

Electing the European Parliament's President

At the January plenary sitting, the European Parliament (EP) is due to elect its 30th President, to hold the office until the next European parliamentary elections, due in 2019. The President has an important and increasingly visible function in the EU institutional and international setting, mirroring the influential role of the Parliament as a shaper of EU policies and co-legislator.

Election procedure

Until 1979, EP Presidents were chosen on an annual or biennial basis. Since the first EP election by universal suffrage in 1979, the President is elected and remains in office for a renewable period of two and a half years. During each legislative term, a first election is normally held in July, immediately after the election of the new Parliament, and a second, mid-term election is held two and a half years later, in January.

According to [Article 14\(4\)](#) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), the European Parliament elects its President from among its Members. The Parliament's [Rules of Procedure](#) (RoP), as revised and applicable from the start of the plenary session on 16 January 2017, set out the procedure for this election.

The President is elected based on nominations, which may be handed in before every ballot, with nominees' consent. They are [proposed](#) by political groups, but may also be nominated by a number of Members reaching at least the 'low threshold' i.e. one-twentieth (38) of Parliament's Members (Rules 15 and 168a). The previous Rule 15, in force until 15 January 2017, provided that political groups, or at least 40 Members, could support nominations.

During the first plenary sitting after the election of the new Parliament, or at the sitting designated to elect the President for the mid-term election, the procedure is chaired by the outgoing President, or by one of the Vice-Presidents in order of precedence or, in their absence, by the MEP with the longest period in office (Rule 14). The Parliament shall not deal with any other activity until the election of the new President is concluded (Rule 14(2)).

The vote is by secret ballot. While the previous Rule 15 provided that, if the number of candidates for the election of the President, Vice-Presidents and Quaestors is less than or equal to the seats to be filled, the election *may* be held by acclamation, the new Rule 15 provides that the election *shall* be held by acclamation. However, the new rule also provides that a number of Members or political group(s) reaching at least the 'high threshold', i.e. one fifth of Members, may request a secret ballot. (This provision is, however, unlikely to apply to the presidential election, where traditionally more than one nominee runs for the seat.)

The President is elected by an absolute majority of votes cast (not an absolute majority of Members). Abstentions and spoilt or blank votes do not count. Rule 16 provides for a maximum of four ballots. If, after the third ballot, no absolute majority is reached, the fourth ballot is confined to the two candidates who obtained the highest number of votes in the third ballot, in which case a [simple majority](#) is enough to declare a result. In the case of a tie at the fourth ballot, Rule 16(1) assigns the victory to the older candidate. In electing the President, Vice-Presidents and Quaestors, account should be taken of the need to ensure a fair representation of political views, geographical balance and, according to the revised Rule 15(2), gender balance. The elected President is the sole person entitled to give an opening address.

Duties of the President

The President enjoys executive and representative powers, as well as responsibility for ensuring respect for the rules of procedure. The President directs all of Parliament's activities, including the duty to 'open, suspend and close sittings; to rule on the admissibility of amendments and other texts put to the vote, as well as on the admissibility of parliamentary questions'. Order is maintained during sittings by the President giving the



floor to speakers. The President also closes debates, puts matters to the vote, announces the results of votes and makes relevant communications to committees (Rule 22). A newly introduced Rule 22(4a) gives the President responsibility for the security and inviolability of the Parliament's premises. The powers under Rule 22(4) mean that the President represents the Parliament in international relations, on ceremonial occasions and in administrative, legal and financial matters, although these powers may be delegated.

It is clear that the powers of the President extend far beyond the mere letter of Rule 22. They also include, for example, the power to convene the conciliation committee, under both ordinary legislative procedure and in the budgetary procedure, in agreement with the President of the Council, and to chair Parliament's delegation to the conciliation committee (although under the ordinary legislative procedure this duty is often delegated); to chair formal sittings when visiting heads of state address the Parliament; and during important votes or debates. Since the late 1980s the practice of the EP President addressing the opening of all European Council meetings has developed, a sign of the increased visibility and recognition of the role in relation to the other institutions and the outside world. The President chairs both the EP Bureau and the Conference of Presidents, and may cast a deciding vote in the Bureau in the event of a tie.

One significant symbol of the extent to which Parliament's powers have evolved is that the EP President co-signs, with the President of the Council, legislative acts adopted under the ordinary legislative procedure (Article 297(1) TFEU). At the end of the budgetary procedure, it is also the EP President who declares the EU budget adopted.

Election of Vice-Presidents and Quaestors

The new Rule 15 makes it explicit that, after the election of the President, Parliament also elects the other two main political bodies necessary for the functioning of Parliament's activities, in the following order: the 14 Vice-Presidents and then the 5 Quaestors. Nominations are made on the same basis as for the President (Rule 15).

Under Rule 17, the 14 Vice-Presidents are elected in a single ballot by an absolute majority of votes cast. If the number of successful candidates is less than 14, a second vote is held to assign the remaining seats under the same conditions. If a third vote is necessary, a simple majority is sufficient to fill the remaining seats.

Vice-Presidents take precedence in the order in which they are elected and, in the event of a tie, by age. If voted by acclamation, a vote by secret ballot determines the order of precedence. The election of Quaestors follows the same procedure as that for the election of Vice-Presidents (Rule 18).

In practice, the political groups aim to ensure that the Vice-Presidents and Quaestors broadly reflect the numerical strength of the groups and take into account the results of the President's election.

Figure 1 – European Parliament Presidents



Data source: The European Parliament (9th edition), Corbett, Jacobs, Neville, 2016.