

Rules on political groups in the EP

SUMMARY

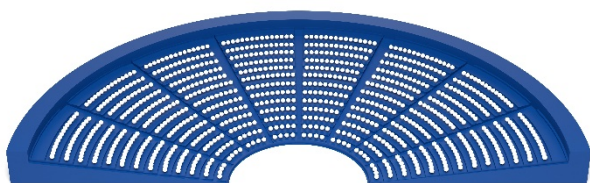
Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) may form political groups; these are organised not by nationality, but by political affiliation. Since the first direct elections in 1979, the number of political groups has fluctuated between seven and ten. Following the 2019 elections, the number, size and composition of political groups is likely to continue to fluctuate, as a result of the possible dissolution of some political groups and the creation of new ones.

To form a political group, a minimum of 25 MEPs, elected in at least one quarter (currently seven) of the EU's Member States is required. Those Members who do not belong to any political group are known as 'non-attached' (*non-inscrits*) Members.

Although the political groups play a very prominent role in Parliament's life, individual MEPs and/or several MEPs acting together, also have many rights, including in relation to the exercise of oversight over other EU institutions, such as the Commission. However, belonging to a political group is of particular relevance when it comes to the allocation of key positions in Parliament's political and organisational structures, such as committee and delegation chairs and rapporteurships on important dossiers. Moreover, political groups receive higher funding for their collective staff and parliamentary activities than the non-attached MEPs.

Political group funding, however, is distinct from funding granted to European political parties and foundations, which, if they comply with the requirements to register as such, may apply for funding from the European Parliament.

This briefing updates an [earlier one](#), of June 2015, by Eva-Maria Poptcheva.



In this Briefing

- Evolution and role of political groups
- Formation and dissolution of political groups
- Rights of political groups and of non-attached Members
- Financing and staff
- European political parties and foundations

Evolution and role of political groups

Members of the European Parliament sit in political groups. These are not organised by nationality, but by political affiliation. This is the legacy of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) Common Assembly – the precursor of the European Parliament (EP) – which, as early as 1953, recognised three trans-national political groups (Christian democrats, socialists and liberals) in its internal rules of procedure. Several years later, the Assembly abandoned alphabetical seating order in favour of seating by political affiliation, making it a genuine transnational parliament organised along ideological lines.¹

Political groups – which are to be distinguished from European political parties (see below) – are central to the work of the European Parliament. Through the creation of political blocs, groups make a significant contribution to the Parliament's operational capability, by preventing too great a fragmentation and facilitating the decision-making process. Political groups are essential for building majorities in Parliament, and in organising, coordinating and supporting the activities of their members. The vast majority of the total [232](#) national political parties represented in the outgoing Parliament were integrated in a political group.

The EP political groups do not operate as strong a system of group discipline as in most national parliaments. Nonetheless, EP groups have achieved high levels of **voting cohesion**: research has suggested that, generally, the groups of the Greens/European Free Alliance, the European People's Party and the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats have achieved the highest levels of cohesion (95.62 %, 93.71 % and 91.99 % respectively), whereas the Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy group had demonstrated the lowest.²

Since the first direct elections in 1979, the number of political groups has fluctuated between **seven and ten**. The centre-right Group of the European People's Party (EPP) and the centre-left Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D) have traditionally been the largest groups, flanked by smaller ones to the left, right and in the centre. The combined share of the EPP and the S&D groups in the Parliament amounted to a record 66 % during the 1999-2004 parliamentary term. Since then, however, it has been on the decrease, dropping to 54.8 % after the 2014 elections (see chart below). After the May 2019 elections, the EPP/S&D share dropped further, to 44.2 %.

