture ministers would meet to discuss farm subsidies). The Presidency of the Council rotates among the member states, changing every six months.

The **European Council** brings together the Heads of State or Government of the member states and the President of the European Commission at least four times a year (in what are often termed “EU Summits”). It acts principally as a guide and driving force for EU policy. The European Council is headed by a President, who serves as the coordinator and spokesman for the work of the 27 Heads of State or Government.

The **Court of Justice** interprets EU law, and its rulings are binding. The **Court of Auditors** monitors the Union's financial management. A number of other **advisory committees** represent economic, social, and regional interests.

The EP also works closely with the two other main EU institutions—the Council of the European Union (Council of Ministers) and the European Commission. Despite the EP's growing power and influence, the EP is not widely considered a legislative body in the traditional sense because

it cannot initiate legislation; that right rests largely with the Commission, which functions as the EU's executive.¹ The Council, which is composed of ministers from the national governments, is the EU's main decision-making body and enacts legislation based on Commission proposals. However, in most cases, the Council's adoption of legislation occurs jointly with the Parliament, giving the EP an important right to accept, amend, or reject proposed EU legislation.

Role of the European Parliament

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 in a "consultation procedure," the EP gained more power to affect EU legislation in the "cooperation procedure" of the 1986 Single European Act. The EP's role in the EU's legislative process, especially in areas related to the EU's common internal market, was increased further by the introduction of the "co-decision procedure" in the Maastricht Treaty of 1992. In the "co-decision procedure," the EP and the Council of Ministers share legislative power and must both approve a Commission proposal for it to become EU law. The Amsterdam Treaty of 1997 extended the use of "co-decision" to many additional policy areas (ranging from the environment to social policy). As more decisions within the Council of Ministers have become subject to a complex majority voting system rather than unanimity to allow for greater speed and efficiency of decision-making, the Parliament's right of "co-decision" has come to be viewed as an increasingly important democratic counterweight at the European level to the Commission and Council.²

As noted above, the Lisbon Treaty strengthens the EP's responsibilities, especially in the EU's legislative process. It roughly doubles the Parliament's right of "co-decision" to almost 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 the term "co-decision" continues to be used frequently in practice.

The "Co-decision Procedure"

The EU's "ordinary legislative procedure," or "co-decision," 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.

¹ EP supporters contend that the EP has a limited power of political initiative; the EP can ask the Commission to introduce a legislative proposal, but the Commission is not required to comply with the EP's request.

² The voting system in the Council of Ministers is known as Qualified Majority Voting (QMV); each EU member state is allotted a number of votes in rough proportion to its population size. Passage of a measure currently requires at least half of the member states and 255 out of the 345 total votes, representing at least 62% of the EU population. Under the Lisbon Treaty, a simpler formula for QMV will be introduced in 2014 but not fully implemented until 2017.

Additionally, in the “consent procedure,” the EP must, by a simple “yes” or “no” majority, approve the accession of new EU member states and the conclusion of agreements with third parties, such as association and trade agreements with non-member states.³ If the Parliament does not give its consent, such agreements cannot enter into force.

Budgetary Process

The EP and the Council of Ministers together constitute the EU’s budget authority and are responsible for allocating the EU’s annual budget; they decide, for example, on the amount of funding dedicated to infrastructure as opposed to education. However, neither the EP nor the Council can affect the size of the EU’s annual budget; that amount is fixed periodically by agreement among the EU’s member states as a percentage of the Union’s combined gross national income (GNI).⁴ The EU’s 2010 budget is EUR 141.5 billion (approximately \$195 billion).

With the entrance into force of the Lisbon Treaty, the Parliament has the right to decide on the allocation of the entire EU budget jointly with the Council. Previously, 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. Of particular importance, the EP gains more control over agricultural spending, which usually accounts for over one-third of the EU’s annual budget.

