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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 705 members represent the EU's roughly 445 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 next EP elections are expected 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 also has a supervisory role over the European Commission and some limited oversight over the activities of the Council of the EU. The EP monitors 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

over 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 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

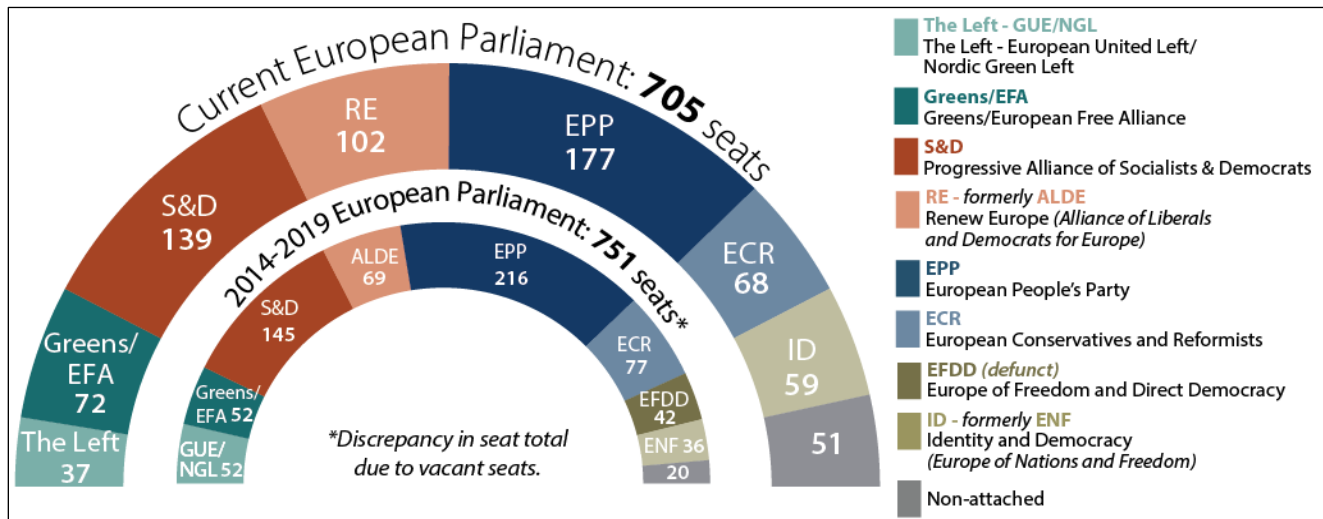
MEPs elect a president of the European Parliament every two-and-a-half years (twice per parliamentary term). The president oversees the work of the EP and represents it externally. Roberta Metsola, a Maltese MEP from the EPP, was elected as EP president in January 2022. The EP has 20 standing committees 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 that fall within its jurisdiction and recommends to the full EP 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 48 delegations that 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 that came to light in 2022.

Figure 1. European Parliament Political Groups and Seats (as of April 15, 2024)



Source: Created by CRS, based on European Parliament data, updated regularly, at <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meps/en/search/table>.

EP Elections

In the EP's last elections in May 2019, 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 enhanced the influence of the centrist, liberal, pro-EU Renew Europe (RE) group. Voter concerns about climate change translated into an increase in seats for the Greens/European Free Alliance (Greens/EFA), composed of pro-environment parties and leftist regional parties (e.g., Catalanian, Corsican). Higher-than-average voter turnout (51% in 2019 versus 43% in 2014) also helped boost support for these four pro-EU parties, which currently hold a combined 490 seats (70%).

Euroskeptic parties in the EP have a range of different policy views, including on EU reforms. The most stridently euroskeptic group in the EP is Identity and Democracy (ID), an alliance of far-right parties. 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.

The size of the next EP is set to increase to 720 MEPs following the upcoming elections scheduled for June 6-9, 2024. Polls suggest the EPP and S&D will remain the two largest groups in the next EP, but RE will lose seats while ECR and ID could make significant gains. Although euroskeptic parties in the EP traditionally have struggled to forge a cohesive opposition, an increase in euroskeptic MEPs could influence EP positions on key policies, such as migration or EU enlargement, especially if other political groups embrace similar views. The EP elections also may affect the leadership of the European Commission; EU member states must take the EP election results into account in choosing the next commission president and the EP maintains that the post should go to the "lead candidate" of the political group that wins the most EP seats.

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. technology 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 Russia's alleged attempts 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*.

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