

Party Politics in the EU

Party politics is seldom a major factor in most of the EU institutions. But in the European Parliament, where members sit in one of seven political groups organised by political affiliation rather than nationality, it does play a significant role. On most issues voting in the Parliament divides along broad left/right lines, but because EU parliamentary parties are *coalitions* of different national parties, agreements generally rely upon consensus among many groups. Because no group has an overall majority in the parliament, this is particularly important.

History

Party politics, as understood at the national level, was not originally expected to play an important role in the European project. The aim of the founding fathers of the European Community was to avoid controversial political decisions by seeking consensus wherever possible, even on technical topics like trade and competition. When political leaders met in the European Council, or Council of Ministers, they were to represent their national government, rather than party interests. Most decisions are made by consensus, with all Council members having to vote in favour of a new policy or changes to existing policies.

As the powers of the European Community expanded, so calls grew for more democratic representation. Originally, the members of the European Parliament were chosen by the national parliaments but in 1979 the first direct elections were held, allowing the citizens of the member states to vote for the candidate of their choice. Since then, direct elections have been held every five years.

With the growth of the legislative powers of the Parliament, party politics has gradually begun to play a part in the decision-making process. The *co-decision* procedure, introduced by the Treaty of Maastricht in 1992, led to a greater emphasis on party politics. In 2004 the EU passed a statute that allowed EU political parties to receive funds from within the EU budget. The Commission is currently developing plans to strengthen the European parties in an effort to boost turnout at elections.

The main groups in the European Parliament

Below are listed the main party groupings in the European Parliament and the number of MEPs for each party in the 2005-2009 term. Allegiances and groupings often shift.

-European Peoples' Party – European Democrats Group (EPP-ED): main centre-right group. 278 members.

-Party of European Socialists (PES): the main centre-left and socialist group. 217 members.

-Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE): the main liberal and centrist group. An amalgamation of the European Liberal Democrat and Reform Party, and the centrist European Democratic Party. 103 members.

-Greens/European Free Alliance (Greens/EFA): a mixed grouping of environmentalists, regionalists and nationalists. 42 members.

-European United Left/Nordic Green Left (EUL/NGL): a far left and Communist grouping. 41 members.

-Union for Europe of the Nations (UEN): an alliance of right wing and nationalist groups. 44 members.

-Identity, Tradition and Sovereignty (ITS): an alliance of the far-right with 23 members. Recognised as a European party in January 2007

-Independence and Democracy (IND/DEM): a group of EU-sceptics. 23 members.

-Non-attached: there are 14 non-attached independent members.

Arguments about EU Party Politics

For

- Political parties have an important role in representing the different interests that exist in society.
- A lively party political system allows for open and frank debate about issues that might not be possible when the aim is to reach consensus.
- Developing a party system for the whole of Europe could play an important role in creating a stronger sense of shared European identity.

Against

- European countries have such different political cultures and traditions that it is difficult to imagine how Europe-wide political parties could operate.
- The EU is now so large and diverse that it is hard to create a single political debate. Voters in European elections make decisions based on what is happening in their country, not on the interests of the EU as a whole.
- Coalitions often act with conflicting goals and values. For example, the EPP-ED group contains the largely EU-sceptic British Conservative Party alongside the avowedly pro-European German Christian Democratic Union.

Quotes

'More Left-Right politics at the European level is not only inevitable but is also healthy, as it will allow the EU to overcome institutional gridlock, will encourage policy innovation...and so will increase the legitimacy of the EU'.
Simon Hix, Notre Europe Research Association

Technical Terms

Coalition: a formal agreement between political parties to share power in government.

Co-decision: A structure that means that EU decisions must be taken jointly by the Parliament and the Council of the European Union.

Links

- http://www.europarl.europa.eu/groups/default_en.htm