

The European Parliament

Ready for the Future? The Impact of Enlargement on the European Parliament



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Abstract

The European Parliament which was elected in June 2004 consists of 732 members representing 163 political parties from 25 countries. This ever larger chamber is being called upon to play an ever stronger role in the EU political system. Will this unprecedented enlargement affect the Parliament's ability to live up to these political expectations? So far, its political balance has not been radically altered and the overall increase in numbers seems to have been digested without too much difficulty, although questions remain as to the impact of all the new languages on the EP's working methods, especially after further enlargements. On the other hand the turnout at the 2004 elections reflected the continuing weakness of popular interest in the Parliament, especially in the new Member States. In preparation for the 2009 elections, new efforts will have to be made to bridge this gap not just by the Parliament showing that it can make good use of its new powers but also, where possible, by strengthening multi-level political parties and inter-parliamentary relations, as well as by increasing public understanding of the role of the European Parliament.

Introduction

The first European elections in the Union of 25 were held on 10-13 June 2004. As a result, the European Parliament has become the world's largest democratically-elected parliamentary chamber, having grown from 198 members before the first direct elections in 1979 to the present total of 732, bringing together representatives of over 100 different political parties from across a continent.

The following week, on 18 June, the 25 governments agreed on a new Constitution for Europe. Assuming the Constitution is ratified, the EP's legislative and budgetary powers will be further reinforced, with, in particular, 'codecision', by which Parliament and Council must agree on laws on the basis of a Commission proposal, being further extended and becoming the 'ordinary legislative procedure' for European laws affecting some half a billion people.

Little more one month later, the Parliament's powers regarding appointments began to be demonstrated. On 22 July, the European Parliament exercised its right to approve the person nominated by Council as next Commission President, José Manuel Barroso. In September and October it held hearings for the proposed members of the Commission. Indeed, this role received a very high degree of public attention. In the face of widespread opposition within the Parliament, in particular to the candidate proposed as Commissioner for Justice, Freedom and Security – the Italian nominee, Rocco Buttiglione – Mr Barroso did not at first alter the composition of the proposed College. In the end, however, he decided to ask for a postponement of the Parliament's planned vote of approval on 27 October. The new Commission could thus not take office on 1 November.

In this context, the question naturally arises as to the possible impacts of enlargement on the European Parliament at this time of mounting political responsibilities.

This paper discusses three aspects of this question, looking at the position of the Parliament as of October 2004: the possible impact on Parliament's *efficiency*, in terms of its internal structures and working methods; on its *coherence*, in the sense of its Groups' ability, together with European political parties, to be seen to present clear policy choices at European level; and on its *legitimacy*, in terms of its public support.

1. Efficiency

The first set of questions concern the possible impact of enlargement on the practical work of the Parliament.

Impacts on size and structures

The most obvious direct effect of enlargement has been the increase in the EP's numbers from 626 to 732. This has had the important consequence of reducing the size of the national delegations from 13 of the 15 'old' Member States, with only the largest (Germany at 99) and smallest (Luxembourg at 6) remaining at their pre-2004 figure. For the larger Member States the difference may not seem so great, but for some of the smaller Member States the impact has been of more obvious significance. Irish governments, for example, have tended to put greater emphasis on their representation in the Commission and in the Council because they considered that they had more weight there than within the European Parliament.

Another such impact has been the great increase in the number of political parties represented in the Parliament. After the 2004 elections there were 114 parties and lists from the old Member States (although

20 of these from Italy alone), but there were 49 parties and lists from the new Member States, a very high figure considering the small population of most of these countries, but reflecting their often fluid political systems.

A further important consequence has been on voting thresholds. Most importantly the absolute majority required for certain types of votes, such as rejection or amendment of EU codecision legislation in second reading, has gone up from 314 to 367.

Another significant change is that the size of Parliament-Council conciliation delegations has gone up from 30 to 50, with 25 on either side rather than 15 as before enlargement. It is too early to tell what this will mean for the practical management of conciliation, but this will probably lead to an even greater reliance on informal meetings and 'dialogues' between small numbers of representatives from each institution.

A less direct impact has been the increase in the number of committees. It was agreed already in January 2004 to increase the number of standing committees from 17 to 20. The average size has thus been held at 43 (42, including the sub-committees), almost exactly the same as the figure of 42.3 in 2002-2004. Moreover, new openings have been created for chairmen and other office-holders from the new Member States.

