Wilfried
Martens Centre
for European Studies

From Mandated to Representative Democracy:

European Parliamentarism From 1952 to 2024

Michael Gehler

Credits

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About the author

Dr Michael Gehler has been a Professor, the Head of the Institute of History and the Jean Monnet Chair for Modern and Contemporary History of Germany and Europe and European Integration at the University of Hildesheim since 2006. He has also been a Professor at Andrássy University, Budapest since 2021. His research interests include the history of empires; Austrian, German and European history; and international relations, with a special focus on the Cold War, German unification, European integration, the transnational party cooperation of Christian Democrats and conservatives in Europe, and the South Tyrolean question.

Summary

The European Parliament (EP), with its predecessor being the Common Assembly of the European Coal and Steel Community, has a long history. It is one of the oldest community institutions, together with the High Authority, now known as the Commission; the Council of Ministers; and the European Court of Justice. From the very beginning, Christian Democrats, conservatives, socialists, Social Democrats and liberals from the founding member states advocated establishing a European parliamentary system with its own budget and specific procedures.

Over the course of time, a range of efforts and numerous initiatives by various parliamentary groups have forced the heads of state and government to grant the EP ever more rights. Even before the first direct elections in 1979, the representatives had already achieved respectable successes. The close cooperation of the groups across the political and ideological divides has been decisive, with there always having been a fundamental pro-European consensus among the Members of the European Parliament on the need for Europe's unification. Both in the context of crises and in the course of the enlargements from 6 to 27 members, a growing number of tasks and challenges have not been able to be solved on a purely national level.

As a result, there has been a continual need to further legitimise decision-making through the introduction of increasingly democratic parliamentary processes; this has enabled the EP to acquire more and more opportunities for co-decision. During this process, European Christian Democrats, in particular, have played a major role. In the face of the recent onslaught from EU opponents and populists, the European People's Party has held the European flag high, while also defending and strengthening the EP, the development of which represents one of the greatest achievements of European unification.

This paper attempts to periodise this evolution of the Parliament on the basis of six criteria: (1) the treaties, from Paris to Lisbon; (2) the various rounds of enlargement to include new members in an enlarged EP; (3) the changing party-political landscapes in the member states; (4) the relationship and cooperation between the EP and the other institutions; (5) election results; and (6) the profiles of several parliamentarians and the respective presidents. A summary of the developments in each of these criteria is provided at the end of the paper.

Introduction

Periodising the history of European unification is one of the greatest challenges of historical integration research,[1] because several different factors have to be kept in mind. These factors are also part of the narrative of European integration history.[2] Historical research has yet to produce such a periodisation for the varied, eventful and not always uniform development of the European Parliament[3] (EP), something which this research paper will attempt to do. When studying the development of European parliamentarism, six conceivable and possible criteria for such periodisation must be considered, including

1. the legal framework enshrined in the successive treaties, from the Paris Treaty on the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) to Lisbon on the EU, in particular the Treaties of Maastricht of 1991 (in force from 1993) and Lisbon of 2007 (in force from 2009);

2. the admission of new members, from the northern enlargement (in 1973) to Croatia (2013), with the consequences in terms of the changed composition of the Parliament;

3. the changing domestic and party-political landscapes in the member states, which have had repercussions for the structure of the EP;

4. the relationships and cooperation between the EP and other institutions (the Commission, the European Court of Justice and the former Council of Ministers, now the Council of the EU);

5. election results; and

6. the commitment and engagement of prominent European parliamentarians, as well as the profiles of and roles played by the respective presidents.

These six criteria will be assessed at the end of this article.

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[1] See proposals to periodise European integration history in M. Gehler, 'Von der west- zur gesamteuropäischen Integration. Periodisierungs-vorschläge zu ihren Antriebskräften, Gründen, Motiven, Zielen und Wirkungen', *Historische Zeitschrift* 318 (2024).

[2] W. Kaiser and R. McMahon, 'Narrating European Integration: Transnational Actors and Stories', *National Identities* 19/2 (2017).

[3] D. Dinan, 'The European Parliament: Moving to the Centre of Historical Interest in the European Union', *Journal of European Integration History* 27/1 (2021).

The following eight sections represent an attempt to periodise the key phases of European parliamentarism, broadly based on the outlined criteria. Afterwards, the conclusion reflects on the implications of the findings and outlines some key aspects and challenges that national politicians and policymakers should keep in mind when cooperating with the EP and reflecting on the historically significant and still ongoing European integration process.

The emergence of political groupings in the ECSC's Common Assembly (1952–8)

The first phase covers the decade from the announcement of the Schuman Plan and its implementation, through the agreement of the Treaty of Paris, to the first appointment of a representative body for Europe in the form of the EP. On 9 May 1950 French Foreign Minister Robert Schuman made a historic proposal in a short speech in the Clock Room of the Quai d'Orsay in Paris. The aim was to place coal mining and steel production in France and the Federal Republic of Germany under joint control. The main goals of the proposal were to prevent war between the two countries and to promote economic cooperation. This marked the start of Western European integration. Two years later, the ECSC was created. The ECSC Treaty, signed in Paris on 18 April 1951 by Belgium, West Germany, France, Italy, Luxembourg and the Netherlands, and which came into force on 23 July 1952, provided for the creation of a Common Assembly (CA) in addition to the powerful High Authority, the ECSC's main institution.[4] However, at the very beginning there was no regulation of how political groups should operate within this Assembly, nor was there any stipulation as to whether the deputies should be grouped according to national or political orientations.

The inaugural session of the CA took place on 10 September 1952, and its rules of procedure came into force one year later on 13 January 1953. The deputies, who were not directly elected but delegated from the national parliaments of the member states, formally joined together in political groupings. The concrete

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[4] H.-V. Schierwater, *Parlament und Hohe Behörde der Montanunion* (Heidelberg: Quelle & Meyer, 1961).

formation of these groups took place through declarations between 20 and 23 June 1953 and were based around three camps: Christian Democrats, a Socialist–Social Democratic grouping, and a group made up of Liberals and Associates ('*apparentés*'). That no further parliamentary groupings were formed was primarily due to how deputies had been appointed by the national parliaments, which limited the political spectrum to the political centre. In the mid-1950s there were only two Members of the CA who did not belong to a group, the Dutch liberal Albertus Hendrikus Korthals, who criticised the liberal group's lack of liberal orientation, and the French parliamentarian Michel Debré, who wanted to make a name for himself independently.[5]

In practice, the CA had relatively little practical influence on integration policy. The 'founding father' of the EU, Jean Monnet,[6] who was largely responsible for the creation of the ECSC in the 1950s, believed in the importance of a 'Europe from above'.[7] He had spoken out against a supranational parliament endowed with real powers.[8] Indeed, he was not the founding father of the EP. In this sense, the long-standing 'democratic deficit' of European integration can be traced back to him. The belated onset of democratisation raised the question early on of whether the EU was really on its way to becoming a fully fledged parliamentary democracy.[9]

At the very beginning, the 78 CA members met in Strasbourg. Although they had no legislative rights and were not directly elected but were delegated by the national parliaments, there was no shortage of activity. As early as 10 March 1953, an ambitious draft treaty for the establishment of a European Political Community (EPC) was approved by an ad hoc meeting of the CA.[10]

The EPC was intended to be an overarching organisation of the ECSC and the European Defence Community and would prepare the ground for a political union under the banner of a federal European state. After its rejection by the French National Assembly on 30 August 1954, the EPC failed in the same way as

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5   J. Mittag, 'Die Politisierung der Gemeinsamen Versammlung der EGKS', *Journal of European Integration History* 17/1 (2011), 14, 18, 20, 25–6.
6   See the section on Monnet in M. Gehler, 'The "Saints" of European Integration: From Visionaries to Architects', in M. Segers and S. van Hecke (eds.), *The Cambridge History of the European Union, Vol. II: European Integration Inside-Out* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press & Assessment 2023), 516–19, 538.
7   Ibid., 519–20.
8   Ibid.
9   F. Decker, 'Die Europäische Union auf dem Weg zur parlamentarischen Demokratie?', *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* 64 (2014).
10   G. Pittoors, *Political Parties, Voter Mobilisation and the 1979 European Elections*, European Parliamentary Research Service Briefing, PE 749.769 (June 2023).

the European Defence Community.[11] Due to this fundamental decision, an early opportunity to democratise and more strongly politicise Western Europe's integration process through parliamentarisation was missed.

The first four presidents of the CA were the Belgian Socialist Paul-Henri Spaak (1952–4), Italian Christian Democrat Alcide De Gasperi (only briefly, in 1954, prior to his death in August), Italian Christian Democrat Giuseppe Pella (1954–6) and German Christian Democrat Hans Furler (1956–8). From the outset, the CA groups operated in a different institutional environment to nation-state parliamentary groups, as no cohesive and hierarchically organised European parties existed to form the foundation of the parliamentary groups. To this day, European deputies are tied to the national parties from which they are nominated or delegated. The social and cultural heterogeneity of the national parties was reflected in the CA and in the internal diversity of the parliamentary groups. However, it was during this early period that the parliamentary groups gradually succeeded in finding their role and expanding it by introducing procedural reforms that allowed them to make use of the CA's political opportunities and resources. Compared to the Council of Ministers and the High Authority, the CA was undoubtedly the weakest body in the ECSC's institutional structure, but, with its own budget and the specific rules of a parliament, it was able to establish itself and become capable of acting. Trade union and Social Democratic representatives were able to represent workers' interests from an early stage and this paved the way for a future European social policy. Thus, despite fluctuations, the groups gained both profile and stability.

Compared to later developments, there was no strong politicisation in the 1950s—the reasons for this are complex but centre on the fact that there was a broad pro-European consensus among the CA's members, which meant that there were no fundamental debates about the necessity, meaning and purpose of integration. The reasons for the, albeit relatively low-level, politicisation of the CA through the formation of transnational parliamentary groupings are complex; however, the autonomy the creation of such groupings provided in matters of rules of procedure was of fundamental importance for the dynamics of the internal organisational structure. The fact that the CA had an 'unrestricted and independent budgetary right'[12] allowed the deputies to establish a much more developed parliamentary-political infrastructure within a shorter

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[11] E. Fursdon, *The European Defence Community: A History* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1980); H.-E. Volkmann and W. Schwengler (eds.), *Die Europäische Verteidigungsgemeinschaft. Stand und Probleme der Forschung* (Boppard: Harald Boldt, 1985); K. Ruane, *The Rise and Fall of the European Defence Community: Anglo-American Relations and the Crisis of European Defense, 1950–55* (New York: St Martin's Press, 2000).

