

Introduction

The European Parliament is the only directly elected EU institution. The parliament meets in Brussels and Strasbourg. It cannot propose legislation. Instead, alongside the Council of the European Union, it can discuss, amend, and vote on laws proposed by the Commission.

History

Originally created as an appointed body under the Treaty of Rome in 1957, the European Parliament's role was to review EU proposals. It has gained greater prominence since it became a directly elected body in 1979. Under the Single European Act (1986), it was given the power to veto the entry of a new member state. Then the Maastricht Treaty (1992) gave the parliament the power of co-decision, meaning in some areas the parliament, as well as the Council of the European Union, must approve new laws.

In 1999, tension between the elected and appointed branches of the EU led to the European Parliament using its powers to force the resignation of the European Commission.

The Lisbon Treaty (2007) extended the use of co-decision, so that both parliament and the Council of the European Union must jointly approve the vast majority of EU laws. In some cases, such as agreements on foreign policy or adopting competition law, the parliament must be consulted but the Council can approve the changes without their support.

How does the European Parliament work?

European Parliamentary elections are held every five years, and every EU citizen who is on their country's electoral register is entitled to vote. There are 751 elected Members of the European Parliament (MEPs), including the President of the European Parliament, currently Martin Schulz, who oversees the work of the parliament. The number of MEPs representing each country is based on population. For example, Britain and Italy, with over 60 million people have 73 MEPs, whereas Ireland with a population of less than 5 million only has 11 MEPs. MEPs do not sit in national groups, but in seven Europe-wide political groups; the largest are the European People's Party and the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats.

MEPs are elected under a system of proportional representation to represent regions within each country. They represent the electorate's interests in discussions with the other EU institutions. The parliament cannot propose legislation; only discuss, amend, and vote to accept or reject laws proposed by the Commission. The parliament has different committees to review specific areas of newly proposed laws. They can also produce reports making recommendations to the Commission, but the Commission does not have to act on these.

The parliament must approve the appointment of the President of the European Commission and has the power of democratic supervision over the Commission – giving it the power to sack the whole Commission if two-thirds of the parliament votes to do so.

The parliament's lack of power and low turnouts in EU elections has led to arguments that the EU has a democratic deficit. Across the EU, the average turnout in the 2014 EU elections was 43.1% and was just 36% in the UK.