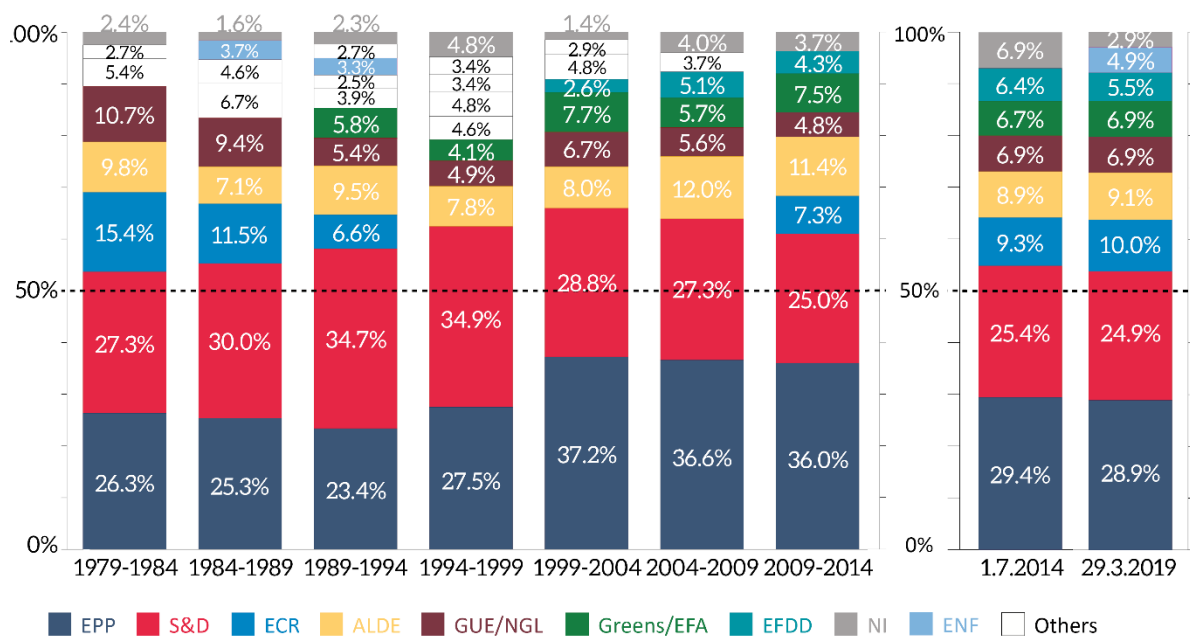
At the beginning of the 2014-2019 parliamentary term, there were seven political groups, but June 2015 saw the creation of an eighth – the Europe of Nations and Freedom (ENF) group. The number, size and composition of political groups will continue to fluctuate in the near future, not only due to the outcome of the 2019 elections but also due to the prospect of Brexit and the departure of the British Members. Furthermore, ALDE group leader Guy Verhofstadt had already [announced](#) in May 2019 that the ALDE group would dissolve to form a new pro-European, centrist group together with the 'Renaissance' list established by the President of France, Emmanuel Macron.

The eight political groups in the outgoing 2014-2019 Parliament in order of size were:

- Group of the European People's Party (Christian Democrats) (EPP), 219 MEPs,
- Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats in the European Parliament (S&D), 189 MEPs,
- European Conservatives and Reformists Group (ECR), 70 MEPs,
- Group of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE), 68 MEPs,
- Group of the Greens/European Free Alliance (Greens/EFA), 52 MEPs,
- Confederal Group of the European United Left – Nordic Green Left (GUE/NGL), 51 MEPs,
- Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy Group (EFDD), 44 MEPs,
- Europe of Nations and Freedom (ENF), 36 MEPs.

In addition, some MEPs sat as non-attached Members (*Non-inscrits* – NI, 20 MEPs).

Strengths of the political groups, July 1979 - March 2019



Source: European Parliament: Facts and Figures, EPRS, April 2019.

NB: The figures for the first seven terms relate to the constituent sessions, in July of the first year indicated.

Formation and dissolution of political groups

The rules for the formation of political groups are stipulated in Parliament's [Rules of Procedure](#), which provide that 'Members may form themselves into groups according to their political affinities' (Rule 33). Parliament does not normally assess the political affinity of members of a group, taking this as read unless the Members concerned indicate otherwise (interpretation of Rule 33). To form a political group, a minimum of 25 MEPs elected in at least one quarter of the EU's Member States (currently seven) is required. A Member may not belong to more than one political group.

Recent changes to the Rules of Procedure require all members of a new group to declare in a written statement 'that they share the same **political affinity**' (Rule 33(5)). A group's formation must be notified in a statement to the President of Parliament. Such a statement must contain: (a) the name of the group, (b) a political declaration, setting out the purpose of the group and (c) the names of its members and bureau members. Most recently, the Parliament [decided](#) on 17 April 2019 to confirm the following interpretation regarding the requirement of the political declaration (point b above):

The political declaration of a group shall set out the values that the group stands for and the main political objectives which its members intend to pursue together in the framework of the exercise of their mandate. The declaration shall describe the common political orientation of the group in a substantial, distinctive and genuine way.

The definition of 'political affinity' has long been a contentious issue, underpinned by the wish to prevent the formation of purely technical groups, created to take advantage of the benefits offered by belonging to a group. In 1999, Parliament [rejected](#) the creation of a Technical Group of Independent Members (TDI). When challenged, this decision was upheld by the [European Court of First Instance](#), which considered it as justified in order to allow Parliament to ensure its proper functioning.

If during the legislative term, a group falls below the required threshold, the President, with the agreement of the [Conference of Presidents](#), may allow it to continue to exist until Parliament's next constitutive sitting, under two conditions: namely, that the Members continue to represent at least one fifth of the Member States, and that the group has existed for a period longer than one year.

This exception is not applied if there is sufficient evidence to suspect that it is being abused (Rule 33). The President must announce the establishment as well as the dissolution of political groups in Parliament.