Under the Lisbon Treaty, the EU’s annual budgetary procedure begins with the Commission proposing a draft budget. The Council adopts its position on the draft budget, including any amendments, and sends it to the EP for its consideration. The Parliament then has 42 days to either approve the draft budget or amend it and send it back to the Council. If the Council agrees with the EP’s amendments, the budget is adopted; if the Council disagrees with the EP’s changes, a Conciliation Committee is convened to resolve differences and reach agreement on a joint text within 21 days. The joint text must then be approved by both the Council and the EP; however, if the joint text is rejected by the Council, the EP—subject to certain conditions—ultimately has the right to approve the budget. In the event that both the EP and the Council reject the joint text or fail to decide, the Commission must submit a new draft budget. Some EP advocates assert that the EP’s position in the annual budgetary process is now stronger than that of the Council, as the Council may never impose a budget against the will of the EP, but under some circumstances, the EP may impose a budget against the will of the Council; at the same time, most experts agree that in practice, the EP would likely only exert this right in exceptional situations.⁵

In determining the EU’s annual budget, the EP and the Council must also adhere to annual spending limits laid out in the EU’s multi-annual financial framework, which defines the long-term political priorities for the EU and sets annual maximum amounts for each priority and expenditure category.⁶ According to the Lisbon Treaty, the Council must agree unanimously on

³ Prior to the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty, the “consent procedure” was known as the “assent procedure.”

⁴ Currently, EU member states have set an annual budget ceiling of 1.29% of the Union’s gross national income. The EU budget comes from three main sources: external customs duties; a share of each member state’s value added tax (VAT) revenue; and a further contribution from each member state based on the size of its individual GNI.

⁵ See Fact Sheets on the European Union, “The Budgetary Procedure,” available on the website of the European Parliament, <http://www.europarl.europa.eu>.

⁶ The EU’s current multiannual financial framework covers the period 2007-2013.

each multiannual financial framework, after having obtained the Parliament's consent. As such, the Parliament has a degree of input into the EU's overall budgetary direction and the ability to help shape the EU budget to reflect its own political priorities. In addition, the EP examines the European Commission's implementation of previous annual 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. With its decision, the EP also presents the Commission with binding recommendations and observations regarding implementation of the budget. The EP's budgetary powers are considerably greater than those exercised by most parliaments in EU member states.

Supervision and Oversight Responsibilities

The Parliament has a supervisory role over the European Commission and exercises some limited oversight over the activities of the Council of Ministers. The EP monitors the management of EU policies, can conduct investigations and public hearings, and may submit oral and written questions to the Commission and the Council. The Presidency of the Council, which rotates among the member states every six months, presents its program to the Parliament at the beginning of its term and reports on results achieved at the end of its mandate.

Of particular note, the EP plays a role in the approval process of each new Commission and Commission President every five years. According to the Lisbon Treaty, the member states agree together (usually during a meeting of the European Council) on who to designate as the Commission President, and their selection must take into account the results of the most recent EP elections. 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 nominee for Commission President then must be "elected" by a majority vote in the EP. Analysts note that this "election" procedure is largely intended to raise public awareness of the importance of EP elections and the EP's role in choosing the Commission President; in practice, they assert, it differs very little from the previous parliamentary "approval" process. For example, in both 2004 and 2009—that is, before the Lisbon Treaty's entrance into force—the EP's strongest political group successfully demanded that the Commission President be of the same political stripe. At the same time, given that no single political group in the EP has ever held a majority on its own, the support of other political groups has always been needed in order to approve the nomination. In September 2009, the EP supported the re-appointment of 2004-2009 Commission President José Manuel Barroso for the 2009-2014 term (by a vote of 382 to 219, with 117 abstentions).⁷

The EP also has the power to accept or reject a newly proposed Commission as a whole, but not 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. In February 2010, the EP voted to approve the so-called Barroso II Commission for the term ending in 2014. 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. 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

⁷ Barroso, from Portugal, is a former prime minister from a conservative Portuguese political party. As such, he was backed in both 2004 and 2009 for Commission President by the EP's largest political group, which is center-right in political orientation. See also, Sebastian Kurpas, "The Treaty of Lisbon: How Much 'Constitution' Is Left?," *CEPS Policy Brief*, December 2007.

Parliament amid concerns about her past financial dealings and her competence for her portfolio. A similar situation occurred in 2004, when the EP 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.

In addition, the EP may 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 1979.⁸ Voting for the EP takes place on a national basis, with the number of MEPs elected in each country based roughly 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.⁹ 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, some analysts contend that relatively low voter participation compared to national elections indicates a lack of awareness and understanding about the EP.