[12] Mittag, 'Die Politisierung der Gemeinsamen Versammlung', 29.

period of time than was the case in other transnational parliamentary assemblies. The extent of the financial resources available was decisive for the weight, profile and self-image of the CA, especially in terms of its relationship to the Council of Ministers (where the member states were represented), the Court of Justice (ECJ) and, last but not least, the High Authority. The parliamentary configuration was strengthened by the political conflicts arising from the election of the president of the CA, the first such instance of political conflict, but also by political–conceptual disputes in the course of the CA's budget debate about what its funds were to be used for. The need for the parliamentarians to address their own draft budget led to debates and reflections on the CA's self-image and future role in the institutional architecture of the ECSC. Despite their differences, a cross-party and cross-national consensus emerged that the CA should continue to develop along the lines of traditional national models of parliamentarism and that it should be given the necessary means, including the instruments of parliamentary groupings. Personnel, rooms and resources were made available; this parliamentary infrastructure could be used by the deputies.[13] Contrary to the predictions of the social science studies of the 1960s with regard to the ideological sphere, genuine parliamentary behaviour[14] developed only gradually. Rather, the convictions of the majority of parliamentarians with regard to the need for European integration, as well as the social and ideological heterogeneity within the groupings, seemed to counterbalance the stronger ideologisation that could be found in the national parliaments.[15]

The developments towards direct elections (1958–79)

The second phase covers a longer period of two decades, and included the introduction of two Community treaties, a treaty amendment and preparations for the first direct elections to the EP. Following the entry into force of the European Economic Community and EURATOM Treaties on 1 January 1958, the competence

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[13] Ibid., 25–8.
[14] P. Reichel, *Bundestagsabgeordnete in europäischen Parlamenten. Zur Soziologie des europäischen Parlamentariers* (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1974); Schierwater, *Parlament und Hohe Behörde der Montanunion.*
[15] Mittag, 'Die Politisierung der Gemeinsamen Versammlung', 19–23, 29–30.

of the CA, which by 1972 consisted of 142 deputies, was extended to cover all three Communities. It held its constituent meeting in Strasbourg on 19 March 1958, now as the 'European Parliamentary Assembly'.[16] From 30 March 1962 the name 'European Parliament' officially applied, although it had been in general use since 1958.[17] The EP was an institutional latecomer, unlike the ECJ, which had existed since the founding of the ECSC; the Commission, which had been installed with the Treaties of Rome; and the Council of Ministers. The Parliament was thus a belated birth in the history of European integration. After its establishment in 1958, a period of familiarisation, experience-gaining and preparation followed, with the arrival of new groupings and quasi-party formations, especially in the run-up to the first direct elections in 1979.[18]

With the Merger Treaty signed in Brussels on 8 April 1965 (which came into force on 1 July 1967), the ECSC, the European Economic Community and EURATOM were merged to form the European Communities, with the same institutions. The EP thus became the common parliament for all three sub-communities.[19]

Between 1973, after the northern enlargement to include Denmark, the UK and Ireland, and 1979, the EP had 198 members.

A draft convention of the EP in 1960[20] was intended to pave the way for general and direct elections; its preparation had started in the late 1950s. In 1958 a subcommittee on direct elections was set up by the Political Affairs Committee, with the work carried out by a working group on European elections. It was chaired by the Belgian socialist and European federalist Fernand Dehousse, a professor of international law and human rights at the University of Liège, who also chaired the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe from 1956 to 1959. The working group met several times in European capitals and conducted discussions within the EP that also involved academic experts, civil society members and national politicians. During these exploratory and preparatory sessions, differences of opinion emerged regarding the necessity of having political parties at the European level. The idea that the establishment of European parties

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[16] *Cvce.eu*, 'The Consultative Assembly'; see also K. Kühlem, 'Konstituierende Sitzung des Europäischen Parlaments', *Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung*.

[17] F. C. Heidelberg, *Das Europäische Parlament* (Baden-Baden: August Lutzeyer, 1959).

[18] For more on the road to the first direct EP elections, see W. Loth, *Europas Einigung. Eine unvollendete Geschichte* (Frankfurt: Campus, 2015, 3rd edn.), 211–18.

[19] 19 European Parliament, 'Merger Treaty'.

[20] Assemblée Parlementaire Européene, *Rapports: Project de Convention et Documents annexes* (February 1960).

should precede the European elections was strongly present early on. Belgian Christian Democrat Pierre Wigny proposed postponing direct elections to the EP until European parties existed that could support the project. According to Wigny, without European parties, there would be little interest in elections and the candidates would be chosen based solely on national considerations. He worried that a Parliament elected in this way would be unrepresentative, get off to a poor start and allow extremist parties to gain traction. But the majority of the EP opposed any postponement. French Member of the European Parliament (MEP) Pierre-Henri Teitgen, a former minister and leader of the Christian Democratic Popular Republican Movement (Mouvement Républicain Populaire), who was a close associate of Robert Schuman and later staunch opponent of Charles de Gaulle, argued in favour of the stimulating effect of elections and warned that there would be no European parties as long as European elections were not held. Teitgen and the staunch European federalist and former French Prime Minister Paul Reynaud were supported by the EP majority in not postponing the elections. In his introductory report on the draft of the Convention—not to be confused with the Constitutional Convention set up in 2002–3, in preparation for the Treaty on a Constitution for Europe— Dehousse challenged the argument that elections were only justified if voters first understood European issues better, arguing that their wider understanding of politics had gradually matured as a result of their participation in public life. He thus compared the holding of EP elections to the setting up of elections in European member states. The French socialist Maurice Faure, Minister for European Institutions in 1958, was convinced that universal and direct elections would mobilise the Europeans of the European Economic Community. This view ultimately prevailed.[21]

The first president of the EP (1960–2) was the German Christian Democrat Hans Furler (of the German Christian Democratic Union/Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands (CDU)), who had previously presided over the CA (1956–8). The politicisation of the EP continued, but not in a linear fashion. In this context, politicisation refers to the internal and external debates on various issues concerning the structure and future of the European Communities. In the EP, this involved the demand for direct elections, the shaping of its competences and the enlargement of the Communities to include new member states. It also included the EP's institutional positioning vis-à-vis the Council of Ministers and the Commission. Thus the politicisation of Europe often went hand in hand with the Europeanisation of politics both within and outside the Communities, if we also take into consideration the development of democracy within the states (see

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[21] Pittoors, *Political Parties*, 1–10, 3–4.

below). The entry of Communists and socialists from France and Italy into the EP in the 1970s led to the stronger ideologisation and politicisation of the debating culture.

It was not until March 1960, when Furler beat Italian Liberal Gaetano Martino to become EP president, that a campaign for the presidency of the EP took place, with elections subsequently occurring every five years. Furler was followed by Martino (1962–4), the Belgian Christian Socialists Jean Duvieusart (1964–5, Christian Social Party/Parti Social Chrétien, PSC) and Victor Leemans (1965–6, PSC), the French Democrat Alain Poher (1966–9, Popular Republican Movement), the Italian Christian Democrat Mario Scelba (1969–71, Christian Democracy/Democrazia Cristiana), the German Social Democrat Walter Behrendt (1971–3, Social Democratic Party of Germany/Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (SPD)), the Dutch Liberal Cornelis Berkhouwer (1973–5, Dutch People's Party for Freedom and Democracy/Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie), the French Socialist Georges Spénale (1975–7, Socialist Party/Parti Socialiste) and the Italian Christian Democrat Emilio Colombo (1977–9, Christian Democracy/Democrazia Cristiana).

Generally speaking, the idea of democracy in Europe gained momentum during the 1970s.[22] The events of the Carnation Revolution in Portugal on 25 April 1974 and the death of the dictator General Francisco Franco in Spain on 20 November 1975 paved the way for further democratisation in these southern European countries and increased their political chances of joining the European Communities.[23] In Greece, a colonel-led military dictatorship that had been in place since 21 April 1967 was overcome on 23 July 1974 and a democratic form of government, led by Konstantinos Karamanlis, was established following elections on 17 November. Parliamentarism on the European institutional level also benefited from these developments by gaining members from these new democracies.[24]

In the context of the détente process, with the signing of the Helsinki Final Act on 1 August 1975, the 'Declaration on European Identity' made at the Copenhagen Summit on 14 December 1973[25] was seen by

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[22] B. Simms, *Kampf um die Vorherrschaft. Eine deutsche Geschichte Europas 1453 bis heute* (Munich: Deutsche Verlagsanstalt, 2014), 458–529.

[23] C. Salm, 'Diffusing Democracy in Europe: The European Parliament and European Community Enlargement Policy 1974–1979', *Journal of European Integration History* 27/1 (2021).

[24] Loth, *Europas Einigung*, 211–18.

[25] *Bulletin der Europäischen Gemeinschaften* 12 (December 1973), 131–4; see also *Cvce.eu*, 'Dokument über die europäische Identität' (Copenhagen, 14 December 1973).

the EP as an opportunity to build its own identity. In a resolution of 10 July 1975, a bottom-up initiative, the EP called for the creation of a European Union in order to determine the 'common destiny' of Europe and to develop a common charter of citizens' rights—thus also introducing practical measures to create a stronger European consciousness.[26]

The debate about the EP's self-image shows its efforts to build a European identity in relation to Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). These efforts were documented in a report on relations between the European Community and the CEE countries that was published on 7 October 1985, named after Vincenzo Bettiza,[27] a Dalmatian–Italian novelist, journalist and MEP. Starting with the 1973 'Declaration on European Identity', which was issued by the nine heads of state and government of the European Communities, and aided by the EP's push for enlargement, which ended with the accession to the EU of the CEE states in 2004 and 2007, a common historical narrative was used to build a European and an EP identity based on the integration experiences of the Western European member states. While this allowed the CEE states to be brought back into the fold after the end of the Cold War, it was only partially successful in helping the CEE countries to find their place in the Union.[28]

Like the European Liberal Democrat and Reform Party (ELDR) and the Party of European Socialists (PES), Europe's Christian Democratic parties played an active role early on in transnational cooperation. What was unique, however, was the variety of different forms and forums in which the Christian Democrats organised their Europe-wide cooperation. The new dynamic that emerged with the EP's growing importance enormously influenced organised European Christian Democracy. The Christian Democratic parliamentary group, the European People's Party (EPP), founded on 28 July 1976 in Luxembourg,[29] not only distinguished itself as a driving force on its way to forming a European party, but was also present in various cooperation forums, which led to tensions within European

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[26] European Communities, Resolution on the granting of special rights to be citizens of the European Community in implementation of the decision of the Paris Summit of December 1974 (point 11 of the final communiqué), OJ C 299/28 (12 December 1977).

[27] V. Bettiza, *Report on Relations Between the European Community and the Countries of Central and Eastern Europe,* Political Affairs Committee (7 October 1985).

[28] E. De Angelis, 'The European Parliament's Identity Discourse and Eastern Europe, 1974–2004', *Journal of European Integration History* 17/1 (2011).

[29] S. van Hecke and T. Jansen, *At Europe's Service. The Origins and Evolution of the European People's Party* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2011); L. Bardi et al., *The European Ambition. The Group of the European People's Party and European Integration* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2020).

Christian Democracy and set limits to its integration. Two of these forums were the European Union of Christian Democrats, founded in 1965 in Taormina, Sicily, as the successor to the Nouvelles Équipes Internationales, which had existed since 1947, and the European Democrat Union, which was established at Schloss Klessheim in Salzburg in 1978. While the European Union of Christian Democrats united the Christian Democratic and Christian Social parties of Western Europe, the members of the European Democrat Union were more conservative and right-wing bourgeois. While most European Community member state parties belonged to the EPP, the French Gaullists and the British Conservatives formed their own parliamentary group, the European Democrats (ED), which set up an alliance with the party.

