The European Parliament

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June 3, 2009

Congressional Research Service
7-5700
www.crs.gov
RS21998

CRS Report for Congress
Prepared for Members and Committees of Congress

c11173008

Summary

On June 4-7, 2009, the 27 member countries of the European Union (EU) will hold elections for the European Parliament (EP). The European Parliament is one of the three key institutions of the European Union, and the only EU institution whose members are directly elected. Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) serve five-year terms. Once limited to being a consultative assembly, the EP has accumulated more power over time—it performs important functions in the EU's legislative and budgeting processes, and exercises supervision over the two other main EU institutions, the Council of the European Union (Council of Ministers) and the European Commission.

Although it does not initiate EU legislation, the EP has "co-decision" power in about three-quarters of EU legislation, giving it the right to amend or reject proposals. The Lisbon Treaty, if ratified, would increase the EP's role further, giving it veto authority over the vast majority of EU legislation. Moreover, supporters argue, as the only directly elected EU institution, the EP increasingly plays an important checks-and-balances role on behalf of Europe's citizens. Supporters also claim that the EP's influence is even growing in strictly consultative areas, such as the EU's common foreign policy, and that the EP has become an important forum for debate on international issues.

Members of the European Parliament caucus according to transnational groups based on political affiliation, rather than by nationality. No single group has ever held an absolute majority in the European Parliament, making compromise and coalition-building important elements of the legislative process. The two largest and most dominant of the seven political groups in the current Parliament are the center-right *Group of the European People's Party (Christian Democrats) and European Democrats (EPP-ED*) and the center-left *Socialist Group in the European Parliament (PES)*. Every two-and-a-half years (twice per parliamentary term), MEPs vote to elect a President of the European Parliament to lead and oversee its work and to represent the EP externally. The EP has 20 standing committees that are key actors in the adoption of EU legislation and 34 delegations that maintain international parliament-to-parliament relations.

Although supporters point to the EP's growing institutional significance, the European Parliament faces several challenges of public perception. Some skeptics contend that the EP lacks the legitimacy of national parliaments and exercises little real power. Other analysts observe that the complexity of the EU legislative process contributes to limited public interest and understanding of the EP's role, leading in turn to a trend of declining turnout in European Parliament elections. Another issue is whether MEPs reflect national or European interests—many MEPs tend to campaign on national rather than European issues and many voters view EP elections as a national mid-term election. Criticism has also been directed at the costs incurred by what many consider duplicate facilities—while much of the work of the EP takes place in Brussels, monthly plenary meetings are held in Strasbourg, France, and most of the EP Secretariat is based in Luxembourg.

Ties between the EP and the U.S. Congress are long-standing, and the Transatlantic Legislators' Dialogue—the formal mechanism for EP-Congressional exchanges—is expected to continue its activities during the 111th Congress. Also see CRS Report RS21372, *The European Union: Questions and Answers*, by Kristin Archick and Derek E. Mix.

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June 2009 European Parliament Election

On June 4-7, 2009, the 27 member countries of the European Union (EU) will hold elections for the European Parliament (EP).[1] There are 736 seats at stake in this year's vote.[2] Voting takes place on a national basis, with the number of Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) elected in each country based on population size—Germany will elect the largest number (99) and Malta the smallest (5). Once elected, national party blocs will caucus according to transnational groups based on political affiliation, rather than by country. Members will also elect a European Parliament President to lead and represent the body. MEPs serve five-year terms and have been directly elected since 1979.[3]

Approximately 375 million European citizens are eligible to cast a ballot this year. In European Parliament elections, EU citizens may vote—or run for a seat—in their country of residence, without necessarily holding citizenship in that country.

In the last EP elections, held in June 2004, overall voter turnout was approximately 45%, the lowest percentage ever and down from 63% in the first EP election of 1979. National turnout ranged from about 90% in Belgium and Luxembourg (where voting is compulsory) to just over 20% in Poland and under 17% in Slovakia. Turnout in the "Big Three" EU countries—France, Germany, and the United Kingdom—averaged around 40%.

