

May 16, 2019

The European Parliament and U.S. Interests

A Key EU Institution

Between May 23 and May 26, 2019, the 28 member states of the European Union (EU) are due to hold elections for the next European Parliament (EP). As the only EU institution that is directly elected, the 751 members of the EP represent the roughly 513 million citizens of the EU. The EP has accumulated more power over time, most recently with the EU's 2009 Lisbon Treaty, in an attempt to improve democratic accountability and transparency in EU policymaking. Enhanced powers have made the EP a more important actor on several issues of U.S. concern, including trade, data privacy, and countering terrorism. Congress-EP ties are longstanding, and Congress may be increasingly interested in EP activities given the EP's potential to influence key aspects of U.S.-EU relations.

Role and Responsibilities

The EP plays a role in the EU's legislative and budget processes and has a degree of oversight responsibility. The EP works closely with the two other main EU institutions: the *European Commission*, which represents the interests of the EU as a whole and functions as the EU's executive, and the *Council of the European Union* (or the *Council of Ministers*), which represents the interests of the EU's national governments.

Although the European Commission has the right of legislative initiative, the EP shares legislative power with the Council of Ministers in most policy areas, giving the EP the right to accept, amend, or reject the vast majority of EU laws (with some exceptions, such as taxation and most aspects of foreign policy). Both the EP and the Council of Ministers must approve a European Commission proposal for it to become EU law in a process known as the *ordinary legislative procedure* or *co-decision*. The EP must also approve the accession of new EU member states (or a member state's withdrawal) and has the right to approve or reject international accords, including EU trade agreements.

The EP decides how to allocate the EU's budget jointly with the Council of Ministers (although neither the EP nor the Council of Ministers can affect the size of the EU's annual budget, which is fixed as a percentage of the EU's combined gross national income). In addition, the EP has a supervisory role over the European Commission and 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 must approve each new slate of European Commissioners every five years.

Structure and Organization

Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) serve five-year terms. Voting for the EP takes place on a national

basis, with the number of MEPs elected in each EU country based roughly on population size. Although voter turnout varies greatly from country to country, average turnout in EP elections is usually relatively low (43% in the last EP elections in May 2014) and of ongoing concern to the EU.

Political Groups

Once elected, MEPs caucus according to political ideology rather than nationality. A political group must contain at least 25 MEPs from a minimum of seven EU countries. No single group in the EP has an absolute majority, making compromise and coalition-building key features of the legislative process. The relative size of the political groups helps to determine EP leadership positions and committee posts. In the 2014-2019 EP, there were eight political groups—containing over 200 national political parties—that spanned the political spectrum, as well as a number of “non-attached” or independent MEPs (see **Figure 1**).

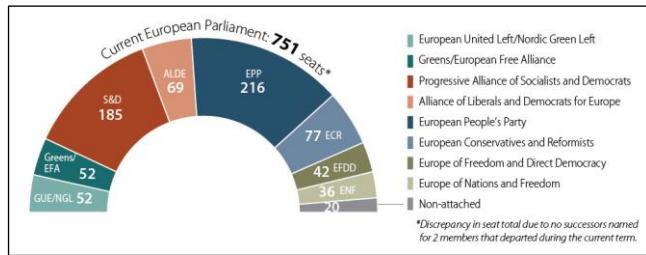
Historically, the center-right *European People's Party (EPP)* and the center-left *Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats in the European Parliament (S&D)* have been the two largest political groups and have tended to dominate the EP by cooperating in unofficial “grand coalitions.” At the same time, voting blocs on specific pieces of legislation vary according to different issues and interests. In the 2014-2019 EP, the centrist and liberal *Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE)* and the right-wing *European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR)* both played a “kingmaker” role at times by exercising decisive swing votes.

In the 2014 election, candidates and parties considered to be “euroskeptic”—that is, critical of the EU or anti-EU to varying degrees—won an increased number of seats. Although most euroskeptic parties are on the right or far right (and are predominantly nationalist and anti-immigration), some are on the left or far left. The ECR was one of three right-wing euroskeptic groups in the 2014-2019 EP. The ECR consisted of MEPs concerned about a loss of national sovereignty in the EU. Further to the right, the *Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy (EFDD)* group strongly objected to any further EU integration. Both the ECR and the EFDD included MEPs from the United Kingdom (UK) who supported the UK's decision to leave the EU (known as “Brexit,” which remains pending). In 2015, a smaller but more stridently anti-EU, nationalist group formed—the *Europe of Nations and Freedom (ENF)*.

The other two groups in the EP are on the left of the political spectrum. The *Greens/European Free Alliance (Greens/EFA)* comprises pro-environment parties and several regional parties (e.g., Scottish, Welsh, Catalanian, and Basque) with leftist outlooks. The far-left *European*

United Left/Nordic Green Left (GUE/NGL) includes former communist parties and some EU critics.

