



Updated May 26, 2021

The European Parliament and U.S. Interests

A Key EU Institution

The European Parliament (EP) is the only directly elected institution of the 27-country European Union (EU). The EP's 705 members represent the EU's roughly 445 million citizens. The most recent EP elections were in May 2019. The EP has accumulated more power over time as part of EU efforts to improve democratic accountability and transparency in EU policymaking. Enhanced powers since the 2009 Lisbon Treaty have made the EP a more important actor on several issues of U.S. concern, including trade, data privacy, and counterterrorism. Congress-EP ties are long-standing, and Congress may be 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 also must 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.

Political Groups

Once elected, MEPs caucus according to political ideology rather than nationality. A political group must contain at least 23 MEPs from a minimum of seven EU countries. Currently, the EP has seven political groups—containing almost 200 national political parties—that span the political spectrum, as well as a number of “non-attached” or independent MEPs (see **Figure 1**). Although the majority of MEPs hail from political parties that support the EU project, some belong to parties considered to be anti-establishment and *euroskeptic*—that is, critical of the EU or anti-EU to varying degrees. Most euroskeptic parties are on the right or far right (and are predominantly nationalist and anti-immigration), but a few are on the left or far left.

No single group in the EP has an absolute majority, making compromise and coalition-building key features of the EP's legislative process. 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 tended to dominate the EP by cooperating in unofficial “grand coalitions.” At the same time, voting blocs may vary on specific pieces of legislation. The relative size of the political groups also helps to determine EP leadership and committee posts.

EP Leadership, Committees, and Delegations

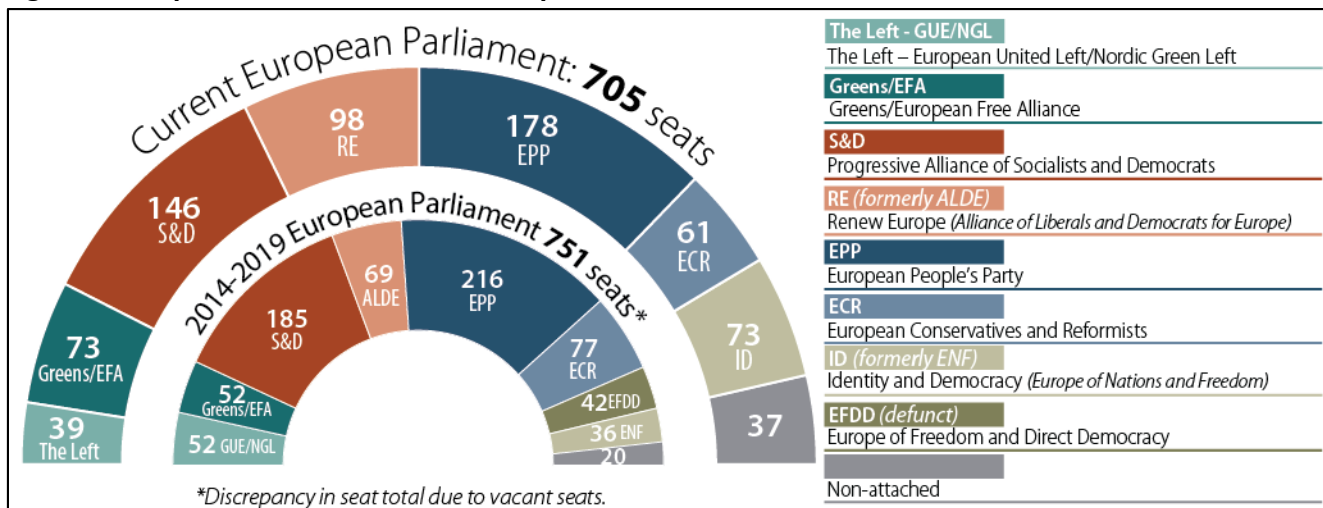
MEPs elect a president of the European Parliament every two-and-a-half years (twice per parliamentary term). The president oversees the work of the EP and represents it externally. David Sassoli, an Italian MEP from the S&D, was elected as EP president in July 2019. The EP has 20 standing committees 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 may establish temporary committees on specific issues or committees of inquiry on breaches of EU law. The EP 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, symbolizes Europe's postwar reconciliation. Plenaries typically are held in Strasbourg once per month, and committee meetings and some part-plenary sessions occur in Brussels, Belgium. A Secretariat of roughly 5,000 nonpartisan civil servants, based in both Brussels and Luxembourg, provides

administrative and technical support. MEPs and political groups also have their own staff assistants.

