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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 current 720 members represent the EU's nearly 450 million citizens. The EP has accumulated more power over time (most recently with the 2009 Lisbon Treaty) as part of EU efforts to improve democratic accountability and transparency in EU policymaking. Congress-EP ties are long-standing, and the EP's potential to influence key aspects of U.S.-EU relations—such as trade, data privacy, digital policies, and counterterrorism—may be of interest to Congress. The most recent EP elections were in June 2024.

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* (informally the *Council*, or *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 the EU 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 the EU 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 approve the accession of new EU members and international agreements (including on trade) and may issue nonlegislative resolutions (used, for example, to provide opinions on foreign policy issues).

With the Council of the EU, the EP decides how to allocate the EU's annual budget (fixed as a percentage of the EU's combined gross national income). The EP has a supervisory role over the European Commission, limited oversight over the Council of the EU, and monitors EU policies, including through investigations and public hearings. EU member states are required to take EP election results into account in choosing the European Commission president, and the EP must approve each new slate of European Commissioners, including the president, 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) into groups, which span the political spectrum and typically represent over 200 national

political parties. In the 2019-2024 EP, there were seven political groups; in the new EP, there are eight, as well as a number of “nonattached” or independent MEPs (see **Figure 1**). Although the majority of MEPs hail from political parties that support the EU project, some are considered to be antiestablishment and *euroskeptic*—that is, critical of the EU or anti-EU to varying degrees. Most euroskeptic parties in the EP are on the right or far right and hold predominantly nationalist and anti-immigration views.

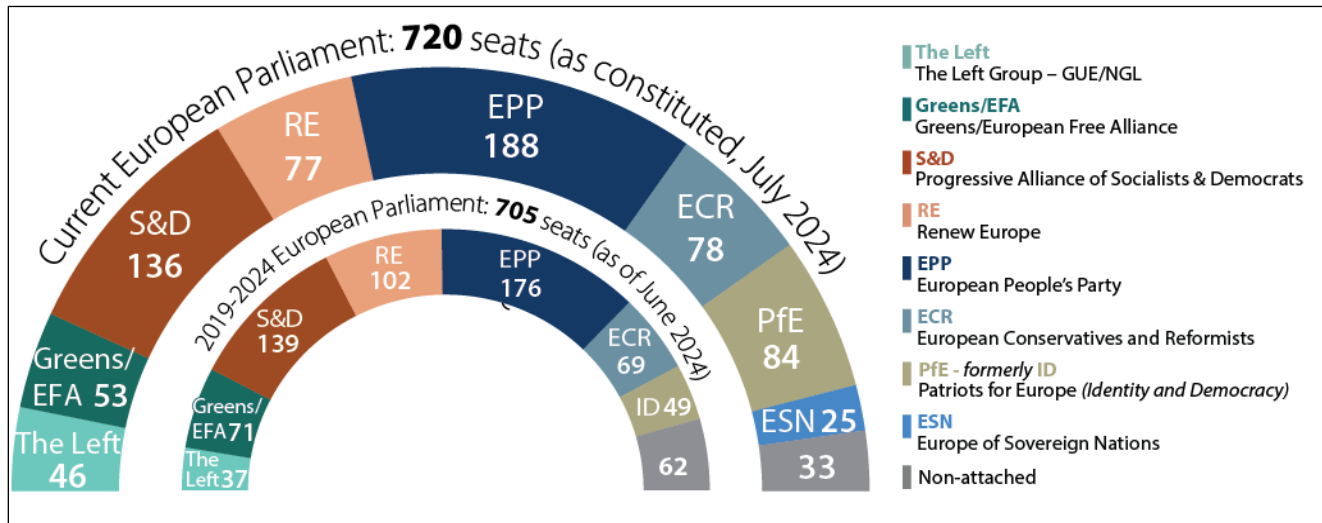
No single group in the EP has an absolute majority, making compromise and coalition-building key features of the EP. Historically, the two largest groups—the center-right European People's Party (EPP) and the center-left Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats in the European Parliament (S&D)—have 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 determine EP leadership and committee posts.

EP Leadership, Committees, and Delegations

MEPs elect a president of the EP every two-and-a-half years (twice per parliamentary term). The president oversees the work of the EP and represents it externally. Roberta Metsola, a Maltese MEP from the EPP, was reelected to a second term as EP president in July 2024. The EP has 20 standing committees that are key actors in the adoption of EU legislation. In terms of 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 that fall within its jurisdiction and recommends to the full EP whether to adopt, amend, or reject proposed legislation. The EP also may establish temporary committees on specific issues or committees of inquiry on breaches of EU law. Forty-eight EP delegations maintain parliament-to-parliament relations throughout the world (including with the U.S. Congress).