Figure 1. European Parliament 2014-2019
Political Groups and Seats



Source: Graphic created by CRS, based on data from the European Parliament, <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/meps/en/search/table>.

EP Leadership, Committees, and Delegations

MEPs elect a president of the European Parliament every two-and-a-half years (twice per parliamentary term). The president oversees the work of the EP and represents it externally. In recent parliaments, the EPP and S&D have agreed to split the position of EP president over each five-year term. Antonio Tajani, an Italian MEP from the EPP, has served as EP president since January 2017.

The EP has 20 standing committees that are key actors in the adoption of EU legislation. In terms of their importance and power, EP committees rival those in the U.S. Congress and surpass those in most national European legislatures. Each committee considers legislative proposals put forward by the European Commission that fall within its jurisdiction and issues a recommendation to the full EP on whether to adopt, amend, or reject the proposed legislation. The EP also plays a role in the EU's international presence with 44 delegations that maintain parliament-to-parliament relations throughout the world (including with the U.S. Congress).

Location and Administration

Strasbourg, France, is the official seat of the EP. This location, close to the border with Germany, was chosen to symbolize post-war European reconciliation. Plenaries are held in Strasbourg once per month, while EP committee meetings and some part-plenary sessions occur in Brussels, Belgium. A Secretariat of roughly 5,000 non-partisan civil servants, based in both Brussels and Luxembourg, provides administrative and technical support. MEPs and political groups also have their own staff assistants.

The Upcoming 2019 Election

In the upcoming May 2019 EP election, 751 seats will be contested. The UK will participate in the EP election as it remains an EU member. If the UK leaves the EU during the upcoming EP term, the UK's 73 MEPs would depart, and the overall number of MEPs would fall to 705, but certain EU countries would gain additional seats (according to a previously agreed post-Brexit seat redistribution).

Polls suggest that the EPP and the S&D will retain their positions as the two largest political groups in the next EP, but both are expected to lose seats amid gains for anti-establishment, populist, and/or euroskeptic parties. Experts suggest that this could further fragment the EP. EU supporters are primarily concerned that further gains by euroskeptic candidates or parties may enable them to block legislation and hinder EP (and EU) decisionmaking.

In the current EP, however, euroskeptic parties have struggled to form a cohesive opposition due to competing political agendas and different views on numerous issues (including EU reforms). Some euroskeptic politicians are seeking to forge a more unified force in the next EP. In April 2019, Matteo Salvini, leader of Italy's far-right *Lega* party, launched an alliance with other far-right euroskeptic parties, including from France, Germany, the Netherlands, Austria, Denmark, and Finland. This new group incorporates most of the ENF, as well as some parties in the ECR and EFDD. Many analysts remain doubtful, however, about the ability of such diverse euroskeptic parties to work together. Others note that most euroskeptic parties (even the most hardline ones) now largely advocate for EU reform rather than a dissolution of the EU or national withdrawal from the EU (in part due to the UK's difficulties with Brexit).

The outcome of the EP election is expected to influence the selection of the next president of the European Commission (due to take office in late 2019), which could prove controversial. The Lisbon Treaty requires EU leaders to take the EP election results into account in choosing the next commission president. The main European political parties have nominated "lead candidates" for the post, but many EU leaders contend that they are not limited to selecting from among these specific candidates. Some suggest that the EP may reject any nominee for commission president who was not a lead candidate during the EP election.

The United States and the EP

Over the last decade, the EP has gained a more prominent role in some aspects of U.S.-EU relations, particularly in light of the EP's right to approve or reject international agreements. In 2010, for example, the EP initially rejected a U.S.-EU agreement on countering terrorist financing due to EP concerns about U.S. data privacy safeguards. The EP would also have to approve a possible future U.S.-EU trade accord. More generally, the EP's role in EU lawmaking may affect certain U.S. political or economic interests. The EP was central to shaping the EU's new General Data Protection Regulation, which applies to many U.S. companies doing business in Europe.

Congress-Parliament Relations

Inter-parliamentary exchanges between Congress and the EP date back to the 1970s. The Transatlantic Legislators' Dialogue (TLD) has been the formal mechanism for engagement between the U.S. House of Representatives and the EP since 1999. Two TLD meetings usually take place each year to discuss a wide range of political and economic issues. Many MEPs have long argued for enhancing cooperation with Congress further, and some U.S. analysts suggest that it might be in U.S. interests for Congress to forge stronger ties. Those with this view contend that there have been instances in which legislation passed by either Congress or the EU has contributed to U.S.-EU tensions and argue that enhanced consultations could have avoided, or at least reduced, such frictions. Others assess that structural and procedural differences between Congress and the EP would likely impede effective cooperation.

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