ELECTING THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT'S PRESIDENT

At the constituent plenary sitting of the new parliamentary term (16-19 July 2024), the European Parliament will elect its 32nd President, to hold office for the first half of the 10th parliamentary term, until January 2027. The President has an important and increasingly visible function in the EU institutional and international setting, mirroring Parliament's influential role as shaper of EU policies and as co-legislator.

Election procedure

Until 1979, Parliament's Presidents were chosen on an annual or biennial basis. Since the first European Parliament election by universal suffrage in 1979, its President has been elected for a renewable period of 2.5 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 2.5 years later, in January. According to Article 14(4) of the Treaty on European Union (TEU), the European Parliament elects its President from among its Members. Parliament's Rules of Procedure (RoP), as last revised in 2020, 2021, 2023 and 2024, set out the procedure for this election. As of the 2024 European elections, Parliament's composition is 720 members, by virtue of European Council Decision (EU) 2023/2061 of 22 September 2023.

The President is elected on the basis of nominations, with the nominees' consent. These are handed in before each round of the ballot. Candidates are proposed by political groups, but may also be nominated by a number of Members reaching at least the 'low threshold', i.e. one 20th (36) of Parliament's Members (Rules 15 and 186). During the first plenary sitting after the election of a 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 outgoing Vice-Presidents in order of precedence or, in their absence, by the MEP having held office for the longest period (Rule 14). Apart from the verification of credentials (Rule 14(2)), Parliament cannot deal with any other activity until the new President has been elected.

The vote is by secret ballot (Rule 15). Prior to January 2017, under Rule 15, if the number of candidates (for President, Vice-Presidents and Quaestors) was less than or equal to the number of seats to be filled, the election could be held by acclamation. Rule 15 now provides that, in those circumstances, the election must be held by acclamation, unless a number of Members or a political group or political group(s) reaching at least the 'high threshold', i.e. one fifth of Members (144), 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.

Under Rule 16, after nominations have been handed to the provisional chair of the plenary sitting, the latter announces them in plenary. The President is elected by an absolute majority of votes cast, i.e. 50 % +1. This can be less than an absolute majority of all Members, since abstentions and spoil 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 numbers of votes in the third ballot, in which case the victory is attributed to the candidate (among the two) with the higher score. In the case of a tie at the fourth ballot, Rule 16(1) assigns the presidency 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 gender balance (Rule 15(2)). 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 the rules of procedure are upheld. 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.
The President’s responsibility extends to the security and inviolability of the Parliament’s premises (Rule 22). Rule 22(4) attributes to the President the power to represent Parliament in international relations, on ceremonial occasions and in administrative, legal and financial matters, although some of these powers may be delegated. The powers of the President, however, extend far beyond the mere letter of Rule 22. They also include, for example: the power to convene the conciliation committee, under both the ordinary legislative procedure (OLP) and the budgetary procedure, in agreement with the President of the Council, and to chair Parliament’s delegation to the conciliation committee (although under OLP, this duty has often been delegated); to chair formal sittings when visiting heads of state address the Parliament; and to chair important votes or debates. Since the late 1980s, the practice of Parliament’s President addressing the European Council at the opening of all its 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 Parliament’s Bureau and its Conference of Presidents, and can cast a deciding vote in the Bureau in the event of a tie. A significant symbol of the extent to which Parliament’s powers have evolved is that, with the President of the Council, its President co-signs legislative acts adopted under the ordinary legislative procedure (Article 297(1) TFEU). Moreover, at the end of the annual budgetary procedure, it is Parliament’s President who declares the EU budget adopted (Article 314(9) TFEU).

Election of Vice-Presidents and Quaestors

Rule 15 makes it explicit that, after the election of the President, Members then elect Parliament’s other main political officeholders – required for the correct functioning of the institution’s activities. The 14 Vice-Presidents, and then the five Quaestors, are elected in plenary. 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 (absolute majority of votes cast). If a third vote is necessary, a relative majority is sufficient to fill the remaining seats (abstentions and spoilt votes do not count). 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 Parliament’s Bureau, made up of the Vice-Presidents and the Quaestors, broadly reflects the numerical strength of the groups, including taking into account the results of the President’s election.

This further updates an ‘at a glance’ note of January 2022.

1 Any references to the RoP are to the new rules, adopted on 10 April 2024 and due to enter into force on 16 July 2024.