Location and Administration

The EP's official seat is in Strasbourg, France (a location near Germany symbolic of postwar peace), where plenaries typically are held once per month. Committee meetings and some part-plenary sessions occur in Brussels, Belgium. A Secretariat of over 7,000 nonpartisan civil servants and contract staff, based in both Brussels and Luxembourg, provides administrative and technical support. MEPs and political groups also have their own staff assistants (around 3,000 personnel total). The EP faces some criticism that its multiple locations entail a wasteful duplication of resources and sizeable commuting costs, as well as calls for greater transparency about MEPs' office and travel expenses. The EP tightened ethics rules in 2023 following the so-called Qatargate corruption scandal involving alleged bribes paid to several MEPs and staffers.

Figure 1. European Parliament Political Groups and Seats (as of July 2024)

Source: Created by CRS, based on European Parliament data, <https://results.elections.europa.eu/en/index.html>.

The 2024 EP Elections

In the June 2024 elections, the overall size of the EP increased to 720 MEPs due to EU demographic changes. Pro-EU center-right EPP and center-left S&D retained their positions as the two largest groups. However, voter concerns about migration, the economy, and EU climate policies helped drive increased support for euroskeptic parties and a loss of seats for the centrist, liberal, pro-EU Renew Europe (RE) group and the Greens/European Free Alliance (Greens/EFA), composed of pro-environment parties and leftist regional parties (e.g., Catalanian, Corsican) that largely support the EU. Despite the gains by euroskeptics, the EPP, S&D, RE, and Greens/EFA hold a combined 454 seats (63%). Average turnout across the EU was 51% (same as the 2019 election and higher than the 43% turnout in 2014).

Euroskeptic parties in the EP have a range of different policy views, including on EU reforms and attitudes toward Russia. The largest euroskeptic group in the new EP (and the third-largest group overall) is Patriots for Europe (PfE), an alliance of far-right parties. The new, small Europe of Sovereign Nations (ESN) is farther right and more stridently euroskeptic. The European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) is considered a more moderately euroskeptic group. The Left group includes former communist parties and some far-left EU critics.

Euroskeptic MEPs could influence EP positions on issues such as migration, climate change, or EU enlargement, especially if the EPP or other groups embrace similar views. Before the election, EPP leaders indicated openness to cooperating with ECR (regarded by the EPP as pro-Europe, pro-Ukraine, and pro-rule of law). However, ECR's lack of support in the July 2024 vote approving EPP lead candidate Ursula von der Leyen for a second term as European Commission president raises questions about the extent of potential future EPP-ECR cooperation.

The United States, Congress, and the EP

With the Lisbon Treaty, the EP 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 subsequently approved this accord and other U.S.-EU information-sharing and data protection agreements. The EP also would have to approve a potential new U.S.-EU critical minerals agreement (aimed at easing tensions over U.S. clean energy subsidies in P.L. 117-169, the Inflation Reduction Act of 2022).

More generally, the EP's role in EU lawmaking may affect certain U.S. interests. The EP was central to shaping the EU's General Data Protection Regulation, which applies to many U.S. companies doing business in Europe. Some U.S. stakeholders (including in Congress) are concerned that new EU digital rules approved by the EP to promote competition and improve online platform monitoring could unfairly target U.S. firms. The EP also has approved new legislation to regulate artificial intelligence. Meanwhile, some MEPs express concerns about China's human rights and labor practices; in 2021, the EP froze work on ratifying an EU-China investment agreement that some U.S. officials opposed. Many MEPs also support Ukraine and EU sanctions on Russia (although decisions on sanctions rest with the member states). Concerns exist in the EP about some parties' traditional ties to Russia and alleged attempts by Russia, China, and others to influence some 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. Some MEPs and analysts have long argued for further enhancing cooperation with Congress, suggesting that closer ties could help strengthen U.S.-EU relations and reduce frictions. At the same time, structural and procedural differences between Congress and the EP could pose challenges to greater legislative cooperation. For more information on the EU and U.S. relations, see CRS Report RS21372, *The European Union: Questions and Answers*.

Kristin Archick, Specialist in European Affairs

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