Turnout for the 2009 election is projected to be similar, and could even decline. Although the overall number is comparable to turnout in U.S. mid-term elections, analysts observe that relatively low voter participation indicates a lack of awareness and understanding in the EU about the activities of the EP. Low turnout also reinforces the perceptions of skeptics who question the democratic legitimacy of the EP and of the EU as a whole.

Role of the European Parliament

The European Parliament is one of the three key institutions of the European Union, and the only EU institution whose members are directly elected. Once limited to being a consultative assembly, the EP has accumulated more power over time. Analysts observe that the EP and its advocates have consistently sought to expand its role and responsibilities in the EU policy process. Many believe that successive EU treaties have granted enhanced powers to the EP in order to increase democratic accountability in EU policy-making.

The European Parliament performs important functions in the EU's legislative and budgeting processes, and exercises a significant degree of supervision over the two other main EU

[1] The member states of the EU are Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom.

[2] There are 785 seats in the current European Parliament of 2004-2009; under the EU's 2001 Nice Treaty, which entered into force in 2003, this number is reduced to 736 for the parliamentary term 2009-2014. Under the yet-to-be-ratified Lisbon Treaty, there would be 754 MEPs in this term—should the Lisbon Treaty be ratified during the term, 18 additional MEPs could be added to the EP. The Lisbon Treaty sets the number of MEPs at 751 starting in 2014.

[3] Prior to direct elections, MEPs were appointed by their national parliaments.

institutions, the Council of the European Union (Council of Ministers) and the European Commission. However, the EP is not a legislative body in the traditional sense. The EP cannot initiate legislation; in most cases that right rests with the Commission, which also functions as the EU's executive: it implements and manages Council decisions and common policies, ensuring that member states adopt and abide by the provisions of EU treaties, regulations, and directives.[4] The Council, the EU's main decision-making body, composed of ministers from the national governments, enacts legislation based on Commission proposals.[5] In most cases, the Council's adoption of legislation occurs jointly with the Parliament, in a process called "co-decision."

Legislative Process

The scope of EU policy has grown over time, and with it the role of the European Parliament in the EU's legislative process. Initially limited to offering non-binding opinions and proposing amendments ("consultation procedure"), the EP gained more power to affect EU legislation in the "cooperation procedure" of 1986 Single European Act. The Maastricht Treaty of 1992 (which entered into force in 1993) substantially increased the EP's role, mostly in areas related to the EU's common internal market, with the introduction of the "co-decision procedure." In the "co-decision procedure," the EP and the Council share legislative power and must both approve a Commission proposal for it to become EU law. The Amsterdam Treaty of 1997 (which entered into force in 1999) simplified the "co-decision procedure" and extended it to many additional policy areas (ranging from the environment to social policy). As more decisions within the Council of Ministers have become subject to qualified majority voting (rather than unanimity) to allow for greater speed and efficiency of decision-making, the Parliament's power of "co-decision" serves as an important check and balance to the Commission and Council.[6] Reportedly, the EP currently has a say in about three-quarters of the legislation passed in the EU. Tax matters and foreign policy, however, are among the areas to which the "co-decision procedure" does not apply (the Parliament may give a non-binding opinion).

The "Co-decision Procedure"

The EU's "co-decision procedure" can be summarized as follows: (1) if Parliament and the Council of Ministers agree on a Commission proposal, it is approved; (2) if they disagree, the Council forms a common position; the EP can then either accept the Council's common position, or reject or amend it, by an absolute majority of its members; (3) if the Council cannot accept the EP's amendments, a conciliation meeting is convened, after which the EP and the Council approve an agreement if one can be reached. If they are unable to agree, the proposal is not adopted.