In 1992 the Confederation of Social Democratic Parties changed its name to the Party of European Socialists, and then to the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D) in 2009. The party gathering the liberal groups was originally (from 1976) the Federation of Liberal and Democratic Parties, becoming ELDR after 1986, before splitting into ELDR and the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) in 2004. As mentioned above, the Group of the EPP and the ED (EPP–ED) existed from 1999 to 2009, created through an alliance of the EPP Group with the ED, a collection of conservative parties that did not have the status of European parties in their own right. The ED had been part of the EP between 1979 and 1992 and before forming its own political group. Through this alliance, the EPP–ED became the largest political group in the EP and retained this status until the 2009 European elections. After the election, the ED members split to form the European Conservatives and Reformists, while the EPP once again formed an independent group.[30]

After this digression on the history of transnational party cooperation between European Christian Democrats and conservative parties, and the political groups in the EP, we now return to our description of the various phases of European parliamentarism. In the light of the perceived hyper-dominance of the

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[30] M. Gehler and W. Kaiser (eds.), *Transnational Party Cooperation of European Christian Democrats: Documents 1945–1965* (Munich: Saur, 2004); E. Gerard and S. van Hecke, *Christian Democratic Parties in Europe Since the End of the Cold War* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2004); H. Meyer, 'Die christlich-demokratische Fraktion des Europäischen Parlaments im Spannungsfeld verschiedener transnationaler Kooperationsformen 1965–1979', *Journal of European Integration History* 17/1 (2011); M. Gehler et al. (eds.), *Transnationale Parteienkooperation der europäischen Christdemokraten und Konservativen 1965–1979* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018).

East–West conflict, the North–South dialogue[31] aimed to draw attention to the problems of what was then known as the Third World—and today is more euphemistically referred to as the Global South—and to offer solutions to its presumed dependency on the high-growth north. The focus on this dialogue was initiated mainly by European Social Democrats such as German Chancellor Willy Brandt, Austrian Chancellor Bruno Kreisky and Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme. In reaction to the decolonisation process and in the context of the existing North–South dialogue, the EP had already intervened in the debate on the shape of the European Communities' development aid policy at the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s. Because it was able to make itself heard in the European Communities' policy arena due to its consensus-based decision-making, it was able to put developing countries' demands on the agenda. In this context, the Socialist grouping played a role, with both its desire to reshape the European Communities' economic cooperation with developing countries and its consensus-based approach to strengthening the moral force of the EP in this policy field.[32]

The Council decision of 21 April 1970 on the replacement of the member states' financial contributions with the Communities' own resources created a system of funding for the European Communities. In the corresponding Treaty of Luxembourg of 22 April 1970, certain budgetary powers were transferred to the EP.[33] The Treaty amending the budgetary provisions, signed by the member states in Brussels on 22 July 1975, again strengthened the budgetary powers of the EP. This gave the EP the power to either reject the Communities' budget or to grant discharge to the Commission for its implementation. These reforms appeared necessary because the European Communities had gained financial autonomy as a result of having their own resources.[34] Following the 1970 Luxembourg and 1975 Brussels Treaties, the EP used its newly acquired budgetary powers to push for the expansion of the European Communities into new policy areas.[35]

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[31] The term used to describe the debates and negotiations between industrialised countries (of the Global North) and developing countries (the Global South), with the goal of creating fairer trade relations and a fair global economic system in order to defuse the conflicts arising between the north and the south.

[32] C. Salm, 'Die Sozialistische Fraktion, das Europäische Parlament und die Entwicklungshilfepolitik der Europäischen Gemeinschaft 1968–1975', *Journal of European Integration History* 17/1 (2011); van Hecke and Jansen, *At Europe's Service*.

[33] European Parliament, 'Development up to the Single European Act'.

[34] Through the Treaty of Brussels and the Treaty Amending Certain Financial Provisions.

[35] S. Kotanidis et al., *Entwicklung der Befugnisse des Europäischen Parlaments*, European Parliamentary Research Service, PE 762.399 (September 2024); W. Kaiser, S. Guerrieri and A. Ripoll Servent, 'The European Parliament and EU Democracy: Lessons From 70 Years of Reforms', European Parliamentary Research Service Briefing, PE 747.121 (April 2023).

The first efforts to harmonise EP electoral law were also made in the 1970s. The Act of 20 September 1976 introducing direct universal suffrage comprised 16 articles and contained various provisions.[36] These regulations laid the foundations for a uniform law for the election of MEPs for the first time. The most important aspect of the harmonisation was the agreement on proportional representation, uniform electoral procedures and the definition of parliamentary terms, meaning the five-year duration of the legislature. The act aimed to promote citizens' participation in European democracy. But furthermore, each member state could continue to highlight domestic incompatibilities and instances where being an MEP was incompatible with being a member of their national parliament. The act also included the allocation of seats among the nine Community states that had been members since 1973. A milestone was also reached on 20 September 1976, when a decision by the European Council empowered migrants from Community member states to vote in local elections, thereby extending their political and social rights.[37]

As has been mentioned before, this act also allowed for general incompatibilities; these concerned, in particular, simultaneous membership of the government of a member state and the holding of political or administrative office in Community institutions.[38]

The EP's growing autonomy and self-awareness (1979–90)

This section covers around a decade and describes the further development of the EP. It questions whether 1979 really marked a turning point in the history of European parliamentarism and how various MEPs and presidents were involved in the changes that increased the profile of the EP.

[36] European Parliament, 'Legislation Governing Elections to the European Parliament', Directorate-General for Research, Working Paper, Political series W 13; see also European Council Decision 76/787/ECSC, EEC, Euratom concerning the election of the representatives of the Assembly by direct universal suffrage, OJ L278 (8 October 1976), 1.

[37] European Council Decision (EU, Euratom) 2018/994 amending the Act concerning the election of the members of the European Parliament by direct universal suffrage annexed to Council Decision 76/787/ECSC, EEC, Euratom, 20 September 1976, OJ L178 (13 July 2018), 1; see also *Politische-Union.de*, 'Akt zur Einführung allgemeiner unmittelbarer Wahlen der Abgeordneten der Versammlung im Anhang zum Beschluß des Rates' (20 September 1976).

[38] European Council Decision 76/787/ECSC.

After ratification by all the member states, the abovementioned act of 20 September 1976 entered into force in July 1978, allowing the first elections to be held on 7 and 10 June 1979. These elections are usually seen as a turning point because, it is argued, it was only after this date that the EP started to take a more active role in the institutional system and have greater self-confidence. However, this argument is questionable, especially since the EP was already very active and self-confident in the policy process in the 1970s—for example, in environmental policy. Members of the EP Committee on Public Health and Environmental Protection had put a lot of skill and energy into addressing the environmental issues on the agenda, influencing policy and feeding citizens' concerns into the European policy process, thereby fulfilling important parliamentary functions and contributing to the legitimacy of European Community policy. Therefore, even before direct elections took place, the EP was very active and effective in the policy process.[39]

After 1979, a generally directly and freely elected EP existed, albeit one without extensive competences—a situation which did not satisfy the deputies. In the run-up to the first direct EP elections, the mocking slogan, 'If you have a grandad, send him to Europe!' was often heard.[40] This was because, according to common opinion, the EP's main function in the 1970s was to provide a pension for former politicians who had been expelled from their national parliaments to ensure that they could no longer cause political damage. Some MEPs, however, retained their national parliamentary seats, because during the first directly elected legislature of the EP this was not considered to cause a conflict of interests.

Many of the delegates were not ready to accept the lack of competences held by the EP. These MEPs were a motley mix of experienced elder statesmen, illustrious political celebrities, activist politicians and aspiring political figures who were yet to attain high state office. Among them were prominent figures: Germany's former Chancellor and German Social Democrat, Willy Brandt; French neo-Gaullist and later Prime Minister, Jacques Chirac; Italian Christian Democrat, Emilio Colombo; Italian socialist and later prime minister, Bettino Craxi; French Socialist and later Commission President, Jacques Delors; and former German Secretary of State for Europe and Social Democrat, Katharina Focke. They also included the former

[39] J.-H. Meyer, 'Green Activism: The European Parliament's Environmental Committee Promoting a European Environmental Policy in the 1970s', *Journal of European Integration History* 17/1 (2011); J.-H. Meyer, 'Pushing for a Greener Europe. The European Parliament and the Institutional Reform of the European Communities 1979–1984', *Journal of European Integration History* 27/1 (2021); see also K. K. Patel and C. Salm, 'The European Parliament During the 1970s and 1980s: An Institution on the Rise?', *Journal of European Integration History* 27/1 (2021).
[40] With its origins in the 1970s, to this day it is not clear who exactly came up with this slogan. It appears without attribution. It mockingly emphasised the alleged insignificance of the EP by referring to the practice of delegating long-serving or retired politicians to Strasbourg in order to give them a rest. The slogan is no longer used due to the increased importance of the EP.

Bavarian Prime Minister, Alfons Goppel; the original Austro-Hungarian heir to the throne, Otto von Habsburg, who was running for the Bavarian Christian Social Union (Christlich-Soziale Union in Bayern); French former minister and mayor of Strasbourg, Pierre Pflimlin; Belgian former Commission President, Jean Rey; and Italian Christian Democrat and former prime minister, Mariano Rumor. The president of the German Confederation of Skilled Crafts, Paul Schnitker; Italian federalist and socialist, Altiero Spinelli; and president of the German Trade Union Confederation, Heinz Oskar Vetter were also among their number. Despite this considerable expertise, at the end of the 1980s, the question arose as to whether the elections to the EP were still second-order.[41] Regardless of this wider question, there was no less commitment from the parliamentarians: these MEPs made stronger pro-European commitments than national parliamentarians. Therefore further activities were developed in order to acquire more competences for the EP and to win a broader electorate.[42]

The main groupings remained the same during these two decades. They changed only slightly in terms of their names, while nationalist groupings were not particularly significant in the composition of the EP between 1958 and 1989. The individual members belonged to the traditional parties of the nation states as mentioned above: the Christian Democrats, Social Democrats and liberals. The evolution of the Christian Democrats and the EPP has been outlined above.[43] The Social Democrats were initially coordinated via a Liaison Bureau of the Socialist Parties of the European Communities, formed in 1957, which was superseded by the Office of the Social Democratic Parties of the European Communities in 1971 and the Confederation of Social Democratic Parties of the European Communities in 1974. The party political developments in Europe in the 1970s and 1980s were also reflected in the EP's composition. Eurocommunism saw itself as a breakaway movement and an emancipation, if not a detachment, from the centralised Communist Party of the Soviet Union, which directed the Communist parties of other countries from Moscow. Strong Eurocommunist parties existed in Italy under Enrico Berlinguer, in France under Georges Marchais and in Spain under Santiago Carrillo. Both Berlinguer and Marchais were members of the EP. The Eurocommunists used

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[41]   This was a rhetorical question: see U. Feist and H.-J. Hofmann, 'Die Europawahl 1989 – eine klassische Nebenwahl? Ergebnisse und Analysen der dritten Direktwahl des Europäischen Parlaments', *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* 43 (1989); see also Patel and Salm, 'The European Parliament During the 1970s and 1980s'.