Impacts on turnover of the MEPs

Turnover among MEPs has been very high in recent elections, with well under 50% of outgoing members being re-elected in both 1994 and 1999. Enlargement has necessarily meant that the overall proportion of new MEPs has, at almost 60%, been even higher than usual. A striking figure is that under 50 of the 162 members from the new Member States had previously been among the Observers from those countries who had been deputed by their national parliaments to follow the work of the EP in the months before formal enlargement. There is clearly thus a higher number than usual of newly-elected members for whom EU business is new in general. Inasmuch as new members naturally require time to settle in, this will undoubtedly have some impact in the short term, with those of long experience of the Parliament and its procedures coming disproportionately from just a few countries, notably Germany and the United Kingdom.

Impacts on working methods

Enlargement is clearly having a significant impact on the working methods of all the EU institutions, but the exact nature of these impacts will vary. In some respects there may well be fewer impacts on the Parliament. While in the Council, the traditional 'tour de table' has come under new pressure, the impact on speaking patterns

within the EP is less great. In plenary, speaking time is generally pre-planned and in committee normally follows a more spontaneous 'catch the eye system', so that not everyone tries to speak. Whereas some of the new members have been quick to take the floor ('is it surprising, when we were silenced for 50 years?' was the explanation given to a co-author by one MEP from a new Member State), debates do not appear to be becoming significantly longer.

On the other hand, the day-to-day impacts of the new languages are greater than for any of the other institutions. There are a number of reasons why this should be

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so. Unlike the Commission and the working groups of the Council, where career civil servants usually work in a restricted number of languages, the European Parliament consists of elected politicians for whom the ability to speak foreign languages, while highly

useful, cannot be a prerequisite for their election. Moreover, if they are to work on and amend legislative texts, they must have the right to do so in their native language. Finally, maintenance of a Member State's identity and culture is heavily dependent on its language and the European Parliament, with its representational role, cannot compromise too far on this point. In any conflict between 'efficiency' and 'democracy' there are thus compelling arguments for the latter to prevail within the European Parliament.

The problems associated with this, however, are becoming more acute. The number of working languages has gone up from 11 to 20 and the number of potential language combinations from 110 to 380. As far as interpretation is concerned, a number of pragmatic solutions are being tried, such as use of pivot languages (particularly English, but also others such as French or German), and the placing of interpreters from lesser-used languages in the major language booths (thus breaking the old rule that interpreters should essentially interpret into their own language). For the first time many interpreters do not always know even which language is being spoken. There are a number of major disadvantages to all this, with greater constraints on the holding of meetings, with some languages not being available at such meetings, and with quality sometimes suffering.

The problems are perhaps even more serious as regards translation. The backlog of untranslated texts has become much greater (even such key legislative proposals as the REACH proposal on chemicals have not yet been translated in the new EU languages); the gap between the adoption of Council common positions on legislation and their transmission as fully translated common positions to the Parliament has gone up to an estimated average of around six months; and the time required for having Parliament texts (draft reports, amendments, etc) translated is being extended, with

further knock-on effects on Parliament's working timetable. The gap between committee adoption and plenary adoption of texts is becoming longer, and there are greater delays in the production of routine texts, such as committee minutes, in all languages.

The EP has been exploring a variety of ways to mitigate these problems. Interpretation is restricted for certain meetings, with attempts being made to have a better match of supply and demand. Thus, for example, if a language like Estonian is not being used routinely in a committee it will not be provided, even if an Estonian member subsequently decides to attend a particular meeting. Such measures, summed up by the phrase 'controlled multilingualism', can help to some extent, but major problems are likely to remain, and even to be accentuated in the future, as further new languages (Romanian, Bulgarian, Croatian, Turkish, etc) are introduced and as pressure grows for certain regional languages, such as Catalan, to be used as well.

Implications of further EU enlargements

The 2004 enlargement has been by far the largest ever faced by the Union. Nevertheless the EU is being given little, if any, respite, with the enlargement process continuing. The consequences for the Parliament are most obvious in the cases of Bulgaria and Romania. The negotiations with them will continue to be closely monitored by the Parliament. In a short period they may start sending Observers from their national parliaments, and within the term of office of the present Parliament (the current target date is 2007) it is planned that they should join the EU, 53 new MEPs bringing in (35 from Romania and 18 from Bulgaria), along with two more languages. The overall size of the Parliament would go up to 785 until the next EP elections in 2009. After 2009 the EP would again be downsized to 736, with all but six countries having yet again to reduce the size of their national delegations. If the Constitution will have entered into force by then, however, there will be a new total figure of 750 members, with a maximum of 96 for the biggest countries and a minimum of six.