[4] The European Commission is composed of 27 Commissioners—one from each EU member country—who serve a five-year term. The head of state or government of each member country nominates their country's Commissioner. Commissioners, however, do not serve national interests, but rather represent the interests of the EU as a whole. One is selected to lead and represent the Commission as the Commission President. The others hold a distinct portfolio (e.g., agriculture, energy, external relations), similar to U.S. department secretaries and agency directors, and are responsible for overseeing legislation and member state compliance, and for representing the Commission, on that issue. Five Commissioners are double-hatted as Commission Vice Presidents in addition to their portfolio.

[5] Council of Ministers meetings are configured according to the subject under consideration (e.g., foreign ministers would meet to discuss the Middle East, agriculture ministers to discuss farm subsidies).

[6] In qualified majority voting in the Council of Ministers, countries are allotted a number of votes in rough proportion to their population size. Passage of a measure requires a double majority: at least half of the member states (two-thirds if not a Commission initiative) and 255 out of the 345 total votes. Votes must also represent at least 62% of the total EU population.

In December 2007, EU leaders signed a new reform treaty—the Lisbon Treaty—that would roughly double the Parliament's right of "co-decision" to 80 policy areas, including agriculture and issues such as asylum and immigration. The future of the Lisbon Treaty, however, has been thrown into doubt following its rejection by Irish voters in June 2008. In order for the Lisbon Treaty to come into force, all 27 member states must ratify it—EU leaders had initially hoped that this process would be complete before the June 2009 European Parliament election. While Germany, Poland, and the Czech Republic have also not yet completed their formal ratification procedures, a second referendum in Ireland—the only country to decide the matter by referendum—is expected in late 2009, possibly in October.

Additionally, in the "assent procedure," the EP must, by a simple 'yes' or 'no' majority, approve the accession of new EU member states and the conclusion of all official agreements with third parties, such as association and trade agreements with non-member states. If the Parliament does not consent, such agreements cannot enter into force.

Budgetary Process

The EP and the Council exercise joint powers over allocation of the EU's annual budget, such as the amount of funding dedicated to infrastructure as opposed to education.[7] It is similar to the way that the U.S. House and Senate Budget Committees allocate the President's budget request to various programs. However, neither the EP nor the Council can affect the size of the EU budget—the amount is fixed through percentages contributed from member states' gross national incomes (GNI) and value added tax (VAT) revenues, as well as from external customs duties.

The budgetary procedure begins with the Commission proposing a preliminary draft budget to the Council. The Council examines the preliminary draft budget and establishes the draft budget, which is then sent to the EP for a first reading. The EP may approve the draft budget or vote to attach proposed amendments or modifications, returning it to the Council for a second reading. After a conciliation meeting with Parliament representatives, the Council then votes whether to take account of the Parliament's proposed amendments and modifications and returns the draft budget as amended to the EP for its second reading and final approval.

The EP must then vote to adopt the budget in order for it to become operational. In this final stage of the process, the EP has the last word on "non-compulsory" expenditures, such as development aid both within the EU and internationally. The Council, however, has the final word on "compulsory" expenditures—mainly agriculture—that make up most of the EU budget. If disagreements persist at this stage, the EP can reject the entire draft budget.

The Lisbon Treaty, if ratified, would eliminate the distinction between "compulsory" and "non-compulsory" expenditures, and would thus give the EP more control over, for example, agricultural spending. The EP's budgetary power is considerably greater than that exercised by most parliaments in EU member states, and this "power of the purse" gives the EP considerable institutional weight in the EU.

Additionally, the EP examines the Commission's implementation of previous budgets through the "discharge procedure." In order to close the budget books of a given year, the EP must vote to

[7] The 2009 EU budget is EUR 133.8 billion (approximately $187 billion).

grant "discharge" based on reports of the EU Court of Auditors and a recommendation of the Council. In cases of fraud or mismanagement, the EP may postpone or refuse discharge pending a resolution. With its decision, the EP also presents the Commission with binding recommendations and observations regarding implementation of the budget.