[42]   Interviews with Godelieve Quisthoudt-Rowohl (CDU), Erika Mann (SPD) and Klaus Hänsch (SPD), in M. Gehler and H. Meyer (eds.), *Deutschland, der Westen und der europäische Parlamentarismus* (Hildesheim: Georg W. Olms, 2012), 341–75; 384–409; 425–64.

[43]   Bardi et al., *The European Ambition.*

the EP as a platform to promote their ideas and spread the idea of Europe's unification in a strongly leftist, socialist sense.[44]

During this period the EP developed into a driver and initiator of the democratisation of the European Communities and later the EU through its constant demands and recurring reforms.[45] In the run-up to the 1979 EP elections, the political parties of the nine member states were required to mobilise the European electorate. The elections also forced the national parties to take clear positions on European issues.[46] The draft Treaty Establishing a European Union was drawn up by the EP's Committee on Institutional Affairs under its rapporteur, the Italian federalist Altiero Spinelli. This was a supranationally orientated draft con-stitution for a European Union. Although it was broadly approved by the majority of MEPs on 14 February 1984, with 237 votes in favour and 31 against, it was not ratified by the member states of the European Community.[47]

An outstanding president of the EP during this period is definitely worth mentioning: Simone Veil is considered a pioneer of European parliamentarism. The influence of both the EP as an institution and its members is illustrated by the example of Veil, who was a member of the EP from 1979 to 1993 and its presi-dent from 1979 to 1982. She mastered both roles, that of the 'European evangelist' and that of a strongly engaged politician for Europe, which made her a 'European champion'.[48] The role of an evangelist is mainly to communicate the basics of a faith to non-believers and people of other faiths in catchy terms and to invite them to convert. She carried out this role with a passionate commitment to the European cause, although she did not declare her passion publicly before the 1979 elections. Her vision was defined by her militant

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[44] See N. Dörr, *Wandel des Kommunismus in Westeuropa: eine Analyse der innerparteilichen Entwicklungen in den Kommunistischen Par-teien Frankreichs, Finnlands und Italiens im Zuge des Eurokommunismus* (Berlin: Metropol Verlag, 2006); F. Di Palma and W. Mueller, *Kom-munismus und Europa. Europapolitik und -vorstellungen europäischer kommunistischer Parteien im Kalten Krieg* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2016); F. Di Palma et al. (eds.), *Der Eurokommunismus. Schlüsseltexte und neue Quellen* (Berlin: Metropol Verlag, 2024); see also W. Kaiser, 'Counter-Narratives in the European Parliament: Far Left and Far Right Groups and European "Union" in the 1980s', *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 30/1 (2022).

[45] W. Kaiser, *Shaping European Union: The European Parliament and Institutional Reform 1979–1989*, European Parliamentary Research Service, PE 630.271 (Brussels, November 2018).

[46] Pittoors, *Political Parties*.

[47] W. Kaiser, 'Towards a European Constitution? The European Parliament and the Institutional Reform of the European Communities 1979–84', *Journal of European Integration History* 27/1 (2021); Kaiser, Guerrieri and Ripoll Servent, 'The European Parliament and EU Democracy'.

[48] A. É. Gfeller, 'Une militante du parlementarism européen: Simone Veil', *Journal of European Integration History* 17/1 (2011), 62–3.

commitment to human rights and public health. Veil's parliamentary commitment helped to Europeanise these two issues while elevating the importance of the EP.[49]

Veil was succeeded by the Dutch Social Democrat Piet Dankert (1982–4), the French Christian Democrat Pierre Pflimlin (1984–7, EPP), and the British farmer and Conservative Sir Henry Plumb (1987–9, ED).

The EP's increased politicisation and institutionalisation (1991–9)

The post-1979 phase of emancipation, self-discovery and growing understanding for the EP was followed by the negotiations for the Treaty of Maastricht, which gave the Parliament considerable co-decision rights. From then on, the EP essentially had authority over *seven factors* that impacted its competences: budget, legislation, control, election, appointment, petition acceptance and assent. The EP has the right to approve the EU budget. It reviews and adopts the budget plan, thereby influencing the EU's financial resources. The EP is responsible for legislation, together with the Council of the EU. The EP can adopt, amend or reject legislative proposals, making it a co-decision-maker in the legislative process. The EP also exercises control over the other EU institutions, in particular the Commission, which it can hold to account and question, including by setting up committees of inquiry. The EP is elected every five years. It must approve the appointment of the Commission, which is confirmed by the EP on the proposal of the member states. It examines petitions from EU citizens and forwards them to the appropriate bodies. In cases of important decisions, such as international agreements or amendments to the EU treaties, the EP's consent is required. All of this shows that the EP plays a central role in important areas of the EU.[50]

Following a proposal for an act to introduce a uniform system for the election of its members on 10 March 1992—which was not, however, accepted by the member states—the EP revisited the issue in the De

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49 Ibid.
50 D. Dialer, A. Maurer and M. Richter, *Handbuch zum Europäischen Parlament* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2015).

Gucht report on 10 June 1992, named after the Flemish liberal Karel de Gucht. In March 1993 the EP voted in favour of introducing a uniform electoral system based on proportional representation with a 5% minimum threshold,[51] meaning that campaigning parties would have to receive at least this proportion of votes in a member state in order to enter the EP. The proportional representation system was already being used in 14 member states, while the UK used a system of majority voting with a single ballot.[52]

Since the Council had not adopted the law before the entry into force of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) in 1992, it was required, according to Article 138(3) of the TEU, to adopt the relevant provisions unanimously, after obtaining the assent of the EP by a majority of its component members, and to recommend their adoption to the member states in accordance with their respective constitutional requirements. The Council laid down detailed rules for the implementation of the provisions on 6 December 1993 in the form of a directive. It included arrangements for the exercise of the right to vote and stand as a candidate in elections to the EP for citizens of the EU residing in a member state of which they were not nationals. The directive was written in alignment with the spirit of subsidiarity and proportionality: the Council laid down detailed rules, but the content was limited to what was strictly necessary to achieve the objective.[53] The provisions of this directive did not affect national provisions for the rights of nationals of the member state concerned residing outside of its electoral territory to vote and to stand as candidates. The directive's primary objective was to abolish the nationality conditions currently imposed in most member states on the exercise of these rights. All EU member states now adopted the amendments to the right to vote and to stand as a candidate necessary to implement the Community directive.[54]

Since the entry into force of the TEU, the EP has shared legislative powers with the Council. The use of recommendations, decisions, directives and regulations was adopted by the EP, and the Parliament and the Council are on an equal footing when it comes to legislation. During either of its two readings, the EP can propose amendments to a law proposed by the Commission. If there is still dissent between the Com-

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[51] European Council Directive 93/109/EC laying down detailed arrangements for the exercise of the right to vote and stand as a candidate in elections to the European Parliament for citizens of the Union residing in a member state of which they are not nationals', OJ L329 (6 December 1993), 34.

[52] European Parliament, 'Legislation Governing Elections to the European Parliament', Directorate-General for Research, Working Paper, Political series W 13.

[53] European Council Directive 93/109/EC.

[54] Ibid.

mission and the Council of the EU by the time of the third reading, a conciliation committee must be called in to help reach an agreement. In order to shorten this time-consuming process, since the entry into force of the Maastricht Treaty, an informal trilogue procedure also involving the EP has developed to ensure that laws are passed quickly, and this process is applied to the majority of laws.[55]

The sovereign right of every Parliament is the right to approve the budget. Since 1993 the EP and the Council have jointly agreed the EU budget and, therefore, the multiannual financial framework. In this process, the Commission submits a draft budget. Once the EP and the Council have approved it, it enters into force, with the inclusion of any changes that have been agreed upon. In the case of a disagreement, a complicated two-way consultation and coordination procedure has to be set in motion. If an agreement cannot be reached, a mediation committee is set up, and its negotiations usually lead to a settlement. Furthermore, since 1993 the EP has also had supervisory oversight of the actions of the Commission and the Council. As a result, committees of inquiry can be established, with actions brought before the ECJ. To assist in the exercise of this right, the Commission, the Council and the European Central Bank (ECB) are required to report regularly to the EP. The introduction of this supervision marked the beginning of a phase of intensified politicisation and profiling from 1991 to 1999, which led to a polarisation that reached its first climax with the forced resignation of Jacques Santer's Commission because of irregularities, primarily due to the misconduct of the French Commissioner Édith Cresson.[56]

In this period, the Spanish socialist EP President Enrique Barón Crespo (1989–92) was followed by German Christian Democrat Egon A. Klepsch (1992–4), German Social Democrat Klaus Hänsch (1994–7) and then by Spanish Christian Democrat José Maria Gil-Robles (1997–9, EPP). At this time, the EP took on another role as well—appointing the Commission. It also began to elect the Commission president, although the Council retains the right of nomination. The latter, however, is not permitted to ignore the result of the preceding elections to the EP and thus has to recognise the strongest parliamentary grouping in its nomination. Before the commissioners are appointed, they are subject to a hearing procedure in the EP. The Parliament also took on the appointment of the European ombudsman, who investigates citizens' complaints about maladministration by the EU institutions. Since every citizen of the EU has the right to petition

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[55] A. Maurer, 'The Legislative Powers and Impact of the European Parliament', *Journal of Common Market Studies* 41/2 (2003).
[56] M. Gehler, 'Jacques Santer (1995–1999): President of the Commission in Times of Transition', in J. van der Harst and G. Voerman (eds.), *An Impossible Job? The Presidents of the European Commission 1958–2014* (London: John Harper, 2015), 215–18.

the EP, these petitions also have to be dealt with by a corresponding committee. In this period, the EP also played a role as a foreign policy actor with regard to inter-parliamentarism, common trade and development policy, and in the areas of human rights, security, defence and election observation. Last but not least, the EP also had to give its consent to the accession of new member states. The 751-member body now had a seat and place of work in three cities: Brussels, Strasbourg and Luxembourg. With the entry into force of the Maastricht Treaty, the EP had become more important than the national parliaments. National parliaments only pass laws for their respective countries, while EU legal acts are effective in 27 countries at the same time. The EP decides on issues that transcend national borders. Its decisions have a structural, economic and social impact throughout Europe. On average, the EP adopts more legislative acts than the national parliaments. More than just a forum for debate, as it had been in the 1970s and 1980s, by the 1990s the EP had firmly established itself in the EU's institutional structure, alongside the Commission and the Council, as a decisive co-shaper of legislation. It thus represented something new among democracies, namely a European supranational parliamentarism.[57]

The achievement of institutional equality with the Council (1999–2009)

The emancipatory phase for the EP was followed by another phase of assertiveness vis-à-vis the other major EU institutions. In the 1999 European elections, the parties of the EPP won a relative majority of seats and became the strongest parliamentary grouping since the introduction of direct elections. Successive treaties from Amsterdam to Nice[58] and Lisbon,[59] adopted from 1999 to 2009, marked the EP's breakthrough

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[57] U. Tulli, 'The European Parliament in EC External Relations, From the Inception of European Political Cooperation to the Single European Act', *Journal of European Integration History* 27/1 (2021); A. Maurer and D. Nickel (eds.), *Das Europäische Parlament. Supranationalität, Repräsentation und Legitimation* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2005).