Successful negotiations with Croatia would again alter these calculations. In the longer time the biggest impacts, however, would come as a result of Turkish accession. Quite apart from all other considerations, the impacts on EP structure would be vast, with Turkey likely to be entitled to more MEPs than any other country but Germany. If the remaining Balkan countries, Ukraine and others also came in, the EP would be faced even more starkly with the invidious choice of becoming an even larger Parliament, or else of sharply cutting back

the size of most national delegations, with many of the smaller countries, in particular, running the risk of feeling insufficiently represented within the Parliament.

To sum up, the 2004 enlargement, as far as numbers are concerned, should not have a strong adverse effect on the Parliament's basic functioning. The basic structures have been adapted to the new numbers. In the short term, one may expect a certain slowing-down of business as the large numbers of new MEPs, especially those who are also from new Member States, settle in. The main question is whether the increase in languages can be managed without causing excessive delays, especially after further enlargement.

2. Political Balance and Political Coherence

The second set of questions concerns the political coherence of the European Parliament, understood here as both the cohesion of the Political Groups in their voting behaviour and the degree to which their positions are seen as offering distinct policy options at European level. It is too early to judge what impact this enlargement will have – and this is a complex subject which goes beyond the scope of this article. Nevertheless, some preliminary observations are possible.

Impact on the political balance within the EP

Table 1 shows the political balance in the European Parliament as it was in the 1999-2004 term² and as it was agreed on 20 July following the 2004 elections.

The share of the two largest groups in the end remained more or less the same. In fact it actually decreased slightly from 65.2% of the old Parliament to 63.9% today, in spite of some prior predictions that it could increase significantly and as seemed to be indicated by the fact that so many of the observers from the new Member States joined the two largest groups. In the event, some of these parties, notably the Socialists in Poland, did badly in the June 2004 elections, and this was reflected in the final result.

Moreover, both groups had been represented in all Member States. The EPP have maintained this status, with 69 MEPs from all ten new Member States. This is, however, no longer the case for the Socialists, who only have 31 MEPs from just eight of the new Member States and no members at all from Cyprus or Latvia.

The largest increase in membership has been in the Liberal Group, whose share of the total has risen from 8.5% to 12%. Most of this increase is due to having made new recruits from outside the traditional liberal parties

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Table 1: The Evolution of the Political Balance in the European Parliament

		1999-2004		2004-2009	
	Political Group	Seats	% total	Seats	% total
Christian Democrats/ Conservatives	EPP-ED	232	37.1	268	36.6
Socialists	PES	176	28.1	200	27.3
Liberals	ALDE	<i>ELDR</i> 53	8.5	<i>ALDE</i> 88	12.0
Greens plus	Greens/EFA	44	7.0	42	5.7
Left	GUE/NGL	49	7.8	41	5.6
'Sceptics' ⁵	IND/DEM	<i>EDD</i> 18	2.9	<i>IND/DEM</i> 32	4.4
Other	UEN ⁶	23	3.7	27	3.7
Other	NI	31	5.0	34	4.6
	Total	626		732	

EPP-ED	Group of the European People's Party (Christian Democrats) and European Democrats
PES	Socialist Group in the European Parliament
ALDE	Group of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe
ELDR	Group of the European Liberal, Democratic and Reform Party
Greens/EFA	Group of the Greens/European Free Alliance
GUE/NGL	Confederal Group of the European United Left - Nordic Green Left
IND/DEM	Independence and Democracy Group
EDD	Europe of Democracies and Diversities Group
UEN	Union for Europe of the Nations Group
NI	Non-attached Members

in the old Member States (notably in France and in Italy), and this has been reflected in the slight change in the Group's name. However it also has nineteen members from eight of the ten new Member States (the exceptions being in the Czech Republic and in Slovakia), with the Group doing particularly well in Lithuania, where it has seven seats and over half of all Lithuanian MEPs.

Predictions that the Green/EFA Group would fare badly as a result of enlargement have been confirmed, with only one (EFA rather than Green) member from Latvia, and with no representative in any of the other new Member States. The Green/EFA Group, however, has just managed to become the fourth largest group in the Parliament, in considerable measure because of its good result in Germany.

The GUE/NGL Group has gone from fourth to fifth in size, and is also unrepresented in seven of the ten new Member States, the exceptions being Cyprus, Estonia and the Czech Republic.