Supervision and Oversight Responsibilities

The Parliament plays a supervisory role over the European Commission and the Council of Ministers. As described above, the Parliament's co-decision and budgetary powers grant it a degree of control over the Commission and the Council in many areas. The EP also monitors the management of EU policies, can conduct investigations, inquiries, and public hearings, and submits oral and written questions to the Commission and the Council.

The EP must approve the Council's nomination for Commission President—thus, the relative strengths of the political groups in the EP can affect who is nominated by the member states to this post. The EP then has the power to accept or reject the newly proposed Commission (as a whole, rather than individual nominees).[8] Since 1995, the EP has held U.S. Senate-style confirmation hearings for newly appointed Commissioners, who are chosen by the member states for five-year terms. In 2004, some MEPs threatened to veto the incoming Commission headed by current Commission President José Manuel Barroso because of controversy over some of its proposed members. MEPs demanded either a re-shuffling of Commission posts or new appointments—Barroso withdrew his proposed team in order to avoid rejection by the EP, and revamped it to ensure parliamentary approval.

The EP can also dismiss the entire Commission (although, again, not individual Commissioners) through a vote of censure. In 1999, the entire Commission opted to resign rather than face a formal censure by the EP over alleged corruption charges. Some observers view these episodes as an indication that the threat of carrying out its powers of check and balance has served to increase the EP's institutional clout.

Organization of the European Parliament

Political Groups

Members of the European Parliament caucus according to transnational groups based on political affiliation, rather than by nationality. The EP currently has seven political groups—containing over 100 individual political parties—plus a number of "non-attached" or independent members. A political group must consist of at least 20 MEPs from a minimum of one-fifth (currently, therefore, at least six) of the EU member states.

Each group appoints a chair or co-chairs, and maintains a bureau and secretariat to manage its internal organization. Prior to a vote, MEPs within each group study the legislative proposals in question with the support of committee reports, discuss prospective amendments, and seek to

[8] A new European Commission is due to be formed in late 2009.

arrive at a consensus group position. National and partisan divisions within groups routinely impact this process—and individual MEPs are not bound to vote according to the group position.

Political Groups and Seats in the European Parliament at the End of the Sixth Parliamentary Term (as of June 1, 2009) [785 seats total; two seats unoccupied]	
European People's Party-European Democrats (EPP-ED; center-right)	288
Party of European Socialists (PES; center-left/socialists)	216
Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE; liberals)	99
Union for Europe of the Nations (UEN; nationalists)	44
Greens/European Free Alliance (Greens/EFA; greens and regionalists)	43
European United Left/Nordic Green Left (EUL/NGL; far-left and former communists)	41
Independence/Democracy (ID; euroskeptics)	22
Non-attached members	30
Source: http://www.europarl.europa.eu/members/expert/groupAndCountry.do?language=EN	

No single group has ever held an absolute majority in the European Parliament, making compromise and coalition-building important elements of the legislative process. Nevertheless, the two largest groups tend to dominate the Parliament:

The *Group of the European People's Party (Christian Democrats) and European Democrats (EPP-ED*) holds the largest number of seats. The EPP-ED is center-right in political orientation, and the only group with members from all 27 EU countries. The EPP-ED contains MEPs from Germany's Christian Democratic/Christian Social Union (CDU-CSU), France's Union pour un Mouvement Populaire (UMP), the UK Conservative Party, Spain's Partido Popular (PP), Italy's Forza Italia, Poland's Civic Platform, and numerous other Christian Democratic, conservative, center-right, and centrist national parties.[9]

Many analysts expect the EPP-ED to remain the largest political group in the European Parliament following the June 2009 election. However, the UK Conservatives, increasingly uncomfortable with the strong pro-integration stance represented by the EPP-ED, have indicated that they are likely to leave the group after the election and form a new group, one that could possibly include the more "euroskeptic" Czech Civic Democrats and Poland's Law and Justice Party.