Political Groups

Once elected, Members of the European Parliament caucus according to transnational groups based on political ideology, rather than by nationality. A political group must consist of at least 25 MEPs from a minimum of seven EU member states. The EP currently has seven political groups—containing over 100 individual political parties—plus a number of “non-attached” or independent members.

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. However, individual MEPs are not bound to vote according to their group's position.

⁸ Prior to direct elections, MEPs were appointed by their national parliaments.

⁹ 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.

**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 the European Parliament (S&D; center-left/socialists)	184	25
Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE; centrist/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.

Note: Percentages are rounded.

As noted previously, 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 with 265 seats. The EPP is center-right in political orientation. 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. However, the center-left *Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats in the European Parliament (S&D)*, with 184 seats, remains the EP's second-largest political group following the 2009 elections.

The EPP and the S&D have a history of cross-ideological legislative partnership. As in the 2004-2009 EP (in which the S&D was called the PES—the Socialist Group in the European Parliament), the two parties continue to cooperate closely in an unofficial “Grand Coalition” and together frequently shape politics in the EP. Critics argue that the consensus-seeking of the “Grand Coalition” makes politics in the EP stale and paradoxical. Other observers note that maximizing consensus and unity lends the EP greater institutional weight. As a general rule, most MEPs prefer consensus outcomes that are endorsed by a large and broad majority.

The third-largest group in the EP is the *Group of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE)*. ALDE, with 84 seats, is centrist and liberal in political orientation. In European political terminology, “liberal” connotes an emphasis on free market economics, individual rights, social equality, and de-centralized government. In the past, ALDE was often viewed as the “kingmaker,” able to exercise a decisive swing vote for a majority in the EP. However, as a result of some losses suffered by ALDE in the 2009 elections and the shift of the political balance in the EP largely to the right, some analysts assert that ALDE's political capital has decreased. Other

observers contend that as the third-largest group, ALDE's position on a given issue will still be a crucial factor in the outcome of many EP votes.

The remaining four political groups in the EP are smaller in size, ranging from 32 to 55 members each. On the left side of the political spectrum are the *Group of the Greens/European Free Alliance (Greens-EFA)*; and the *Confederal Group of the European United Left/Nordic Green Left (GUE-NGL)*. The Greens-EFA is largely comprised of numerous European Green parties—leftist in political orientation with a strong emphasis on pro-environment politics and human rights—and several regional parties (e.g., Scottish, Welsh, Basque, and Catalan) with a leftist or center-left outlook. Despite the overall trend in the EP to the right in the 2009 elections, the Greens-EFA attracted many voters who sought change, resulting in a significant increase in the number of their seats. The GUE-NGL consists of parties that are even farther left in orientation; some have a Green emphasis while others have roots in communism. The GUE-NGL is pro-EU and pro-integration, but strongly critical of existing EU structures, policies, and overall direction.

On the right side of the political spectrum are two new groups: the *European Conservatives and Reformists Group (ECR)*; and the *Europe of Freedom and Democracy Group (EFD)*. The ECR was formed in 2009, after the UK Conservative Party broke with the EPP amid growing unease with the EPP's support for continued EU integration. The ECR is right-wing in political orientation and strongly opposed to a "federalist" Europe. Even farther to the right is the EFD, composed of "euroskeptics" and critics of the EU who oppose further European integration.

Composition of Political Groups in the European Parliament

European People's Party (EPP). The center-right EPP 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.

Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats in the European Parliament (S&D). The center-left S&D includes MEPs from 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.

Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE). MEPs in the centrist ALDE hail from 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.

Greens/European Free Alliance (Greens-EFA). The leftist and pro-environment Greens-EFA includes MEPs from Germany's Alliance '90/The Greens, France's Europe Ecologie, and the Scottish National Party. The co-chairs of the Greens-EFA are French MEP Daniel Cohn-Bendit and German MEP Rebecca Harms.

European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR). The largest number of MEPs in the right-wing ECR are from the UK Conservative Party, Poland's Law and Justice Party, and the Czech Republic's Civic Democratic Party. The chair of ECR is Polish MEP Michal Kaminski.

European United Left/Nordic Green Left (GUE-NGL). The far-left GUE-NGL contains MEPs from Germany's Die Linke, the French Communist Party, and the Irish party Sinn Fein. The chair of GUE-NGL is German MEP Lothar Bisky.