Finally, enlargement has made a significant contri-

bution to the two smallest groups in the Parliament. The former Europe of Democracies and Diversities (EDD) Group has been renamed as the Independence and Democracy Group (IND/DEM). Essentially consisting of Eurosceptics it has grown from 2.9% to 4.4%, with its two largest delegations being the eleven members from the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), and the ten members from the League of Polish Families. The biggest proportionate impact of enlargement, however, has been on Parliament's smallest Group, the UEN, whose Italian and Irish core have been bolstered by recruits from several of the new Member States, including seven Poles, four Latvians (the single largest group of Latvian MEPs) and two Lithuanians. These 13 members thus make up almost half the total membership of the Group. It is simply too early, however, to tell what kind of impact the changed composition of these latter groups may have on the work of Parliament.

Besides these comments on the changed internal balance within the EP political groups a few words

should be added about the overall political balance among the groups. The most striking feature is that the two largest groups, in spite of the slight drop in their overall share that was noted above, again entered into an agreement to divide up the Parliament Presidency between themselves over the 2004-2009 term of office. This had become standard practice before 1999, but in the 1999-2004 Parliament the 'grand coalition' had broken down, and been replaced by a deal over the Presidency between the EPP and Liberal Groups.

A second important element is that the Liberal Group, while much smaller than the two largest groups, is now much bigger than the other groups. More than ever it is in a key position as an arbiter of many swing votes within the Parliament.

Finally there has been some speculation over the impact of the success of Eurosceptic parties in a number of EU countries, notably UKIP in the United Kingdom. In practice their success was an uneven one and in Denmark, for example, they lost support. The overall impact on the European Parliament political balance was thus limited. The IND/DEM Group has certainly gained considerably in size, but the consequences of this on the workings of the Parliament are not yet evident.

Impacts on political coherence

It also remains to be seen what enlargement may mean for the further evolution of the political groups – and of European political parties – in providing clear options for European politics.

There has been a fairly high degree of cohesion, at least among the largest groups. Looking at voting records from 1979 to 2001, Hix, Kreppel and Noury conclude that the Socialists, EPP and Liberals acted as 'relatively cohesive party organizations' with average scores on an agreement index of 0.84 in the first term to 0.89 in the fifth. This may be lower than in European domestic parliaments where the executive relies on a majority in parliament, but is higher than in the United States, where there is a separation of powers. Moreover, the general trend has been upwards.³

Yet there are still many issues on which MEPs will vote in a particular way corresponding to national, regional or sectoral interest rather than political group affiliation. There are also considerable divergences within most political groups regarding the depth and direction of European integration, and often over other policy preferences at European level.

It is too early to gauge the impacts of enlargement on all this. Many of the new MEPs seem strongly committed to further European integration, but there are a number of Eurosceptics among them as well. On economic policies, the new members include both strong liberals and others more nostalgic for the old certainties. On foreign-policy issues such as attitudes to the Iraq invasion, the policy differences have been well flagged-up. It has also been predicted that enlargement may bring about other shifts in parliamentary priorities with, for example, greater interest being shown in cohesion

issues than, say environmental questions. One difference which is already clear is that there are a higher percentage of social conservatives among the new MEPs than among those from the old Member States.

A final issue that is worth mentioning is the potential impact of the embryonic European political parties, the effects of enlargement upon them and the extent to which they will contribute to provide clear and consistent European policy choices for European citizens. These parties include the Christian Democrats and other centre-right parties in the *European People's Party* (EPP), socialists in the *Party of European Socialists* (PES), liberals in the *European Liberal, Democratic and Reform Party* (ELDR), the *European Green Party* that was founded to succeed the European Federation of Green Parties in February 2004 and the *European Free Alliance* (EFA), which is made up of 'representatives of stateless nations' and which constituted itself as a European Political Party in March 2004. To differing degrees all of these parties have been impacted by enlargement, and have gained a considerable number of parties as full members or observers.

The importance of these parties has been reinforced by the recent adoption of Regulation 2004/2003 on the regulations governing political parties at European level and the rules regarding their funding, which became operational after the 2004 European elections. In the longer term this could help to strengthen their potential role as mobilizers of European public opinion, and contribute to the development of Europe-wide rather than individual national policies. In the shorter term, however, this is still far from being the case, not least because the European political parties that have been created do not correspond in most cases to the political groups within the European Parliament. In some cases their membership is different (for example the EPP-ED includes not just the EPP parties but also the more 'Euro-hesitant' parties in its ED wing, such as the British and Czech Conservatives). The ALDE Group and the ELDR Party also do not coincide. The Greens/EFA Group contains parties from two separate European political parties. Moreover several EP groups, such as the GUE, IND/DEM and UEN Groups have no equivalent European political parties, and indeed in some cases this would be contrary to their core beliefs. For the moment, therefore, the political groups within the European Parliament have the more important role, but it will be interesting to see the extent to which the European political parties succeed in increasing their influence over the next few years.

