

THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The origins of the European Parliament lie in the Common Assembly of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), which became the common assembly of the three supranational European communities that existed at the time. The assembly subsequently acquired the name 'European Parliament'. Over time, the institution, whose members have been directly elected since 1979, has undergone profound changes: evolving from an assembly with appointed members to an elected parliament that is recognised as a political agenda-setter of the European Union.

LEGAL BASIS

- The original Treaties ([1.1.1](#), [1.1.2](#), [1.1.3](#), [1.1.4](#), [1.1.5](#));
- Decision and [Act](#) concerning the election of the representatives of the Assembly by direct universal suffrage (20 September 1976), as amended by the Council Decision of 25 June and 23 September 2002.
- Articles 14(2) and 17(2) of the Treaty on European Union (TEU).

THREE COMMUNITIES, ONE ASSEMBLY

Following the establishment of the European Economic Community and the European Atomic Energy Community, the ECSC Common Assembly was expanded to cover all three communities. With 142 Members, the new assembly met for the first time in Strasbourg on 19 March 1958 as the 'European Parliamentary Assembly', changing its name to the 'European Parliament' on 30 March 1962.

FROM APPOINTED ASSEMBLY TO ELECTED PARLIAMENT

Before the introduction of direct elections, Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) were appointed by each of the Member States' national parliaments. All MEPs thus had a dual mandate.

The summit conference held in Paris on 9 and 10 December 1974 determined that direct elections 'should take place in or after 1978' and asked Parliament to submit new proposals to replace its original draft convention of 1960. In January 1975, Parliament adopted a new draft convention, on the basis of which the Heads of State or Government, after settling a number of differences, reached agreement at their meeting of 12 and 13 July 1976.

The Decision and Act concerning the election of the representatives of the Assembly by direct universal suffrage were signed in Brussels on 20 September 1976. Following ratification by all Member States, the act entered into force in July 1978, and the first elections took place on 7 and 10 June 1979.

ENLARGEMENTS

When Denmark, Ireland and the United Kingdom joined the European Communities on 1 January 1973 ([the first enlargement](#)), the number of MEPs was increased by 198.

For the second enlargement, with the [accession of Greece](#) on 1 January 1981, 24 Greek MEPs were appointed to Parliament by the Greek Parliament, to be replaced in October 1981 by directly elected MEPs. The second direct elections were held on 14 and 17 June 1984.

On 1 January 1986, with the [third enlargement](#), the number of seats rose from 434 to 518 with the arrival of 60 Spanish and 24 Portuguese MEPs, appointed by their national parliaments and subsequently replaced by directly elected MEPs.

Following German unification, the composition of Parliament was adapted to reflect the demographic change. In accordance with the proposals outlined by Parliament in its [resolution of 10 June 1992](#) entitled 'a uniform electoral procedure: a scheme for allocating the seats of Members of the European Parliament', the number of MEPs rose from 518 to 567 for the June 1994 elections. After the [fourth EU enlargement](#), the number of MEPs increased to 626, with a fair allocation of seats for the new Member States in line with the resolution mentioned above.

The Intergovernmental Conference, which met throughout 2000 in Nice (France), introduced a new distribution of seats in Parliament, which was applied to the European elections in 2004. The maximum number of MEPs (previously set at 700) was increased to 732. The allocation of seats to the 15 existing Member States was reduced by 91 (from 626 to 535). The remaining 197 seats were distributed among all of the existing and new Member States on a pro rata basis.

With the [accession of Bulgaria and Romania](#) on 1 January 2007, the number of seats in Parliament was temporarily raised to 785 in order to welcome MEPs from those countries. Following the 2009 elections, held from 4 to 7 June, the number of seats was reduced to 736. As the Treaty of Lisbon, pursuant to Article 14(2) TEU, had set a maximum number of 751 MEPs, to be temporarily raised to 754 until the next elections, 18 MEPs were added to the 736 elected in June 2009 during the 2009–2014 term, following the ratification by the Member States of an amending protocol adopted at the Intergovernmental Conference of 23 June 2010. With the accession of Croatia on 1 July 2013, the maximum number of seats was temporarily raised to 766, in order to welcome the 12 Croatian MEPs who were elected in April 2013 (in accordance with Article 19 of the [Act concerning the conditions of accession of the Republic of Croatia](#)).

For the 2014 elections, the total number of seats was reduced to 751. The distribution of seats was then reviewed again (with 705 MEPs) because of the withdrawal of the United Kingdom, which took effect on 1 February 2020 ([1.3.3](#)). Reflecting demographic changes in the Member States since the 2019 elections, an additional 11 seats were allocated according to a proposal by Parliament in its [resolution of 15 June 2023](#), pursuant to Article 14(2) TEU. By its [final decision of 22 September 2023](#), the European Council further increased this by another four seats, setting the total number of MEPs to be elected for the 2024–2029 parliamentary term at 720.