[58] A. Kreppel, *The European Parliament and Supranational Party System* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); A. Maurer and W. Wessels, *Das Europäische Parlament nach Amsterdam und Nizza: Akteur, Arena oder Alibi* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2003).

[59] S. Hölscheidt, 'Formale Aufwertung – geringe Schubkraft: die Rolle der nationalen Parlamente gemäß dem Lissaboner Vertrag', *Integration* 31/3 (2008); J. Kreuz and J. Leinen, 'Herausforderung partizipative europäische Demokratie: Zivilgesellschaft und direkte Demokratie im Vertrag von Lissabon', *Integration* 31/3 (2008); M. Reiterer, 'Der Vertrag von Lissabon: Neue Institutionen und die Stärkung des Europäischen Parlaments', *Schweizerische Zeitschrift für internationales und europäisches Recht* 1 (2011).

to equality and full establishment in the EU's institutional structure. The EP became an actor on an equal footing with the Commission and the Council of the EU.[60]

In 1999 the French Centre of Social Democrats (Centre des démocrates sociaux) politician Nicole Fontaine (1999–2002, EPP) became president of the EP, with 306 out of 555 valid votes, beating the Portuguese Socialist Mário Soares (200 votes) and the Finnish Green MEP Heidi Hautala (40 votes). In accordance with an agreement reached with the Liberal Group, Fontaine was succeeded as EP president in January 2002 by Irish liberal MEP Pat Cox (Progressive Democrats). He was followed by Josep Borell Fontelles (2004–7, PES), who represented the PSC and later served as EU high representative for foreign affairs and security policy and vice-president of the von der Leyen Commission from 2019 to 2024.

The EP was involved in the adoption of the Berlin Declaration of 2007, which was strongly supported by the former EPP–ED group leader and EP President Hans-Gert Pöttering (2007–9) during the German Council Presidency. The Berlin Declaration was a landmark document adopted by the EU heads of state and government on the fiftieth anniversary of the signing of the Treaty of Rome, on 25 March 2007. The document was primarily of symbolic importance, serving to honour European unification and emphasise the importance of the Union. While its main points consisted of a reaffirmation of European values, the continuation of the EU as a political and economic project, and its strengthening, above all the emphasis was on ratifying the Treaty of Lisbon to further develop the Union.[61]

This document was therefore a call to further deepen and strengthen European unification. It ultimately served to overcome the ratification crisis that had followed the failure to implement the Constitutional Treaty of 2005 due to negative referendums in France and the Netherlands, and the hurdle of the second Irish referendum in 2008 on the Lisbon Treaty. Pöttering, as EP president, played a decisive role in this process, supporting it with diplomatic skill and political conviction.

The Charter of Fundamental Rights was the result of a separate convention in 1999–2000 under the leadership of Roman Herzog, a German Christian Democrat and former federal president, who was the first

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[60] J. Mittag, *30 Jahre Direktwahlen zum Europäischen Parlament. Europawahlen und EP in der Analyse* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2011); M. Schulz, *Der gefesselte Riese. Europas letzte Chance* (Berlin: Rowohlt, 2013); H. G. Pöttering, *Wir sind zu unserem Glück vereint. Mein europäischer Weg* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2014).
[61] EU, 'Declaration on the Occasion of the 50th Anniversary of the Signature of the Treaties of Rome' (25 March 2007).

to define fundamental and human rights in the EU. It was also signed within the framework of the EP due to Pöttering's encouragement. His successful campaign to ratify the Treaty of Lisbon against all odds was a decisive factor in the signing of the Charter. Despite his considerable efforts, however, it proved impossible to prevent the British Conservatives from leaving the joint EPP–ED group under Prime Minister David Cameron in 2009.[62] Pöttering later became the father of the House of European History in Brussels.[63]

EP President Jerzy Buzek (2009–12) symbolised the successful integration of democratic CEE into the West. His ability to listen to and integrate dissenting opinions had laid the basis for Solidarnosc's successful resistance against Poland's Communist dictatorship.[64] The inclusion of many new CEE and Baltic country representatives in the EP was a unique and successful feat of European parliamentary integration. On the basis of their historical experiences, this process also strengthened anti-Communist, pro-transatlantic and therefore also Russia-critical or anti-Russian tendencies within the EP.

The new start with Lisbon: factionalism, remembrance and the *Spitzenkandidaten* model (2009–19)

This period, which saw the development of the shoots of populism and the emergence of a large number of new campaigning parties and political groups in the EP, is characterised by the entry into force of the TEU and the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (the Lisbon Treaty) on 1 December 2009 and the introduction of the *Spitzenkandidaten* model. For some time, an almost permanent, pragmatically orientated grand coalition had existed between the Socialists/Social Democrats and the Christian Democrats,

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[62]   M. Gehler and M. Gonschor, *A European Conscience. A Biography of Hans-Gert Pöttering* (London: John Harper, 2022), 333–5, 583–5.
[63]   Gehler and Gonschor, *A European Conscience*, 431–2; see also W. Kaiser, 'Limits of Cultural Engineering: Actors and Narratives in the European Parliament's House of European History Project', *Journal of Common Market Studies* 55/3 (2017).
[64]   Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies, *Liber Amicorum. Making Europe Happen. The Politics and Impact of Klaus Welle – Essays on His 60th Birthday.*

which regularly alternated holding the EP presidency. This grand coalition system resulted in long-lasting, stable majorities and was characterised by compromises that ensured the Parliament functioned. This grand coalition was increasingly weakened and found its composition changing as a result of the emergence of new political groups and their diversification, as well as the rise of populist parties due to the crises that occurred in the wake of the treaty ratifications—surrounding the banking and financial markets, the rescue packages, state debts, and the growth and competition of EU member states in the period 2009–14. The EU, badly shaken by this growing and complex crisis, suffered less from a democratic deficit than from a decision-making deficit. This was not so much due to the EP as it was to the member states, which only gradually allowed their national competences to be wrested from them.

The EP president now also took part in the summits of the European Council, with this becoming common practice during the presidencies of Hans-Gert Pöttering and Martin Schulz. Pöttering was followed by the Polish conservative–liberal Jerzy Buzek (2009–12, EPP) and the German Social Democrat Martin Schulz (2012–14, 2014–17, PES). Schulz's tenure was interrupted on an interim basis by Gianni Pittella from the S&D (2014) and he was then followed by Forward Italy (Forza Italia) politician Antonio Tajani (2017–19, EPP), Italian David Sassoli from the Democratic Party (Partito Democratico) (2019–22, PES) and the Maltese Nationalist Party (Partit Nazzjonalista) politician Roberta Metsola (since 2022, EPP). Schulz claimed that the idea of Europe 'without alternative' is false, 'because everything in life has alternatives and these would mean renationalisation, less cooperation, less prosperity, less security'.[65]

During this period, the EP took on the responsibility for remembering Europe's history by commemorating the victims of the Holocaust and totalitarianism, be it in the form of fascism, National Socialism or Stalinism. The 27 January, the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz concentration camp in 1945, became Holocaust Remembrance Day, and the 23 August, the anniversary of the signing of the Hitler–Stalin Pact in 1939, became the 'European Day of Remembrance for victims of all totalitarianisms and authoritarian regimes'.[66]

In Germany, a 3% threshold had been introduced for the European elections. This meant that a party had to receive at least this percentage of second votes in order to enter the EP. This threshold was introduced to

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[65] See 'Vorwort des Parlamentspräsidenten', in Dialer, Maurer and Richter, *Handbuch zum Europäischen Parlament*, 15.
[66] W. Kaiser, 'European Day of Remembrance for Victims of All Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes', European Parliamentary Research Service, PE 733.610 (August 2022).

limit the number of parties in the Parliament and to enable the formation of a stable political system. For the 2014 EP elections, national parties had thus joined together to form European parties in order to meet the threshold.[67] However, following complaints from smaller German parties, the Federal Constitutional Court in Karlsruhe ruled that, in the opinion of the judges, this threshold clause violated the principle of equal opportunity for parties.[68] The 3% clause was thus removed, as it was no longer considered compatible with the Basic Law (see also below).[69]

Also for the first time at the 2014 European elections, most European parties named EU-wide lead candidates (or '*Spitzenkandidaten*' as the German expression is used with reference to the EU) for the European Commission presidency. Although the European Council has the formal right to propose candidates, in accordance with Article 17(7) of the TEU this must take into account the results of the EP elections. Since the EP ultimately elects the European Commission, it has the final say. Efforts were made in the EP to make this *Spitzenkandidaten* principle binding for future EU elections.[70] Additional recommendations included that all EU citizens over the age of 16 should be able to vote, including if living abroad, and that a national or regional minimum EP entry threshold of 3% to 5% should be applied. Ultimately, however, no majority in the EP could be established for the introduction of transnational lists, despite them having been under discussion for some time. The proposed resolutions require the approval of the European Council for the changes to come into force. So far these initiatives have been rejected by the European Council, with the exception of the introduction of an obligatory threshold clause of 2% to 5%.[71]

The *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure was applied as a new method of linking the election of the Commission president to the outcome of the EP elections, whereby each major European political party was to nominate its candidate for the office of Commission president before the parliamentary elections. The lead candidate of the largest party or the one who could obtain the support of a majority coalition would then be proposed

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[67]   European Commission, *Report on the 2014 European Parliament Elections*.
[68]   *Zeit Online*, 'Dreiprozenthürde bei Europawahl ist verfassungswidrig', 26 February 2014.
[69]   The 3% threshold discussed for the 2014 European elections was deemed incompatible with the German constitution. See G. Strohmeier, 'Funktioniert Weimar auf EU-Ebene? Reflektionen zur Europawahl 2014 ohne Sperrklausel', *Zeitschrift für Politik* 61/3 (2014).
[70]   See the Consolidated Treaty on European Union.
[71]   European Parliament, 'The European Parliament: Electoral Procedures'.

by the European Council to the EP for election as Commission president. This procedure was first used in 2014, although its legitimacy was questioned and disputed by some members of the European Council.[72]

Klaus Welle can be regarded as a key European parliamentary strategist and the conceptual mastermind of the EPP.[73] As EP secretary general, he developed the idea of the parliamentary groups nominating lead candidates for the upcoming EP elections.[74] This was intended to make the EP more appealing to the public and increase the motivation to vote in the elections to this unique supranational institution. The biggest parliamentary groups, the EPP and the PES, announced their nominations of candidates for the post of Commission president ahead of the 2014 European elections. Jean-Claude Juncker[75] from the EPP and Martin Schulz[76] from the PES had the best prospects. Juncker, as former prime minister of Luxembourg (1995–2013) and head of the Eurogroup (2005–13) prevailed over former EU Internal Market Commissioner Michel Barnier at the EPP Congress on 6 March in Dublin.[77]

While the British and Hungarian Prime Ministers David Cameron and Viktor Orbán voted against Juncker's nomination as the EPP's lead candidate, Klaus Welle (EPP) supported him. After the EP elections (which Schulz lost), Welle and Schulz were both prepared to support the nomination of the election winner, as both had a strong desire to advance European integration with this proactive European candidate from Luxembourg. In the end there was a broad majority across the political spectrum for the election of Juncker as Commission president, ensuring the success of the 2014 *Spitzenkandidaten* process.[78]

During his term as Commission president (2014–19), Luxembourg's Christian Democrat Jean-Claude Juncker (EPP) spoke of a 'polycrisis', meaning the emergence and interaction of several crises, sometimes

[72]   E. Brok, 'Factsheet: The Story of the "Spitzenkandidaten"' (Brussels, June 2014); M. Ceron, T. Christiansen and D. G. Dimitrakopoulos, *The Politicisation of the European Commission's Presidency. Spitzenkandidaten and Beyond* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024).

