
ICU Volume 5 - Issue 4 - Winter 2005 - EU Focus: Institution Series

European Parliament – The Voice of European Citizens

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Overview

The European Parliament (EP) represents the interests of the people of the European Union Member States. The President directs all activities of the Parliament and acts as its representative. Since 1979 its members, (MEPs), have been directly elected every five years by the people they represent. MEPs hence represent their constituents at a European level. The present parliament, elected in June 2004, has 732 members from all 25 EU countries. However, if the European Union's Constitutional Treaty comes into force in the future, its provisions will cap the size of the European Parliament. Rather than working in national divisions, the members sit in seven Europe-wide political groups; distribution of members across the four largest of these are shown in table 1. The distribution of members across countries is shown in table 2.

The EP has three places of work: Brussels (Belgium), Luxembourg and Strasbourg (France). Whilst Luxembourg is the home of the administrative offices (the 'General Secretariat'), meetings of the whole Parliament, known as 'plenary sessions', take place in Strasbourg for one week each month and two day meetings are sometimes held in Brussels.

Committee meetings are also held in Brussels. Similar to the US Congress, Parliament does most of its work in specialist committees. Parliament has 20 committees, each covering a particular area of EU activity (for committees of interest to intensive care, please see below). During the committee meetings, MEPs prepare for the plenary session. At the plenary sessions, Parliament examines proposed legislation and votes on amendments before coming to a decision on the text as a whole.

The EP's Main Role

The Parliament's main task is to debate and vote on European legislation, just as a national Parliament votes on national legislation.

EU legislation is normally adopted jointly by the European Parliament and the Council. Both Parliament and Council may hold two readings of draft legislation and if, by then, they have not agreed on the same text, a conciliation committee composed of 15 representatives from each side negotiates a compromise, which must then be approved by Parliament and Council. This procedure ensures that European legislation is acceptable both to the representatives of national governments (on the Council) and to MEPs whom the electorate has directly chosen to represent them.

In some fields (for example agriculture, economic policy, visas and immigration), the Council alone legislates, but it has to consult with Parliament. In addition, Parliament's assent is required for certain important decisions, such as allowing new countries to join the EU.

Parliament also provides impetus for new legislation by examining the Commission's annual work programme, considering what new laws would be appropriate and asking the Commission to put forward proposals.

How does the Legislative Process Work?

A Member of the European Parliament, a so-called "rapporteur" working in one of the parliamentary committees, draws up a report on a proposal for a legislative text presented by the European Commission. The parliamentary committee votes on this report and may amend it. When the text has been revised and adopted in plenary, Parliament has approved and adopted the position outlined in the legislation. This process is repeated one or more times, depending on the type of procedure and whether or not agreement is reached with the Council through the co-

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decision procedure.

The Co-Decision Procedure

Co-decision gives the same weight to the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union over a wide range of areas; two thirds of European laws are adopted jointly by the European Parliament and the Council. The co-decision procedure was introduced by the Maastricht Treaty on European Union in

Legislative Proposal - The Commission presents a legislative proposal to Parliament and the Council simultaneously.

Parliament's First Reading – Parliament approves amendments and submits them to the Council.

Council's First Reading - If the Council agrees with the outcome of Parliament's first reading: the legislative text is adopted. If the Council does not accept Parliament's first reading vote, it draws up a common position.

Parliament's Second Reading – Parliament may approve the common position in a second reading or take no decision, and the legislative text is adopted in the form of the common position.

Alternatively, Parliament may table amendments to the common position. In this case: either the Council approves Parliament's amendments, and the legislative text is adopted, or the Council rejects them, and a Conciliation Committee is convened to seek to reconcile the positions. If the Conciliation Committee (with members from both the

Parliament and the Council) cannot agree on a 'joint text', or if Parliament or the Council does not approve it, the act is not adopted.

1992, and extended and made more effective by the Amsterdam Treaty in 1999.

In What Way Does the EP Add Value to the EU?

A significant contribution of the EP is in the diffusion of potential national conflicts. Whereas the Council may appear to be concluding decisions following debate between those representing "national interests", the Parliament operates in a different way. The fact that the Parliament organises itself in political groups rather than national delegations means that disagreements on most concrete subjects are between political viewpoints or sector interests, rather than between nations.

