

## CRITICAL QUESTIONS

**Elections to the European Parliament**

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June 4, 2009

**Q1: What is the European Parliament?**

**A1:** Between June 4 and 7, some 375 million European Union (EU) citizens are called to the polls to elect 736 members of the European Parliament (MEPs), ranging from 99 representatives for Germany to 5 representatives for Malta. Each MEP is elected for a five-year term.

The European Parliament (EP) is one of the three pillars of the EU “institutional triangle,” in addition to the European Commission and the Council of the European Union. The Parliament directly represents all European citizens. In contrast, the Council represents the member state governments, while the Commission is considered the “guardian of the EU treaties.”

**Q2: What is its role?**

**A2:** The European Parliament is not quite comparable to the U.S. Congress because it must share its legislative role with the European Commission and the Council of the European Union. Only the Commission may table a bill. Then, the EP shares decisionmaking authority with the Council. The EP nonetheless holds authority to confirm appointments by the 27 member states’ governments to the Commission.

These powers expanded with each of the four European treaties ratified since the 1980s. Moreover, the EP has proven more and more assertive since 1979, when it was first directly elected by European citizens. Now, even with 23 languages and 27 nations represented, the Parliament is a force to be reckoned with.

Given the technical nature of the European legislative harmonization process, most bills are adopted at first reading. However, when it comes to the most controversial draft legislation, the Parliament is far from a mere rubber stamp of approval. On the contrary, its influence is often decisive, not only by pressing the Commission to take the initiative but also by blocking bills and even shaping the final compromise with the Council.

The European Parliament also plays a significant role overseeing the European Commission. In 1999, the Parliament forced the collective resignation of the Commission led by Jacques Santer. In 2004, it blocked the Italian candidate for the commissioner on justice, freedom, and security.

Should the Lisbon Treaty—aimed at adapting the European Union to 27 states or more—be adopted after the Irish referendum in October, the role of the Parliament would be expanded further. In particular, the EP’s codecision powers would expand to issues such as immigration. Moreover, it would hold sole authority to appoint the next president of the Commission, whereas at present it only confirms the candidacy agreed on by the 27 governments.

**Q3: What was the campaign about?**

**A3:** For many European voters, the EP remains a seemingly remote institution. Most voters do not know what role it plays and believe their vote will have little impact on European politics. In this context, campaigns may be characterized by two features:

- EU politics is local too: 27 separate European campaigns actually occur rather than a single one. Not only are the elections held under national rules, making it difficult to run pan-European campaigns, but local issues—including national politics more than EU-relevant matters—dominate the campaigns, including on such common matters as the economic crisis.
- Consequently, the average voter turnout declined at every European election since 1979, reaching historically low levels in even the newest member states during the 2004 polls!

Still, Europe is not a lost electoral cause. Recent national referendums on the Lisbon Treaty generated higher turnout. Heated debate over the question of enlargement, among other issues, proves that the European Union is not entirely doomed to apathy. But again, the outcome of these polls was largely shaped by domestic agendas. European voters tend to

rely on national elections to weigh in on European politics. This shows a more complex problem than the caricatural “democratic deficit” often blamed on the European Union.

#### **Q4: Why then are these elections noteworthy?**

**A4:** The falling turnout, again, does not mean some attention should not be paid to these elections. Even on foreign policy issues, which are out of its mandate, the European Parliament will have an impact. Not only does it never hesitate to take a position on international issues, as it recently did by calling on member states to help the U.S. administration close Guantánamo. But, most importantly, the EP is a key actor on such issues of major transatlantic resonance as climate change, energy security, economic and financial regulation, and neighborhood policy and enlargement.

So, the balance of power between parties should not be overlooked. The results of the leading parties—the conservative European People’s Party (EPP) and the progressive Party of the European Socialists (PES)—will be particularly important. But should the European Parliament once more escape single-party majority or even stable governing coalitions, it will have to function with negotiated consensus rather than with partisan majorities. So, the results of lesser groupings such as the liberal Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE), the Green Party, or even the new euro-skeptic group the British Tories intend to set up, should not be disregarded.

For example, the post-election balance of power will impact the composition of the next Commission. The current president of the EC, José Manuel Barroso, is likely to be the member states’ candidate unless the upcoming elections change the political calculus. At the very least, the results will affect the appointments of the commissioners, including those responsible for such key portfolios as trade, antitrust policy, or enlargement. More broadly, the electoral outcome will also have consequences for the way that the Parliament deals with issues of growing importance that increasingly represent partisan fault lines, such as economic and social agendas, the environment, and immigration.

A second issue that should be paid attention to is the influence of member states in the EP. This influence is not just about how many MEPs each country has but also about qualitative factors such as weight in the major political groupings or chairmanships. Germany traditionally outplays France at this game. Despite President Nicolas Sarkozy’s efforts, French influence—72 representatives—may still suffer from its traditional weaknesses: junior political figures, high turnover, spreading out thin among the several groupings within the Parliament, etc. The United Kingdom may also face a difficult situation, with the British Tories leaving the EPP to form a new grouping whose size and influence is unclear.

Finally, in order for the European Parliament to have a lasting impact on the path Europe will take on such key issues as enlargement and integration, it will have to prove able to change the way it works and tackle the issues of its relationship with EU citizens.

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