

The European Parliament an overview

The European Parliament has 732 Members. Parliamentarians are elected from the 25 EU member countries and sit in political groups according to their broad political inclinations.

The two largest groups are the European People's Party (Conservative and Christian Democrat MEPs) and the Party of European Socialists (including Labour MEPs).

Like the US Congress, Parliament does most of its work in specialist committees. There are twenty committees, each covering a particular area of EU activity (transport, regional policy, environment, and so on). This allows for detailed scrutiny of draft laws by specialist MEPs.

About the author

Richard Corbett has been a Member of the European Parliament since 1996. He is the spokesman on European constitutional affairs for both the UK Labour Party and the wider Socialist Group.

Richard is co-author of the standard textbook on the European Parliament, now in its fifth edition, as well as several other books on European affairs.

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What does an MEP do?



**Richard
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Your voice in Brussels



Just as you elect councillors to deal with local issues and MPs to deal with national issues, so you elect Members of the European Parliament to deal with European issues.

Your MEP is your voice in Brussels. You don't need to go through Foreign Office diplomats to be represented in the European Union—you have your own representatives for your own area.

MEPs represent regional constituencies. The people of Yorkshire and the Humber, for instance, elect six MEPs every five years. Elections are by proportional representation, and each party puts up a team of candidates.

A European debate

An MEP's main task is to debate and vote on European issues, just as MPs in the House of Commons debate and vote on national issues. Laws agreed in the European Parliament are binding across Europe.

The EU does not legislate in areas that are purely of national concern, such as how we organise our schools, hospitals or health service, or what taxes we pay. But in other areas, we agree some of our laws with our neighbours at European level. This is the case for many of our rules on consumer protection, environmental standards, economic development, competition policy, safety standards, and social rights.

How laws are made

Most European laws are adopted jointly by the European Parliament and the EU Council, which is made up of ministers from all 25 member countries, including Britain.

Parliament and Council each hold two readings of draft legislation. If they cannot agree on the same text, they try to negotiate a compromise. But if either Parliament or Council rejects the compromise, the draft law is scrapped.

We need this detailed scrutiny to make sure that European laws are acceptable both to national governments and to the people of Europe, who elect MEPs to represent them.

Brussels bureaucrats

Initial proposals for new laws are drafted by the European Commission, the famous "Brussels bureaucrats". This small body is led by 25 politicians, put forward by member countries and approved by MEPs. They serve for five years, unless they are dismissed early by a vote of no confidence from Parliament.

Part of an MEP's job is to keep tabs on the Commission and on the civil servants who work for it. Commissioners and their staff regularly appear before MEPs to be cross-examined and explain what they have been up to.

Holder of the purse-strings

The European Parliament is also in charge of the EU's annual budget. Parliament and national governments agree the broad guidelines of the budget jointly, but the exact details are up to MEPs, who also supervise how it is spent.

Constituents

MEPs receive a lot of requests for help from constituents. Many are to do with EU law, or people who have had difficulties when travelling in Europe.

Your MEP works closely with MPs, local councillors and the Parliamentary Ombudsman to help find a solution.