Non-attached MEPs do not establish a separate political group, as is the case in some national parliaments, which have a 'mixed group'. Members may change political groups or become non-attached Members, as happens regularly during a term.

Rights of political groups and of non-attached Members

Advantages of belonging to a political group

Belonging to a political group is of particular relevance for the allocation of key positions in Parliament's political and organisational structures. For example, nominations for the EP President, the 14 Vice-Presidents and the 5 Quaestors may only be made by a political group or Members reaching at least the 'low threshold', which is currently (June 2019) defined as 1/20th of Parliament's Members, i.e. 38 MEPs (Rule 15). Non-attached Members can nominate individuals to **committees and delegations** (Rule 209), but they are unlikely to be elected to positions as committee chairs or to be appointed rapporteurs on significant dossiers. However, the smallest political groups also obtain very few committee chairs.

Belonging to a political group is also important when it comes to the allocation of **speaking time in plenary debates**. For the first part of a debate, a first block of speaking time is divided equally among all political groups; a further share is then divided among the political groups in proportion to their size. Finally, the non-attached Members are allocated an overall speaking time based on the fractions allocated to each political group (Rule 171). Similarly, only political groups or a group of 38 MEPs (low threshold) may request that an extraordinary debate be placed on the Parliament's agenda (Rule 161).

Rights of individual Members or groups of Members acting together

Although the political groups play a very prominent role in Parliament's life, individual MEPs and/or several MEPs acting together also have numerous rights, provided for in the Parliament's Rules of Procedure. For instance, although only the chairs of the political groups, together with the President, are members of the Conference of Presidents – Parliament's political body responsible inter alia for drafting the agenda for plenary sessions – one non-attached Member is invited to attend its meetings, but does not have a vote (Rule 26).

Like any other Member, non-attached MEPs can table **amendments** for consideration in committee (Rule 218). Moreover, they can participate, like political groups, in the **oversight of other EU institutions**. Acting together, 38 MEPs (1/20th of Parliament's members) can, for instance, put questions to, inter alia, the Council or the Commission for oral answer with debate (Rule 136), whilst any Member may put questions for written answer to these and other EU institutions (Rule 138). Moreover, any Member is entitled to participate in question time with the Commission in plenary (though it should be noted that such sessions have rarely been held in recent years). The President is required to ensure, as far as possible, that Members holding different political views and coming from different Member States are given the opportunity to put a question to the Commission during such sessions (Rule 137).

Members can put a question to another Member by raising a 'blue card' during that Member's speech (Rule 171) and make one-minute-long explanations of vote (Rule 194). Furthermore, at least 40 MEPs can ask for a vote to establish whether the **quorum** is present, whereas political groups are not entitled to make such a request on behalf of their Members (Rule 178).

Any Member may table a legislative proposal on the basis of the (indirect) [right of initiative](#) conferred upon Parliament under Article 225 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) (Rule 47). However, **legislative own-initiative reports** must be adopted by a parliamentary committee. The decision to request authorisation to draw up such a report is prepared by the political group coordinators in the committee concerned. While non-attached Members do not participate in coordinators' meetings, they must be guaranteed access to information regarding the proceedings (interpretation of Rule 214).

Financing and staff

The [budget](#) of the European Parliament is the sole source of funding for political groups and non-attached MEPs. Allocations to political groups and non-attached MEPs are subject to [rules](#) laid down by the Bureau of the Parliament. Appropriations are made available under budget item 400 of the general budget of the Union, and amount to €64 million for 2019. They are intended to cover both administrative and operational expenditure of the secretariats of political groups and non-attached Members,

The payment of salaries to MEPs' accredited assistants is covered by separate budget items, with every MEP having the same amount at their disposal to spend on assistants regardless of group membership.

(Article 33(4), [Implementing measures for the statute for MEPs](#))

and expenditure on political and information activities conducted in connection with the Union's activities. They cannot be used to fund European political parties (these are funded under a different budget line, see below) or any European, national, regional or local electoral campaign, but rather for staffing and other parliamentary activities. The budget is allocated at the beginning of each year by the Bureau, on the basis of the number of Members in each group (and the number of non-attached Members) as at 1 January of the year in question, according to a proposal from the chairs of the political groups.

Changes in the composition of groups

Changes in the composition of political groups (or non-attached Members) during the course of the financial year results in a re-allocation from the beginning of the following month, but effectively takes place only at the beginning of the following financial year, when the appropriations are paid (and any recovery of sums paid is effected). Where a non-attached Member joins a political group, the balance of appropriations not used by the non-attached Member is, if appropriate, transferred to the group concerned.

Accordingly, if a new political group is formed in the course of a legislative term, its allocations for the calendar year of its formation would be funded partly from allocations paid to any non-attached MEPs joining the group and partly from a redistribution of allocations to the existing groups, with the latter taking effect only at the beginning of the following financial year, unless the Bureau decides otherwise.