Europe of Freedom and Democracy (EFD). The largest contingents in the euroskeptical EFD are from the UK Independence Party (UKIP), which advocates UK withdrawal from the EU, and Italy's Lega Nord. The co-chairs of EFD are British MEP Nigel Farage and Italian MEP Francesco Enrico Speroni.

Note: This box is meant for illustrative purposes; it is not a definitive or exhaustive list of all the political parties comprising each political group in the European Parliament.

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.¹⁰

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 currently 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 five Quaestors (responsible for administrative and financial matters) 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, Buzek has stressed employment, energy security and the environment, foreign policy and human rights, and EP reform as his presidency priorities.¹¹

Committees

The EP has 20 standing committees, each addressing specific issues such as education, the environment, and economic and monetary affairs. The EP may also set up subcommittees and special committees, which investigate or oversee specific issues for a limited period of time. For example, in 2006, the EP established a special committee to examine the role of EU member states in hosting secret CIA detention facilities and aiding CIA flights related to the rendition of terrorism suspects. Currently, the EP has two special committees, focusing respectively on the EU’s response to the global financial crisis and the EU’s next multiannual financial framework. Only one EP committee—the foreign affairs committee—has subcommittees (one focuses on human rights, the other on security and defense issues).

¹⁰ “Voters Steer Europe to the Right,” BBC News, June 8, 2009; Stephen Castle, “Far Right Is Left Out at EU’s Assembly,” *International Herald Tribune*, July 15, 2009; Julia De Clerck-Sachsse, “The New European Parliament: All Change or Business as Usual?,” *CEPS Special Report*, August 2009.

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

EP committees vary in size, usually containing from 20 to 80 MEPs. Each committee has a chairman, four vice-chairmen, and a secretariat to guide its work. The political make-up of the committees reflects that of the EP as a whole, and committee posts are allocated proportionally to the respective size of the political groups; for example, the EPP currently chairs nine committees, the S&D seven, and the ALDE three.

EP committees are key actors in the adoption of EU legislation. 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. EP committees consider legislative proposals put forward by the Commission and the Council of Ministers. The appropriate committee (e.g., the Committee on the Environment, Public Health, and Food Safety would deal with legislation on pollution) appoints a MEP as “rapporteur” to draft a report on the legislative proposal under consideration. The rapporteur submits a draft report to the committee for discussion, which the committee then votes on and possibly amends. The committee’s report is then considered in a plenary session of the entire Parliament, amended if necessary, and put to a vote in the full EP. The EP thus adopts its position on the proposed EU legislation. Committees may also draw up their “own initiative” reports, in which they recommend action to be taken in a particular area by the Commission or the member states.

Delegations

The European Parliament plays a role in the EU’s international presence through a total of 41 delegations that range in size; most have between 20 and 50 MEPs. These delegations maintain parliament-to-parliament contacts and relations with representatives of many countries and regions 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 Russia, Iran, Israel, the Palestinian Legislative Council, China, India, and the Korean Peninsula.

Administration

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

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 cost of having three addresses is high in terms of both time and money, and continues 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 21 of these languages (Irish and Maltese are sometimes excepted), and some documents must be translated into all 23. Such extensive translation and publication services represent a significant administrative cost.

Growing Influence and Ongoing Challenges

As noted previously, 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 and a greater say over the EU's budget. In addition, the Lisbon Treaty gives the EP the right to approve or reject all international agreements by a simple majority and expands the EP's decision-making authority over trade-related issues.

Analysts observe that the EP has not been shy about exerting its new powers under the Lisbon Treaty, and in some cases, with significant implications for U.S. interests. In February 2010, by a vote of 378 to 196 (with 31 abstentions), the EP rejected a U.S.-EU accord aimed at countering terrorism; the so-called SWIFT agreement, negotiated by the Commission and approved by the Council of Ministers, would have continued allowing U.S. authorities access to European financial data in an effort to help prevent or investigate terrorist attacks. Prior to the Lisbon Treaty, the EP did not have the authority to veto such an accord. Many MEPs had long claimed that the U.S.-EU SWIFT agreement did not contain sufficient protections to safeguard the personal data and privacy rights of EU citizens. In addition, some MEPs reportedly sought to send a message to the Commission and Council, conveying that the EP's positions must now be taken into account during (and not after) the negotiation of international agreements or the drafting of new legislative proposals. Although the EP eventually approved a revised U.S.-EU SWIFT agreement in July 2010, it did so only after several EP demands related to strengthening data privacy protections were agreed to by the United States, the European Commission, and the Council of Ministers.¹²