[73]   See his career and objectives: K. Welle, 'Europäischer Parlamentarismus aus gelebter Praxis', in M. Gehler et al. (eds.), *Geschichte Europas. Seine Desintegration und Integration schreiben* (Hildesheim: Georg W. Olms, 2023); K. Welle, 'Wir haben Europa nicht gebaut, um es den Sozialisten zu überlassen', in M. Gehler et al. (eds.), *Geschichte Europas. Seine Desintegration und Integration schreiben* (Hildesheim: Georg W. Olms, 2023).

[74]   W. Mussler, 'Das Gespenst der deutschen Dominanz', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 2 January 2015.

[75]   M. Kopeinig, *Jean-Claude Juncker. Der Europäer* (Vienna: Czernin, 2004).

[76]   M. Kopeinig, *Martin Schulz. Vom Buchhändler zum Mann für Europa. Die Biografie* (Vienna: Czernin, 2016).

[77]   M. Kaeding and N. Switek (eds.), *Die Europawahl 2014. Spitzenkandidaten, Protestparteien, Nichtwähler* (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2015).

[78]   Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies, *Liber Amicorum*, 433.

in rapid succession and sometimes having simultaneous interdependencies, for example, the intensified immigration in the wake of the 'refugee crisis' of 2015.[79]

The MEPs re-elected Schulz as EP president for another two-and-a-half-year term. He won 409 out of 612 valid votes cast in the first ballot. Schulz was the first president in the history of the EP to be re-elected for a second term and led the Parliament until January 2017.[80]

Despite this personalisation of the election campaign with lead candidates,[81] the result in terms of voter turnout was moderate. The effect was limited to a few core EU countries. A finding from the previous elections in 2009 was confirmed: while the European population was aware of the EP, they—erroneously—classified it as having too little relevance.[82] The fact was that in the context of the still-present grand coalition between the EPP and the PES, the differences in the profiles of the lead candidates were barely recognisable to voters, especially as they were allies. This had caused some problems during the campaign. However, this first historic attempt was a remarkable innovation in the history of the EP.

The EPP's continued success was also due to its willingness and openness to cooperate with right-wing national conservative parties such as Forward Italy. Berlusconi's candidate, Antonio Tajani, became the first Italian EP president (2017–19) since the introduction of direct elections. He ensured broad and reliable cooperation between the political groupings, respect for parliamentarians, and a new focus on EU citizens and their demands.[83]

Generally there is no uniform electoral system for European elections. Apart from the basic principles of universal, free, direct and secret elections in all EU countries, the member states organise European elections differently. There are considerable differences with regard to threshold clauses, with around half of the member states not imposing a percentage threshold. In the remaining states, the threshold varies. The EP

79   R. Stüwe and T. Panayotopoulos (eds.), *The Juncker Commission. Politicizing EU Policies* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2020).
80   European Parliament, 'Martin Schulz Re-Elected President of the European Parliament', Press Release, 1 July 2014.
81   D. Göler and M. Jopp, 'Die Europawahl 2014 und das Konzept der Spitzenkandidaten – ein Kommentar', *Integration* 37/2 (2014).
82   O. Niedermayer, 'Das Europäische Parlament in der öffentlichen Meinung – bekannt aber wenig relevant', *Integration* 32/3 (2009).
83   Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies, *Liber Amicorum*, 433.

had long pushed for the proposal of an electoral reform that would introduce a binding threshold clause for all larger EU states in the future.[84]

Since the first EP elections in 1979, electoral laws have been gradually adopted to better reflect the principles of democracy. However, the harmonisation of electoral systems has never been fully achieved, leading to the differences that exist today. The most important reforms and changes mainly took place in the 1990s and 2000s due to the enlargement to include the CEE countries, with the aim of improving transparency, fairness and representativeness. The last major reform of electoral law was thus carried out by the EU in 2018 with the aim of further harmonising electoral procedures and strengthening democratic legitimacy.[85]

In June 2018 the Council of the EU agreed to change the EU electoral law and amend the 1976 Electoral Act, which had last been amended in 2002. The amendments included a mandatory 2% threshold for countries with more than 35 seats and rules to prevent voters from voting in multiple countries.[86] While the Act was adopted by the Council following the approval of the EP in July 2018, not all member states had ratified it before the 2019 elections, so these were held under the old rules. On 3 May 2022, the EP voted in favour of proposing a new electoral law that would enable the election of 28 seats from transnational lists. However, this reform was not unanimously approved by the Council of the EU before the 2024 elections.[87] To emphasise the importance of the reform, the pro-European Volt Europa put forward a symbolic transnational list alongside its lead candidates for the election.[88] Volt Europa was founded in 2017 as a left–liberal and pro-European movement. It is registered as a party in several European countries. Since the 2024 election, Volt has been represented in the EP by five MEPs—three from Germany and two from the Netherlands.

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[84] In the 2024 European elections, for example, no threshold clause was introduced in Germany. A threshold clause is to be reintroduced in the upcoming 2029 European elections, which is to be set at a minimum of 2%. See Landeszentrale für politische Bildung Baden-Württemburg, 'Sperrklausel bei Europawahlen: 3,5-Prozent-Hürde für größere EU-Staaten?'.

[85] European Parliament and Council Regulation (EU, Euratom) 2018/673 amending Regulation (EU, Euratom) no. 1141/2014 on the statute and funding of European political parties and European political foundations, OJ L114 (3 May 2018), 1.

[86] European Council Decision 2002/772/EC amending the Act concerning the election of the representatives of the European Parliament by direct universal suffrage, annexed to Decision 76/787/ECSC, EEC, Euratom, OJ L283 (21 October 2002), 1.

[87] Council of the EU, 'European Parliament Elections: Council Reaches Agreement on a Series of Measures to Modernise EU Electoral Law', Press Release, 7 June 2018; European Council Decision (EU, Euratom) 2018/994 amending the Act concerning the election of the members of the European Parliament by direct universal suffrage annexed to Council Decision 76/787/ECSC, EEC, Euratom, 20 September 1976, OJ L178 (13 July 2018), 1; E. Vasques, 'EU-Wahlrechtsreform: Wie sich die Mitgliedsstaaten dagegen stemmen', *Euractiv*, 5 July 2023.

[88] *Volt Europa*, 'Volt Elects European Lead Candidates and Transnational List', 7 April 2024.

The period from 2014 to 2019 can be characterised by two major and asymmetrical crises, the management of which affected the member states very differently. The consequences of the alleged 'euro crisis' (2008–12) threatened to cause a split between the northern and the southern euro countries, and thus represented a medium- to long-term threat to the eurozone. The phrase 'euro crisis' was and is a misleading term, because the currency itself was not in crisis, but the stability of the union of the euro member states was called into question due to national budget and debt crises. The 'refugee crisis' (2015) highlighted fundamental differences between the CEE member states and those of Western Europe regarding the acceptance of people into Europe from different cultural and religious backgrounds.

In both cases, the EP was called upon to act. In the first case, the majority of representatives were willing to support the sustainable stabilisation and consolidation of the eurozone by supporting the actions of the ECB under President Mario Draghi and the European Stability Mechanism under Managing Director Klaus Regling.[89] In the second case, the helplessness of the EP, and ultimately its ineffectiveness in solving the migration crisis, was demonstrated.

The EP in times of populism and growing complexity (2019–24)

The *Spitzenkandidaten* model was used again in 2019, with Manfred Weber (EPP), Frans Timmermans (PES), Margrethe Vestager (ALDE), Jan Zahradil (Alliance of Conservatives and Reformists in Europe) and Ska Keller (European Green Party), among others, joining the fray on behalf of their parties. The elections were characterised by an increased onslaught from anti-European, anti-euro and Europe-critical populist parties from a wide range of ideological camps. Manfred Weber, the lead candidate of the EPP, despite winning a plurality of the votes, did not get the chance to become Commission president, as the MEPs could

[89] K. Regling, 'Wenn wir den Euro nicht geschaffen hätten, dann hätten wir noch viel, viel mehr Krisen gehabt', in M. Gehler, J. Algermissen and S. Ziethen (eds.), *Economic and Monetary Union: Lessons After a Quarter of a Century. Personal Reflections* (Hildesheim: Universitätsverlag, 2024).

not agree on his nomination and refused to give him majority support. This obvious disagreement led to the disempowerment of the EP. The heads of state and government, first and foremost German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Emmanuel Macron, took advantage of this situation relatively quickly. In back-room talks, they agreed on the appointment of German Defence Minister Ursula von der Leyen, who had not even been a candidate in the election, as the new Commission president, in exchange for Merkel's approval of Christine Lagarde as Draghi's successor as ECB president. This deal was a self-inflicted defeat for the EP and left voters disappointed and irritated, as they were deprived of their choice of candidate. With von der Leyen's nomination, the European electoral vote was ignored and disregarded due to the unique weakness, de facto indecision and practical disunity of the EP groups, which could not agree on the appointment of electoral winner and EPP Group leader Weber.

On 16 July 2019, after a sophisticated and comprehensive speech that addressed all political camps, von der Leyen was appointed by the EP as the first female president of the Commission. She was elected by the narrowest of margins, gaining just 22 votes more than needed: 733 votes were cast, of which one was invalid, with 383 MEPs voting for her, 327 against and 22 abstaining. On 27 November the EP confirmed her proposed Commission as a whole, with just under 65% of the votes cast in her favour.[90]

In this period right-wing populism became more radical and more intense in some CEE countries. This was clearly demonstrated by the rise of Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and his right-wing populist party, Fidesz – Hungarian Civic Alliance (Fidesz). The EPP and its key members found Fidesz to be very aggressive, provocative and damaging to the EPP's image. After a panel of wise men, consisting of former EP President Hans-Gert Pöttering, Belgian former European Council president Herman van Rompuy and former Austrian chancellor Wolfgang Schüssel, had attempted and failed to reach a compromise with Fidesz, the EPP ultimately saw no alternative but to recommend the withdrawal of the Hungarian right-wing party from the EPP, which the latter promptly acted upon.[91]

The limits of the EP's influence were once again made clear during this period. It did not play a major role in the Covid-19 pandemic; rather, the Commission, which lacked transparency, took the lead in the

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[90] European Parliament, 'Parliament Elects Ursula von der Leyen as First Female Commission President', Press Release, 16 July 2019; see also H. Suder and L. Wittenberg (eds.), *The von der Leyen Commission. Geopolitical Commission Under the Pressure of Crises* (2019–2024) (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2024).
[91] Gehler and Gonschor, *A European Conscience*, 565–70; see also K.-O. Lang and N. von Ondarza, 'Die Zukunft von Fidesz jenseits der EVP', *SWP-Aktuell* 32 (15 April 2021).

procurement of vaccines.[92] In the context of passing a common asylum law in line with the reform of the Schengen system (Dublin II), the EP was also unable to assert itself vis-à-vis the European Council and the Council of the EU, and thus vis-à-vis the member states, for long stretches of the legislative period. A new asylum pact was finally achieved in 2024 with the consent of the EP, although some aspects of migration policy have still not been addressed.