GRADUAL INCREASE IN POWERS

The replacement of Member State contributions by the Community's own resources (1.4.1) led to the first extension of Parliament's budgetary powers under the [Treaty of Luxembourg](#), signed on 22 April 1970. A second treaty on the same subject, strengthening Parliament's powers, was signed in [Brussels on 22 July 1975 \(1.1.2\)](#).

The [Single European Act](#) of 17 February 1986 enhanced Parliament's role in certain legislative areas (cooperation procedure), and made accession and association treaties subject to its assent.

The [Treaty on European Union](#) of 7 February 1992, by establishing the European Union (EU) and by introducing the codecision procedure in certain areas of legislation and extending the cooperation procedure to others, marked the beginning of Parliament's metamorphosis into the role of co-legislator. It gave Parliament the power of final approval over the membership of the Commission: this represented an important step forward in terms of Parliament's political control over the EU executive (1.1.3).

The [Treaty of Amsterdam](#) of 2 October 1997 extended the codecision procedure to most areas of legislation and reformed it, making Parliament a co-legislator on an equal footing with the Council. The appointment of the President of the Commission was made subject to Parliament's approval, thus increasing its powers of control over the executive. The Treaty of Nice further extended the scope of the codecision procedure.

The [Treaty of Nice](#), which amended the TEU, the Treaties establishing the European Communities (TEC) and certain related acts, was signed on 26 February 2001 and entered into force on 1 February 2003. The aim of this new treaty was to reform the institutional structure of the EU so that it could withstand the challenges of future enlargement. Parliament's legislative and supervisory powers were increased and qualified majority voting was extended to more areas in the Council (1.1.4).

The [Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union \(TFEU\) \(1.1.5\)](#) of 13 December 2007 constituted another important extension of both the application of qualified majority voting in the Council (using a new method as of 1 November 2014 – Article 16 TEU) and the application of the codecision procedure (now extended to some 45 new legislative domains). This 'ordinary legislative procedure' became the most widely used decision-making procedure, covering all important policy areas of the TFEU (Article 294 – ex Article 250 TEC). Parliament's role in the preparation of future treaty amendments also became more significant (Article 48 TEU). Moreover, as part of the Treaty of Lisbon (and, initially, as part of the unsuccessful draft treaty establishing a constitution for Europe), the [Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union](#), which was signed by the Presidents of Parliament, the Commission and the Council at the European Council in Nice on 7 December 2000, became legally binding (4.1.2).

With the European elections of 23 to 26 May 2019, it became clear that Parliament had made full use of the provisions of Article 14 TEU, which states that 'the European Parliament shall, jointly with the Council, exercise legislative and budgetary functions. It shall exercise functions of political control It shall elect the President of the

Commission'. Furthermore, according to Article 17(7) TEU, the other members of the Commission are subject as a body to a vote of consent by the European Parliament.

Recent research on Parliament's contribution to growth indicates that the legislation it prepares contributes over EUR one trillion annually to the EU's GDP, by strengthening the rights of EU residents and businesses^[1]. Another significant contribution is provided by the EU budget (1.4.3)^[2]. Evidence and expertise-based legislation is supported by [studies and workshops](#) delivered by five policy departments providing high-level independent expertise, analysis and policy advice at the request of committees, delegations, the President, the Bureau and the Secretary-General.

Since the 2014 elections, European political parties (1.3.3) have presented lead candidates for the office of Commission President, with the aim of increasing voter participation in the European elections.

Following the signature, on 24 January 2020, of the [Agreement on the withdrawal of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland from the European Union and the European Atomic Energy Community](#), Parliament gave its consent to the Council's decision to conclude this withdrawal agreement (Article 50(2) TEU). The vote by 621 to 49 on 29 January 2020 was also the final time that MEPs from the UK sat in Parliament, as its withdrawal took effect on 1 February 2020.

On 28 April 2021, Parliament gave its consent (Article 218(6)a TFEU) to the conclusion of the [Trade and Cooperation Agreement between the European Union and the European Atomic Energy Community, of the one part, and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, of the other part](#).

The next Parliament elections will take place on 6–9 June 2024.

This fact sheet is prepared by Parliament's Policy Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs.

Udo Bux / Mariusz Maciejewski
04/2024

[1]Maciejewski M., 'Contribution to Growth: Delivering economic benefits for citizens and businesses', Publication for the Committee on Internal Market and Consumer Protection, Policy Department for Economic, Scientific and Quality of Life Policies, European Parliament, Luxembourg, 2019.

[2]Stehrer R. et al., 'How EU funds tackle economic divide in the European Union', Publication for the Committee on Budgets, Policy Department for Budgetary Affairs, European Parliament, Luxembourg, 2020.