Each political group receives its annual budget for political and information activities at the beginning of the year, and is responsible for the management of its expenditure. In contrast, Parliament's secretariat settles expenditure for non-attached Members either through direct payments to suppliers or through reimbursement of the Members. The Directorate-General for Finance verifies that all such expenditure for non-attached Members complies with the rules, and will not pay or reimburse if this is not the case. The audited annual statements of revenue and expenditure of the political groups, together with consolidated statements for all non-attached Members prepared by Parliament's secretariat, are delivered to the Bureau and to the Committee on Budgetary Control, and published on Parliament's website. Up to 50% of the annual appropriations not used by groups or by the non-attached Members may be carried over to the following year. Any amount exceeding this limit is returned to Parliament. **Years in which European elections are held** are split into two budgeting periods (1 January to 30 June and 1 July to 31 December). In such years, for the purpose of calculating the carry-over for groups that continue

to exist after the elections, the two half-yearly periods are aggregated and regarded as a single financial year.

Each political group is provided with a secretariat, funded from Parliament's budget. The number and grades of the – predominantly temporary – staff are determined in proportion to the number of Members in the group. Non-attached MEPs too are provided with a secretariat paid from Parliament's budget. Political groups may also employ contractual staff using funding under item 400, whereas non-attached Members may not use such funding for this purpose.

European political parties and foundations

The political groups in the European Parliament are not identical to the [European political parties](#). Most of the national parties represented within a given political group are also members of the corresponding political party at EU level; however, in some political groups there is more than one European political party (e.g. the ALDE group, and the Greens/EFA group). Moreover, one and the same political group may house several national parties from the same country. MEPs can normally join a political group in the Parliament, even if they do not belong to a national party that is a member of the related European political party, under conditions laid down in the rules of the group concerned.

European political parties are (con-)federations of national political parties sharing a political affiliation. The role of political parties at EU level is set out in Article 10(4) TEU and Article 12(2) of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, stipulating that 'Political parties at European level contribute to forming European political awareness and to expressing the will of citizens of the Union'. The importance of European political parties for democracy at EU level is thus twofold. On the one side, they represent the link between Union citizens and the public power in the European institutions.³ On the other, European political parties function as channels for a truly European public debate in a transnational public space. European political parties came into the spotlight in the 2014 and 2019 European elections, with most European political families [nominating lead candidates](#) for the position of the President of the European Commission.

Since July 2004, European political parties have been able to receive annual funding from the European Parliament for their activities at EU level. The rules governing the European political parties and their funding are laid down in Regulation 1141/2014, adopted by the Parliament and Council following the ordinary legislative procedure (Article 224 TFEU). This regulation was last [amended](#) in May 2018 (see an [EPRS briefing](#) of September 2018). The maximum available for grants to European political parties in 2019 amounts to a total of €50 million, compared to €32.44 million in 2018 (item 402 of the [budget of the EU](#)).

European political **foundations** must be affiliated to European political parties. They are intended to contribute to the debate on European public policy issues, inter alia, by organising conferences and conducting studies. They can apply for funding from Parliament through the European political party to which they are affiliated and that is represented in Parliament by at least one MEP. In 2019, the maximum available budget for European political foundations amounted to €19.7 million (budget item 403).

MAIN REFERENCES

R. Corbett, F. Jacobs, D. Neville, *The European Parliament*, 9th edition, 2016.

T. Coosemans, *Les partis politiques européens*, *Courrier hebdomadaire du CRISP*, No 2201-2202 (2014), pp. 1-123.

A. Ripoll Servent, *The European Parliament*, Red Globe Press, 2017.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Ripoll Servent A., *The European Parliament*, Red Globe Press, 2017, p. 38; Dinan, D., [Historiography of the European Parliament](#), EPRS, European Parliament, November 2018, p. 5.
- ² Ripoll Servent A., *ibid.*, p. 190-191; Corbett R. et al., *The European Parliament*, John Harper Publishing, 9th edition, 2016, p. 142.
- ³ M. Nettesheim, *Developing a Theory of Democracy for the European Union*, in *Berkeley Journal of International Law* 23 (2005), p. 358.

DISCLAIMER AND COPYRIGHT

This document is prepared for, and addressed to, the Members and staff of the European Parliament as background material to assist them in their parliamentary work. The content of the document is the sole responsibility of its author(s) and any opinions expressed herein should not be taken to represent an official position of the Parliament.

Reproduction and translation for non-commercial purposes are authorised, provided the source is acknowledged and the European Parliament is given prior notice and sent a copy.

© European Union, 2019.

Photo credits: © Fox / Fotolia.

eprs@ep.europa.eu (contact)

www.eprs.ep.parl.union.eu (intranet)

www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank (internet)

<http://epthinktank.eu> (blog)