The *Socialist Group in the European Parliament (PES)* is the EP's second largest political group. The PES is center-left in political orientation and contains parties from 25 of the 27 EU member states (Cyprus and Latvia are the exceptions), including Germany's Social Democratic Party (SPD), France's Socialist Party, the UK Labour Party, Spain's Socialist Party, and numerous other Socialist, Social Democratic, and center-left parties.[10]

[9] http://www.epp-ed.eu/

[10] http://www.socialistgroup.eu/

The EPP-ED and the PES have a history of cross-ideological legislative partnership, agreeing to cooperate in a "Grand Coalition." Such is the case in the current European Parliament, in which the two groups together hold approximately 64% of the total seats. Critics argue that that the consensus-seeking of the Grand Coalition has made politics in the European Parliament stale and paradoxical. Other observers note that maximizing consensus and unity lends the European Parliament greater institutional weight.

The third largest group is the *Group of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE)*. ALDE is centrist and liberal in political orientation. In European political terminology, "liberal" connotes an emphasis on free market economics, individual rights, social equality and equal opportunity, and de-centralized government. ALDE contains political parties from 22 EU countries, including the UK Liberal Democrat Party and Germany's Free Democrat Party (FDP).[11]

Three additional groups hold roughly equal numbers of seats:

The *Union for a Europe of Nations Group (UEN)* is conservative in orientation, with emphasis on national identity and sovereignty. It contains MEPs from six countries, including Poland's Law and Justice Party, and the League of Polish Families. Members from Italy's National Alliance, now merged with Forza Italia into the new Italian party People of Freedom, will presumably depart the group after the election to caucus with their new colleagues. Ireland's centrist Fianna Fail is also a UEN member, although some observers speculate that it may seek to join ALDE after the June election.[12]

The *Greens/European Free Alliance Group (Greens-EFA)* has members from 14 countries. It is largely comprised of Europe's numerous Greens—leftist in political orientation with a strong emphasis on pro-environment politics—and several independent or regional parties (e.g., Scottish, Welsh, Basque, and Catalonian) with a leftist or center-left outlook. Some members of the Greens/European Free Alliance Group have been advocating the break-up of the PES partnership with the EPP-ED, arguing for the ideological compatibility of a PES-Greens-EFA coalition.[13]

The *European United Left/Nordic Green Left Group* also has members from 14 countries. Its parties are strongly leftist in orientation, some with a Green emphasis. Member parties include Germany's Die Linke, the French Communist Party, two Italian Communist parties, and the Irish party Sinn Fein. The group is pro-EU and pro-integration, but strongly critical of existing EU structures, policies, and overall direction.[14]

The *Independence/Democracy Group (ID)* is the smallest group in the current European Parliament. It contains MEPs from nine countries, with the largest contingent from the UK Independence Party (UKIP). ID members are "euroskeptics" and critics of the EU who oppose further European integration and demand greater transparency in the EU. UKIP advocates UK withdrawal from the EU.[15]

[11] http://www.alde.eu/

[12] http://www.uengroup.org/

[13] http://www.greens-efa.org/

[14] http://www.guengl.eu/

[15] http://indemgroup.eu/

The number of political groups, the internal composition of groups, and coalition arrangements between groups could all change after the election—parties could switch between groups, or new groups could be formed. Some analysts assert that distinct ideological definitions between groups are becoming more complicated, as voting blocs form increasingly according to specific issues and interests.

The EP President

Every two-and-a-half years (twice per parliamentary term), MEPs vote to elect a President of the European Parliament. This individual represents the EP externally, and in relations with the other EU institutions. He or she oversees the work of the Parliament and is responsible for ensuring that its rules of procedure are followed. The signature of the President is the final step in approval of the EU budget, and the President co-signs, together with the President of the Council, legislation adopted under the co-decision procedure. In addition, the President affects broader EU policies by promoting a few key issues as EP priorities.

The majority coalition in the EP (usually an EPP-ED "Grand Coalition" with the PES) has traditionally agreed to split the position of EP president over each five-year term: in the Parliament of 2004-2009, Josep Borrell, a Spanish MEP in the PES group, served as President for the first two-and-a-half years, with Hans-Gert Pöttering, a German MEP in the EPP-ED group, serving for the final two-and-a-half. Many analysts expect a similar deal between the EPP-ED and the PES for the 2009-2014 EP.