The European Parliament moreover is part of what makes the EU radically different from a traditional intergovernmental organisation. Indeed, imagine the EU without the Parliament: it would be a system totally dominated by bureaucrats and diplomats, loosely supervised by ministers flying periodically into Brussels. The existence of a body of full-time representatives at the heart of decision-making in Brussels, asking questions, knocking on doors, shining the spotlight on dark corners, dialoguing with constituents back home, makes the EU system more open, transparent and democratic than would otherwise be the case. MEPs are drawn from governing parties and opposition parties and represent not just capital cities, but the regions in their full diversity. In short: "The

Parliament brings pluralism into play and brings added value to the scrutiny of EU legislation" (Richard Corbett, MEP, 2005).

Parliamentary Committees Relevant to IC

The European Parliament has 20 parliamentary committees, each consisting of between 25 and 78 MEPs. These committees are presided by a chair and have a bureau and secretariat. The political make-up of the committees reflects that of the plenary assembly. The committees meet once or twice a month in Brussels and debates are held in public. The committees draw up, amend and adopt legislative proposals and own-initiative reports. Below is a list of committees working on relevant issues for ICU Managers.

Committee for Employment and Social Affairs (EMPL)

www.europarl.eu.int/committees/empl_home.htm

Chairman: Jan Andersson, Sweden, PES

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The committee is responsible for:

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- employment policy and all aspects of social policy such as working conditions, social security and social protection;
- health and safety measures in the work place;
- the European Social Fund;
- vocational training policy, including professional qualifications;
- the free movement of workers and pensioners;
- social dialogue;
- all forms of discrimination at the work place and in the labour market except those based on gender.

Committee for Environment, Public Health and Food Safety (ENVI)

www.europarl.eu.int/comparl/envi/default_en.htm

Chairman: Karl-Heinz Florenz, Germany, EPP-ED

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The committee is responsible for:

- environmental policy and environmental protection measures, in particular concerning air, soil and water pollution, waste management and recycling, dangerous substances and preparations, noise levels, climate change, protection of biodiversity;
- public health, in particular: (a) programmes and specific actions in the field of public health; (b) pharmaceutical and cosmetic products; (c) health aspects of bioterrorism; (d) the European Agency for the Evaluation of Medicinal Products and the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control;
- food safety issues, in particular the labelling and safety of food products.

Committee for the Internal Market and Consumer Protection (IMCO)

www.europarl.eu.int/comparl/imco/default_en.htm

Chairman: Philip Whitehead, United Kingdom, PES

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The committee is responsible for:

- coordination at Community level of national legislation in the sphere of the internal market and customs, in particular: (a) the free movement of goods including the harmonisation of technical standards; (b) the right of establishment; (c) the freedom to provide services except in the financial and postal sectors;
- measures aiming to identify and remove potential obstacles to the functioning of the internal market;
- the promotion and protection of the economic interests of consumers, except for public health and food safety issues, in the context of the establishment of the internal market.

Committee for Industry, Research and Energy (ITRE)

www.europarl.eu.int/committees/itre_home.htm

Chairman: Giles Chichester, United Kingdom, EPP-ED

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The committee is responsible for:

- the Union's industrial policy and the application of new technologies;
- the Union's research policy, including the dissemination and exploitation of research findings;
- the information society and information technology, including the establishment and development of trans-European networks in the telecommunications sector.

Other Possibilities for Contacting the EP

You can also contact the European Parliament through its Correspondence with Citizens Unit, which will provide an answer to your questions: www.europarl.eu.int/registre/portail/CourrierCitoyen.cfm?langue=EN Moreover, any resident of the European Union, whether or not a citizen of a Member State, may, individually or in association with others, submit a petition to the European Parliament on a subject which comes within the European Union's fields of activity, and which affects them directly. Any company, organisation or association with its headquarters in the European

Union may also exercise this right of petition. Finally and also of interest regarding individuals' rights, Article 255 of the Treaty establishing the European Community states that citizens and residents of the European Union have a right of access to European Parliament, Council and Commission documents.



Published on : Fri, 21 Oct 2011