Figure 1. European Parliament Political Groups and Seats



Source: Graphic created by CRS, based on data from the European Parliament, as of May 26, 2021, at <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/>.

2019 Elections

In the May 2019 EP elections, the pro-EU center-right EPP and the center-left S&D retained their positions as the two largest groups in the EP but lost their combined majority, as euroskeptic, liberal, and green parties gained seats. The resulting fragmentation boosted the influence of the centrist, liberal, pro-EU Renew Europe group (formerly the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe, or ALDE). The increase in seats for the Greens/European Free Alliance (Greens/EFA), composed of pro-environment parties and leftist regional parties (e.g., Catalanian, Corsican), appears to reflect heightened voter concern about climate change and other environmental issues.

Many experts suggest that pro-EU parties were largely successful in overcoming challenges from euroskeptic parties. Pro-EU groups (EPP, S&D, Renew Europe, and Greens/EFA) hold a combined 495 seats (70%). Although euroskeptic parties secured up to 25% of seats in 2019, this is roughly the same percentage as in the previous EP. Analysts point to higher average voter turnout (51% in 2019 versus 43% in 2014) as a key factor in boosting support for pro-EU parties.

Although concerns persist about the influence of euroskeptic parties, such parties often have struggled to form a cohesive opposition in the EP; observers question their ability to work together to block legislation or hinder EU policymaking, given that they hold a range of different policy views, including on EU reforms. The largest euroskeptic group in the EP currently is Identity and Democracy (ID), an alliance of far-right parties, including from Italy, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Austria, Denmark, and Finland. ID largely grew out of the former, stridently anti-EU Europe of Nations and Freedom (ENF). The European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) is considered a more moderately euroskeptic group concerned about the loss of national sovereignty in the EU. The Left group—previously known as the European United Left/Nordic Green Left (GUE/NGL)—includes former communist parties and some far-left EU critics.

The withdrawal of the United Kingdom (UK) from the EU (*Brexit*) on January 31, 2020, and the resulting departure of the UK's 73 MEPs, affected the size and composition of the EP. According to a post-Brexit seat redistribution, the overall number of MEPs decreased from 751 to 705, but certain countries gained additional seats. These changes resulted in some groups losing seats (such as S&D and Renew Europe) but have not significantly altered the balance of power within the EP.

The United States, Congress, and the EP

Following the Lisbon Treaty, the EP has gained a more prominent role in some aspects of U.S.-EU relations, particularly with the right to approve or reject international agreements. In 2010, the EP initially rejected a U.S.-EU accord on countering terrorist financing due to concerns about U.S. data privacy safeguards. The EP also would have to approve any possible future U.S.-EU free-trade agreement. More generally, the EP's role in EU lawmaking may affect certain U.S. political or economic interests. The EP, for example, was central to shaping the EU's General Data Protection Regulation, which applies to many U.S. companies doing business in Europe. EP wariness about an EU-China investment agreement because of China's human rights and labor practices largely aligns with concerns voiced by some U.S. officials; in May 2021, the EP froze work on ratifying the accord following China's sanctioning of several EU entities and officials, including five MEPs.

Interparliamentary 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. TLD meetings are intended to take place twice a year to discuss various political and economic issues. Many MEPs have long argued for further enhancing cooperation with Congress, and some U.S. analysts suggest it might be in U.S. interests for Congress to forge stronger ties with the EP to help improve U.S.-EU relations and reduce frictions. Others assess that structural and procedural

differences between Congress and the EP likely would impede more extensive legislative cooperation.

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IF11211

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