The President is assisted in managing the Parliament's internal organization and affairs by a Bureau composed of 14 Vice-Presidents and six Quaestors drawn from across the EP's political groups (ID is the only group not currently represented in the Bureau).

Committees

The EP has 20 standing committees. These committees are key actors in the adoption of EU legislation. Each committee appoints a chairman, three vice-chairmen, and has a secretariat. The appropriate committee (e.g., the Committee on the Environment, Public Health, and Food Safety would deal with legislation on pollution) appoints a Member as "rapporteur" to draft a report on the Commission proposal under consideration. The rapporteur submits a draft report to the committee for discussion, which is then voted on and possibly amended. The committee's report is then considered in plenary, amended, and put to a vote. The EP thus adopts its position on the issue. In terms of their importance and strength, EP committees rival those in the U.S. Congress and surpass the role of committees in most national European legislatures. Ad hoc committees may also be established to investigate or oversee specific issues. For example, in 2006 the EP formed a Temporary Committee that examined the role of EU member states in hosting secret CIA detention facilities and aiding CIA flights related to the rendition of terrorism suspects.

Delegations

The European Parliament plays a role in the EU's international presence through its 34 delegations, each composed of about 15 MEPs. These delegations maintain parliament-to-parliament contacts and relations with representatives of most countries around the world. For example, the EP has interparliamentary delegations for relations with the United States and the

NATO Parliamentary Assembly, as well as with Iran, Israel, the Palestinian Legislative Council, and the Korean Peninsula.

Administration

A Secretariat of approximately 5,000 civil servants provides administrative and technical support to the Parliament. In addition, MEPs have their own staff assistants and political groups also have their own staff.

Location

Strasbourg, France is the official seat of the EP; plenary sessions are held there for one week a month. For two weeks a month, the EP's standing committees meet 300 miles to the northwest in Brussels, Belgium, where the European Commission and the Council of Ministers are located. Generally, there is also one "part plenary" session (two days) in Brussels each month. One week is set aside for meetings of the political groups, which are usually held in Brussels. MEPs must have offices and lodgings in both cities. Meanwhile, the EP's Secretariat is based largely in Luxembourg, about mid-way between Strasbourg and Brussels. Most EP staff, however, live in Brussels and either commute to France or communicate via telephone or e-mail during full plenary sessions. The costs of having three addresses are high in terms of both time and money, and continue to be a contentious issue (see below).

Languages

Simultaneous interpretation of all parliamentary and committee debates is provided in the EU's 23 official languages. All parliamentary documents are translated into and published in 21 of these languages (Irish and Maltese are sometimes excepted), and some documents must be translated into all 23. Such extensive translation services represent a significant administrative cost.

Challenges

The European Parliament faces several challenges of public perception. Some skeptics contend that the EP lacks the legitimacy of national parliaments, exercising too little power relative to the other EU institutions. Such observers characterize the EP as a large debating chamber with little binding influence on EU policy. Others maintain that the legislative process of the EU is overly complex and often deals with highly technical issues, leading to a lack of public understanding about the role and significance of the EP. Limited public awareness and understanding of the EP's activities, they argue, is reflected in the consistently declining turnout in European Parliament elections since 1979. Low voter participation, in turn, feeds back into skepticism of the EP's legitimacy as a representative institution, and fuels wider charges of a democratic deficit and a lack of transparency in EU policy-making.

EP advocates observe that "co-decision" and its institutional supervisory roles have substantially enhanced the Parliament's influence. The Lisbon Treaty would give the EP veto authority over the vast majority of EU legislation. Moreover, supporters argue, as the only directly elected EU institution, the EP increasingly plays an important checks-and-balances role on behalf of Europe's

citizens. Supporters also claim that the EP's influence is even growing in strictly consultative areas, such as the EU's common foreign policy, where the "co-decision procedure" does not apply. They assert that the EP has become a forum for debate on international issues, and uses its power of assent on cooperation accords with third parties, as well as Parliamentary resolutions, to promote issues such as human rights. Yet, critics counter that EP views on international relations may have little effect because foreign policy decisions rest with the member states.