Supporters also claim that the EP's influence has been growing even in 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 consent on cooperation accords with third parties and Parliamentary resolutions to promote its views and highlight issues such as human rights. For example, many observers credit the EP's opposition in 2005 to ending the EU's arms embargo on China (on both human rights and strategic grounds) as one factor that eventually dissuaded member states from lifting the embargo. More recently, some experts assert that the agreement reached between the EP and the other EU institutions on the establishment of the European External Action Service (EEAS)—the new EU diplomatic corps called for by the Lisbon Treaty—has the potential to greatly increase the EP's voice in the foreign policy realm. The EP fought for and largely won considerable oversight of the EEAS by demanding scrutiny over its political appointments, staffing, and budget.

¹² “MEPs Hail Historic Rejection of SWIFT Deal,” *Agence Europe*, February 13, 2010; “SWIFT: Rapporteur Announces Last-Minute Agreement,” *Europolitics*, June 25, 2010. For more information, see CRS Report RS22030, *U.S.-EU Cooperation Against Terrorism*, by Kristin Archick.

Nevertheless, 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. They argue that the institutional clout and influence of the EP remains somewhat limited given that it cannot initiate legislation and because it shares legislative power with the Council of Ministers. They also maintain that the EU's legislative process is overly complex and often focused on highly technical issues, leading to a lack of public understanding about the role of the EP. Limited public awareness of the EP's activities, they argue, is reflected in the consistently declining turnout in European Parliament elections, which 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.

Closely related to the question of the EP's legitimacy is the issue of whether MEPs reflect national or European interests. Studies on voting behavior in the EP have shown that ideology holds greater influence than nationality, with MEPs voting with their party groups the vast majority of the time. On the other hand, some observers contend that MEPs at times 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. Many voters view EP elections as a national mid-term election—an indication of voter opinion on the performance of the national government—rather than as a vote on Europe-wide issues.¹³

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 a sizeable portion 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. The French city of Strasbourg, which is close to the German border, was originally chosen as the seat of the EP to serve as a symbol of peace and reconciliation between the two countries, and both 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 public controversy, as did the former flat-rate expense regime for MEPs that some viewed as contributing to the EP's "gravy train" image (the EP instituted a reimbursable system for business and travel expenses in 2009).

Finally, a number of analysts suggest that the enhanced powers granted to the EP by the Lisbon Treaty, and the EP's resulting new-found assertiveness, could lead to greater inter-institutional rivalry within the EU and make the EU's legislative process even more complex. As noted above, the EP complicated the approval of the U.S.-EU SWIFT agreement, and some observers contend that EP maneuvering regarding the EEAS has delayed its establishment. Other commentators anticipate that the European Commission or the Council of Ministers, anxious to protect their own institutional turf, may challenge some EP actions in the EU Court of Justice. For example, press reports indicate that the Council of Ministers believes that some provisions of a new EP-European Commission framework agreement (governing relations between the two bodies) are not in line with the EU treaties, and has threatened to submit a complaint to the Court.¹⁴

¹³ Simon Hix and Abdul Noury, "After Enlargement: Voting Patterns in the Sixth European Parliament," *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, May 2009; Julia De Clerck-Sachsse and Piotr Maciej Kaczynski, "The European Parliament: More Powerful, Less Legitimate," *CEPS Working Document*, May 2009.

¹⁴ "EP/Commission: Council Challenges Framework Agreement," *Agence Europe*, October 23, 2010.

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 June 2010 in Madrid, Spain (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 U.S. analysts observe that the TLD remains relatively obscure, with ambiguity regarding which Members of Congress actually belong, and no role given to the U.S. Senate.¹⁵

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 established a liaison office with the U.S. Congress in Washington, DC; EP staffers deployed as part of this office 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, committees, 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.¹⁶

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¹⁵ For more information, see the European Parliament's website on the Transatlantic Legislators' Dialogue, 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.

¹⁶ European Parliament resolution (A6-0114/2009), adopted March 26, 2009.