3. Legitimacy

Impacts on turnout at the 2004 EP elections

The 2004 European elections had a disappointing overall turnout of only 45.7%. The turnout rate was often low in the old Member States, although it did increase in certain countries, and in overall terms was only slightly lower than in 1999. The most striking aspect, however, was just how little interest there was in most new Member States. Turnout was below the EU average except in

Malta (82% – where there has been a high level of interest, not only positive but also negative, and there is a tradition of very strong participation in elections), Cyprus (71% – where EU membership is a matter of top national concern, and voting is obligatory) and, if only just, in Lithuania (48%). Moreover in five of the ten, turnout was below 30%, including Poland with 21% and Slovakia with an all-time record anywhere of 17%.

Far from contributing to an increase in overall electoral participation – as might have been expected, given their apparent enthusiasm for EU membership – the response of most the new Member States thus ensured continuation of the trend by which average turnout across the Community/Union has fallen with each successive elections. Some commentators have suggested that the falling turnout rate in European elections is open to misinterpretation, inasmuch as there has been a more general disenchantment with politics in general. Turnout, it is suggested, is lower in all elections, not just in those to the European Parliament. Yet turnout in the 2004 European elections was lower than turnout in the latest national elections in every single country of the 25 except Luxembourg. This ‘Euro Gap’ (i.e. the *difference* between the two turnout rates) was a full 53% in Slovakia; over 40% in Sweden, Austria and The Netherlands; and 30% or more in Denmark, Hungary, Estonia, the Czech Republic, Latvia and Slovenia.⁴

Given the growing importance of Parliament’s formal role in the evolving European political system, this low level of popular interest in the institution, especially in the new Member States, is a matter for serious concern, especially at a time when citizens are being invited to ratify a new Constitution.

Concluding Remarks

The EP has grown greatly in power in recent years, and now has a much stronger position than it used to have within the inter-institutional triangle that it forms with the Council and Commission. Its power of legislative codecision has been extended, its budgetary powers are very considerable and its powers of control and over EU appointments have also been reinforced. It will now have to demonstrate that it can make the best use of these new powers by further improving its procedures within the legislative process, by devoting more resources to monitoring the implementation of EU law, and by making a major contribution to the adoption of Europe’s medium-term financial perspectives. In addition, the EU draft Constitution, if eventually ratified, would further consolidate the EP’s legislative and budgetary

powers, and the EP will have to show that it can live up to these new responsibilities as well. The EP will also have to face up to the great challenge that lies ahead in better communicating the nature of its role and powers to Europe’s citizens, so that it can seek to reverse the trend to lower turnout by the time of the next European Parliament elections in 2009, and thus help to reinforce its future legitimacy.

A number of other related developments would help to reinforce this process, including the potential consolidation of multi-level political *parties*, the establishment of closer relations between the European Parliament and the national *parliaments*, and strengthening the connection with European *people*. This latter is vital as the Parliament is often not perceived as being relevant to citizens’ most pressing concerns. Both the new Parliament and the new Commission have already indicated that a high priority will be attached to a continued improvement of transparency and communications. This is certainly essential if the institutions are to achieve, as they must, a degree of public understanding and support which is more commensurate with their existing powers and their future role at the heart of a constitutionalized European political system.

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NOTES

- ¹ Francis Jacobs’ contribution is made in a personal rather than an institutional capacity.
- ² These figures refer to the EP of 626 Members, not the 785-member body which formally existed between the June 2004 elections and the July plenary which inaugurated the 6th term. The precise figures varied slightly during the term. Those given here are from February 2004.
- ³ Simon Hix, Amie Kreppel and Abdul Noury, ‘The Party System in the European Parliament: Collusive or Competitive’, *Journal of Common Market Studies* 41:2 (2003): 309-331.
- ⁴ International IDEA, ‘Elections in the European Union – A Comparative Overview’. The UK Electoral Commission, European Parliamentary Elections Seminar, Cardiff, July 2004.
- ⁵ This group in fact includes parties with fairly different attitudes towards European integration itself.
- ⁶ The UEN includes a variety of parties and is a successor to the former Gaullist grouping. □