In the field of European foreign and neighbourhood policy, particularly with regard to the EU's Eastern Partnership, the EP responded in a proactive and largely unified manner. The EP's expression of solidarity and willingness to support Ukraine in its struggle and defensive war against the Russian aggressor have been remarkable. EP President Roberta Metsola's personal courage is also notable, as she was the first president of a European institution to visit Kyiv in wartime.[93]

The EP also clearly backed the Conference on the Future of Europe, organised by citizens and civil society, which concluded its work in May 2022. Its results went largely unnoticed by the public and were ignored by the heads of state and government in the shadow of the fading pandemic and, above all, the outbreak of Russia's all-out war in Ukraine. Among the 49 far-reaching proposals was the introduction of transnational lists for EP elections.[94]

Furthermore, the EP successfully showed its teeth by pursuing its anti-corruption programme and punishing violations of the rule of law in Hungary by referring matters to the ECJ. The Orbán government had to react to this as a result of the pressure exerted by the Commission's appeal to Luxembourg. The Commission referred the Hungarian case to the ECJ with the support and majority approval of the EP. Previously, in the light of a corruption scandal in the EP ('Qatargate'),[95] the hard-right Fidesz leader had argued that the EP's anti-corruption measures had 'failed miserably' and stated: 'If we want to restore public trust, it is time to abolish the European Parliament'.[96] He failed to mention that this would not be legally possible.

[92]   *Cicero*, 'Gericht zu Covid-Impfstoff: EU-Kommission gab zu wenig Infos', 17 July 2024.
[93]   Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies, *Liber Amicorum*, 343; European Parliament, 'President Metsola in Ukraine on Europe Day', Press Release, 9 May 2024.
[94]   Kaiser, Guerrieri and Ripoll Servent, 'The European Parliament and EU Democracy'.
[95]   See the article by Green MEP, Daniel Freund: D. Freund, 'Anti-Corruption: Hungary's Prime Minister in the European Parliament: Viktor Orban Comes Under Intense Fire', *DanielFreund.eu*, 9 October 2024.
[96]   T. Fiedler, 'Abolish the EU Parliament, Viktor Orbán Demands. Hungary's PM Trolls Brussels Again', *Politico*, 22 December 2022.

The 2024 elections were the tenth direct elections to the EP and took place on 6–9 June 2024 in the 27 EU member states. The polls saw 720 MEPs elected—15 more than in the previous elections, but 31 fewer than before the UK's withdrawal. The EPP gained seats (up 11 seats), thus defending its position as the largest group. The S&D (down 2 seats) remained the second-largest group. The liberal Renew Europe (down 24 seats) and the Greens/European Free Alliance (down 18 seats) both suffered heavy losses. Right-wing parties made gains: nationalists or right-wing populists (Patriots for Europe) received 84 seats (up 35); the national conservatives (European Conservatives and Reformists) won 78 (up 9); and the new far-right grouping (Europe of Sovereign Nations) took 25. The newly elected Parliament was constituted on 16 July 2024.[97]

Von der Leyen's re-election as Commission president in 2024 was more decisive than her first appointment, with 401 votes in favour and 284 against, with 15 abstentions. The result was welcomed by the EPP, the S&D and Renew Europe. A closer and more critical look at the results reveals that not all members of the Christian Democrats, Social Democrats and Liberals supported her. The two right-wing populist groups, Patriots for Europe (including the Italian Northern League/Lega Nord) and the Europe of Sovereign Nations, also voted against her election.[98]

Mapping the development of European parliamentarism: key criteria

Returning to the criteria mentioned at the beginning of this paper, the following conclusions can be drawn.

Treaties

The Single European Act, reforming the Rome Treaties and entering into force in 1987, was an important starting point for everything that followed in terms of treaty law over the subsequent decades. From

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[97]   European Parliament, 'Constitutive Session'.

[98]   V. Genovese, 'Wahl von Ursula von der Leyen: Wer für und wer gegen sie gestimmt hat', *Euronews*, 19 July 2024; European Union External Action, 'Parliament Elects Ursula von der Leyen as First Female Commission President', 16 July 2019.

the very beginning, it was mainly EPP parliamentarians, together with the other main groupings, that is, the European Social Democrats and the Liberals, who pushed for an extension of the EP's competences. Community Treaty Law, which was constantly evolving on the basis of ECJ judgments, also made it possible to extend the EP's rights. Experienced civil servants and proactive EP deputies played a decisive part in this. The ratification of the TEU represented a breakthrough, and the Lisbon Treaty brought definitive confirmation of the EP's strong position. The decisive factors in strengthening the EP's position were the opening up of CEE after the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989 and German reunification in 1990, which were the prerequisites for both of these treaties, and the introduction of the Charter of Fundamental Rights, with its further democratisation and legalisation of individual, fundamental and human rights.

Enlargements

The enlargements of the Communities and the Union have had an impact on the growing importance of the EP that has not yet been systematically analysed by historical research. The newly democratically legitimised CEE member states, with their national parliamentary and legal systems and MEPs to be delegated and elected, also brought more attention and weight to the European representation of states and peoples, as was seen with each of the individual rounds of enlargement. The northern enlargement, with the addition of the UK, Denmark and Ireland (1973), widened the parliamentarians' awareness of global affairs. The southern enlargements to Greece (1981), Portugal and Spain (1986) increased awareness of the Mediterranean region within the European Communities. Following the North Sea and the Baltic Sea, the importance of the Mediterranean Sea now entered public awareness even more strongly, strengthening the maritime dimension of the European Communities. The enlargement that encompassed the European Free Trade Association states of Finland, Austria and Sweden (1995) strengthened the EP's Central and Northern European dimension from a corporatist perspective, that is, in terms of political systems in which employers' and employees' associations form social partnerships. The so-called Eastern Enlargement, to the Baltic states, Malta and Cyprus, as well as the enlargements to South-Eastern Europeans (2004 and 2007), were primarily a result of the collapse of the Soviet Union, which had created a geopolitical vacuum. These enlargements led to stronger anti-Communist and Russia-critical attitudes in the EP, and these went hand in hand with a stronger transatlantic orientation among the deputies.

Changing party-political landscapes and EP groupings

The domestic, party, coalition and government policy constellations in the member states were also reflected in the compositions of the respective EP legislatures. This recurring correlation still needs to be analysed in more detail. However, the following can already be stated concerning the various ideological camps.

Socialists and Social Democrats

The 'Social Democratic decade' of the 1970s—thinking of Willy Brandt, Helmut Schmidt and James Callaghan, but also more widely of Bruno Kreisky and Olof Palme—undoubtedly had an impact on the EP and was reflected in the repeated victories and gains of the PES in the Parliament. The German chancellors Brandt (1969–74) and Schmidt (1974–82) were both pro-European. Brandt was focused on European integration and Eastern European policy, while Schmidt took a more transatlantic perspective. By contrast, British prime minister (1976–9) and Labour Party leader Callaghan was less active in integration policy, and was hesitant about being part of the European Monetary System, which Helmut Schmidt and French President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing favoured.

Christian Democrats and conservatives

The continued success of the EPP, which has been victorious in the EP elections since 1999, holding a recurring majority, and is thus the decisive power player, is based on three factors:

- In the course of the 1980s and increasingly so from the 1990s on, the EPP Group included so many European Christian Democrats that it was possible to speak of a quasi-European collective and people's party. Balanced, empathetic, unifying and mediating group chairmen successfully held together very heterogeneous personal, political and ideological constellations, pragmatically and practically.

- The willingness, liberalism and openness of the group chairmen made it possible for disparate and divergent members of the grouping to not only be accepted and integrated, but also to work together with ideologically different groups. The long-lasting grand coalition with the PES, combined with flexibility in terms of coalitions with the liberals, was another key guarantee of success and continuity.

- The long-standing governing majorities of the CDU in Germany and the Christian Social Union in Bavaria, with the long-term chancellorships of Helmut Kohl (1982–98) and Angela Merkel (2005–21) and prime ministers such as Edmund Stoiber (1993–2007) and Horst Seehofer (2008–18), had a considerable impact on the strength of the respective EPP groupings. These German parties were a constant recruiting force and permanent anchor of stability for the EPP. Kohl and Merkel became leading representatives of European Christian Democracy and major figures in state and government in the 1990s and 2000s.[99]

Liberals, Greens and increasing populism

The 'end of the Social Democratic century' (which Ralf Dahrendorf predicted as early as 1983),[100] the strong emergence of the Greens and the assertion of the liberals led to the greater diversification of the European party landscape at the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first century.

On the initiative of Martin Bangemann, among others, the Liberals founded the Federation of Liberal and Democratic Parties in the European Community in Stuttgart on 26 March 1976. One year later, this became the European Liberals and Democrats and subsequently, in 1986, the European Liberals, Democrats and Reformers.[101] On 30 April 2004 the party became an official political party at the European level under the name the European Liberal, Democrat and Reform Party. On 10 November 2012, the party was renamed ALDE after the parliamentary group it had formed in 2004.

Green parties emerged strongly from the 1989 EP elections and formed their own parliamentary group. On 20 June 1993 the European Federation of Green Parties was founded; this was the first party group to decide to adopt a Europe-wide, joint election manifesto for the 2004 EP elections and to found a European Green Party in Rome.[102]

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[99] M. Gehler, 'Die CDU, Europa und die europäische Einigung: Motor der Multifunktionalität im Mehrebenensystem', in N. Lammert (ed.), *Christlich Demokratische Union. Beiträge und Positionen zur Geschichte der CDU* (Munich: Siedler, 2020); M. Gehler, 'Von Konrad Adenauer bis Angela Merkel: die CDU und die europäische Integration 1945–2020', in P. Hilpold, A. Raffeiner and W. Steinmair (eds.), *Rechtsstaatlichkeit, Grundrechte und Solidarität in Österreich und in Europa. Festgabe zum 85. Geburtstag von Professor Heinrich Neisser, einem europäischen Humanisten* (Vienna: Facultas, 2021).

[100] R. Dahrendorf, *Die Chancen der Krise. Über die Zukunft des Liberalismus* (Stuttgart: DVA, 1983), 16–18.

[101] M. Bangemann, *Europäische Integration aus historischer Erfahrung. Ein Zeitzeugengespräch mit Michael Gehler*, ZEI Discussion Paper C 285 (Bonn, 2024), 2–4.

[102] A. von Gehlen, 'Europäische Parteiendemokratie?', Dissertation, FU Berlin, 2005, 293–4.