Another question related to the EP's legitimacy is the issue of whether MEPs reflect national or European interests. The Parliament claims to represent the people of Europe, while the Council represents national governments, and the Commission represents the interests of the EU as a whole. Some analysts observe that the political groups of the EP represent a nascent form of EU-wide politics. Studies on voting behavior in the EP have shown that ideology holds greater influence than nationality, with MEPs voting with their party groups almost 90% of the time. On the other hand, some observers contend that MEPs very often promote parochial national interests, with many MEPs campaigning on national rather than European issues. With essentially 27 different national elections for the EP, citizens vote based on a wide array of different issues and many are unsure what exactly is at stake in the outcome. Many voters essentially view EP elections as a national mid-term election—an indication of voter opinion as to the performance of the national government—rather than as a vote on Europe-wide issues.

Another major concern is costs related to the EP's duplicate facilities. Construction of multi-million dollar buildings in Brussels and Strasbourg in the late 1990s to accommodate the growth in MEPs following EU enlargement stirred controversy. In addition, the fact that MEPs and their staffs regularly shuttle between cities leads to travel and hotel bills that, in the past, have consumed roughly 15-20% of the EP's budget. Yet, the suggestion that the EP should consolidate its operations in one city has met with strong opposition in the host countries of France, Belgium, and Luxembourg, which fear the loss of symbolism and prestige, in addition to jobs and other economic benefits. Strasbourg was originally chosen as the seat of the EP as a symbol of peace between France and Germany, and both countries argue it should continue to do so.

After many years and several failed attempts, MEPs succeeded in 2005 in reforming the Parliament's salary and expense regime. Some MEPs had long complained about pay disparities because they receive the same salary as members of their respective national parliaments. For example, Italian MEPs currently earn roughly three times more than their Spanish counterparts. Previous efforts to reform the pay system had foundered on the concerns of some member states about the costs of the reforms. Under the new deal, starting this year, all MEPs will be paid the same amount in exchange for instituting a reimbursable system for business and travel expenses; currently, MEPs receive a flat-rate travel allowance that does not require receipts and contributes to what some consider the Parliament's "gravy train" image.

The European Parliament and the U.S. Congress

Ties between the EP and the U.S. Congress date back to 1972, when a U.S. Congressional delegation first visited the EP in Brussels and Luxembourg. Since then, Congressional-EP exchanges have taken place at least once a year, and have provided the opportunity for sustained dialogue. The Delegation for Relations with the United States represents the EP in the Transatlantic Legislators' Dialogue (TLD) with the U.S. Congress—it is the oldest and widely considered the most prestigious of the EP's interparliamentary delegations.

In 1999, the EP and the U.S. Congress launched the TLD as their official response to the U.S.-EU commitment in the 1995 New Transatlantic Agenda to enhance parliamentary ties between the EU and the United States. With the TLD, the two sides have committed to regular meetings twice a year to discuss a wide range of topical political and economic issues. The EP TLD delegation is led by a chairman, who is elected by the delegation's members and has responsibilities equal to those of a committee chair. The most recent TLD meeting took place in April 2009 in Prague, Czech Republic. Congress and the EP have also conducted video conferences on specific areas of mutual concern. Some MEPs have called for making the TLD more "operational," however, by creating a formal early warning system to allow each side to weigh in on legislation-in-progress that could adversely affect their interests.[16] However, some American analysts observe that the TLD remains relatively obscure, with ambiguity regarding which U.S. Members actually belong, and no role given to the U.S. Senate.

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[16] For more information, see the European Parliament's website on the Transatlantic Legislators' Dialogue http://www.europarl.europa.eu/intcoop/tld/default_en.htm.