Since the year 2000, which saw the setting up of the Austrian People's Party (Österreichische Volkspartei) and Freedom Party of Austria (Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs) coalition government in Austria (which included the right-wing populist Jörg Haider in the coalition committee),[103] populist parties have increasingly secured a share of the vote, particularly in the wake of the ratification crises that occurred in relation to the Maastricht and Lisbon Treaties. Despite this, they are still far too heterogeneous and disunited to be a real threat to the pro-European forces in the EP.

Inter-institutionalism

Relations and cooperation with the EU's other institutions have been and remain subject to various developments. From the 1960s to the 1980s, the EP remained in the political shadow of the Council of the EU and the heads of state and government in the European Council. However, there is no doubt that in the course of the adoption of the Maastricht and Lisbon Treaties, the EP was able to establish and consolidate its position vis-à-vis both the Council of the EU and the Commission, enabling it to act on an equal footing with these institutions. Since the 1990s, being an MEP has not meant a loss of influence or prestige, as the Parliament no longer functions merely in an advisory capacity and, in most cases, makes decisions with the Council of the EU.

Direct elections

Several trends have become clear in the EP elections over the decades:

- Interest in the first elections in 1979 was high, with an average turnout of around 63%. In the following decades, turnout fluctuated, reaching another peak of 56.8% in 1994.

- There was a continual decline in voter turnout in the early 2000s, with it falling to 45.6% in 2004, 43% in 2009 and 42.6% in 2014, indicating the increasing disinterest in or alienation from the EU among the electorate.

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[103] The 14 EU member states sanctioned this government. See M. Gehler, '"Preventive Hammer Blow" or Boomerang? The EU "Sanction" Measures Against Austria 2000', in G. Bischof, A. Pelinka and M. Gehler (eds.), *Austria in the European Union* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 2002).

- The influence of populist parties gradually increased in the 2014 and 2019 elections, resulting in the latter seeing a 51% voter turnout. The populists' influence has diversified and partially polarised the political landscape in the EP.

- The EP has achieved increased political importance, especially in terms of legislation and control of the European Commission—both during periods of low and increasing voter turnout.

The European elections have consistently been considered second-order elections. Due to a lack of understanding and ignorance, many potential voters regarded them as secondary, prioritising elections to national parliaments. This trend only ended in the context of the increasing crises and the rise of anti-EU parties in the first two decades of the twenty-first century, factors which led to a growing awareness of the EU's importance, as well as the need for a counter-reaction from the pro-European part of the electorate in the 2019 and 2024 elections.[104] Although electoral systems across the EU have experienced harmonisation, voter turnout declined until 2014, despite the EP fighting for more and more powers after the 1993 Maastricht Treaty. The downward trend in voter turnout for the elections from 63% in 1979 to 42.6% in 2014 could not be stopped during this period, despite greater media interest[105] and the parliamentary groups selecting European lead candidates in the 2014 election campaign, thus linking the elections to the appointment of the future president of the European Commission. This trend ended in 2019, however, when the elections saw the highest turnout in 20 years. Voter turnout increased in 21 EU countries for the first time since the first direct elections in 1979, and by more than 10 percentage points in 7 member states. The ongoing interest in European politics can also be assumed to have been a factor affecting turnout in the 2024 EP elections, in view of the numerous political areas of conflict and unresolved problems (climate, migration, consequences of the pandemic, Ukraine etc.).

104 See also K. Welle and F. O. Reho (eds.), *Christian Democracy, Conservatism and the Challenge of the Extremes*, Martens Centre (Brussels, 2025).
105 C. Holtz-Bacha (ed.), *Europawahlkampf 2014. Internationale Studien zur Rolle der Medien* (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2016).

The EPP was able to gain seats in the 2024 elections and thus defended its position as the largest political group. The S&D remains the second-largest group. The liberal Renew Group and the Green Group both lost a lot of seats, while right-wing parties made gains. Overall, the EP's direct election trends reflect both national developments and those within the EU, as well as global challenges (climate, war, migration, environment), with the tension between European supranationality and national sovereignty continuing to play a central role.

The presidents

The charisma and above-average commitment of prominent European parliamentarians and outstanding parliamentary presidents remain prerequisites for the EP's success. Active and high-profile presidents such as the French liberal Simone Veil, the French Christian Democrat Pierre Pflimlin, the German Christian Democrat Hans-Gert Pöttering and the German Social Democrat Martin Schulz are all prominent examples of statespeople who knew how best to represent the EP on the inter-institutional level and how to raise its profile accordingly.

Conclusion

For a long time the EP experienced a steady decline in voter turnout, which raised questions about the general interest of Europeans in the European Communities and the EU and, ultimately, also about the legitimacy of this European representation of the people.[106] The relationship between public opinion and the EP has long been one of disinterest, indifference and even incomprehension. This has also raised the question of general interest in the Communities' legitimation, especially regarding trust in the EU and its legitimacy. Nevertheless, the assessment has become more complex because of growing expectations of the EU as a result of the various challenges and crises (banking and financial markets, migration and the pandemic) it has had to deal with. Although the EP as a community institution has achieved undeniable prominence since its direct election, perceptions of it have remained unclear; its growing competences have gone unnoticed or have even been ignored by the public for a long time.[107]

A statute on European political parties in the European Parliament was first passed in 2003.[108] It enabled political parties to better organise and finance themselves and to operate at the European level. The statute regulated, among other things, parties' legal form and rights. It gave European political parties a legal structure that enabled them to operate in all EU member states. The regulation also stipulated the way in which parties at the European level should be financially supported: the EU could partially support their activities through public funds. To be recognised as European political parties, parties had to adhere to certain democratic principles, such as the promotion of democracy, and respect for human rights and the rule of law. This statute was replaced in 2014 by a new regulation, further clarifying and expanding the regulation on European political parties and political foundations.[109] The new regulation introduced, among other things, greater controls over and transparency requirements regarding the financing of these parties.[110] Therefore, the legal foundations of European political parties now exist, but these have not yet been used to form cross-border and inter-state European parties with corresponding transnational lists.

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[106] See, e.g. M. Roos, 'A Parliament for the People? The European Parliament's Activism in the Area of Social Policy. From the Early 1970s to the Single European Act', *Journal of European Integration History* 27/1 (2021).

[107] A. Dulphy and C. Manigand, 'L'opinion publique et le parlement européen', *Journal of European Integration History* 17/1 (2011).

[108] European Parliament and Council Regulation no. 2004/2003 on the regulations governing political parties at European level and the rules regarding their funding, OJ L297 (15 November 2003), 1.

[109] European Parliament and Council Regulation no. 1141/2014 on the statute and funding of European political parties and European political foundations, OJ L317 (4 November 2014), 1.

[110] European Parliament and Council Regulation no. 2004/2003 on the regulations governing political parties at European level, 1.

Looking back on more than 45 years of direct elections to the EP, little has changed in some fundamental respects with regard to party politics. Until recently, there were only a few real European parties, which existed only as parliamentary factions and groupings.[111] Thus, there is still the potential for further Europeanisation in terms of party-political development.

However, it must also be concluded that most of the EP elections have been second-order elections.[112] Neither specially developed programmes nor the election campaigns themselves have touched on specific aspects of integration policy or typical community policy issues. Electoral competition has instead been promoted at the national party level, with campaign posters using general terms such as 'peace', 'freedom', 'security' and 'prosperity'. The result is often that the campaigns act as reminders to elect the candidates of the national governing parties to the EP.

Finally, the following points should be noted, which are not only relatively unknown among the European public, but also, to some extent, in historical research:

- The EP is older than is generally assumed, because it was one of the founding institutions of the Community. It therefore has a long tradition. It had already undertaken considerable activities before 1979, even though it had not been endowed with strong powers. With the reform of the Rome Treaties in the Single European Act, the EP's importance grew vis-à-vis the other institutions.

- The EP, like the Commission, has the right of initiative in the field of legislation. The Council of the EU and the EP can both request that the Commission submits a proposal for legislation. Since the Lisbon Treaty, the ordinary legislative procedure has become the most important part of the EU decision-making system. It gives the EP and the Council of the EU equal weight in a wide range of areas, such as the internal market, economic governance, immigration, energy, transport, environmental protection and consumer protection. The vast majority of all EU laws are adopted jointly by the EP and the Council.[113]

[111] V. Neßler, *Europäische Willensbildung. Die Fraktionen im Europaparlament zwischen nationalen Interessen, Parteipolitik und Europäischer Integration* (Schwalbach: Wochenschau, 1997); J. Mittag, *Politische Parteien und europäische Integration. Entwicklung und Perspektiven transnationaler Parteienkooperation in Europa* (Essen: Klartext Verlag, 2006).

[112] R. Hrbek, 'Europawahl 2009: mehr als die Summe nationaler Sekundärwahlen?', *Integration* 32/3 (2009); J. Röllgen, 'Die Europawahlen 2009 als „Wahlen zweiter Ordnung"', *Einsichten und Perspektiven. Bayerische Zeitschrift für Politik und Geschichte* 2 (2009); O. Niedermayer, 'Immer noch eine „nationale Nebenwahl"? Die Wahl zum Europäischen Parlament vom 25. Mai 2014', *Zeitschrift für Parlamentsfragen* 45/3 (2014).

[113] European Parliament, 'Legislative Powers'.

- The EP as a directly elected EU body was a latecomer, but has experienced a sustained increase in competences since the 1990s. How can this be explained? Initially, the EP had limited authority in the 1950s and 1960s, which is why its members had to work hard to make their presence felt and to assert themselves with speeches and resolutions. New political challenges, a growing agenda and changing conditions, such as the various enlargements and the transition from the Communities to the Union, have created new tasks for the EU and an increasing need to ensure the democratic legitimacy of political decision-making processes.

- The EP is the only supranational parliament in the world.

- While many EU competences have been gained throughout the EP's history, other key functions remain with the member states, including defence, foreign, health, social and tax policies. Matters affecting these policy areas cannot be decided by majority voting. Unanimity in decision-making by the Council of the EU is particularly required in matters of foreign and security policy and with regard to the EU's resources (its own financial means). In all other areas, the EP has co-decision rights.

The question remains as to what role the EP will play in the face of the ongoing and escalating complex crises within and outside Europe. The Lisbon Treaty, which remains in force, dates from a different time and now seems to have become outdated. Foreign trade, the internal market, the euro and competition have been the pillars of the EU since the Treaty of Rome in 1957. But since 2009, the EU's ability to react under treaty law has been limited. The Union was only able to respond to the banking and financial markets crisis through the non-treaty measures for the euro area countries of the European Financial Stability Facility, the European Stability Mechanism and the Banking Union. Neither health policy in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic nor policies relating to migration, social affairs, taxation or defence have been communitised. And breakthroughs only occurred in 2024 to create a Common European Asylum System and, due to the re-elected US President Donald Trump's challenge to the transatlantic partnership, to strengthen the Common Security and Defence Policy, established in 1999. It remains a challenge for the EP to deepen European integration. The European and global situations seem to threaten the political significance of the EP in the eyes of the European public. Its status in the EU's institutional structure appears both less promising and less important. However, the Parliament remains a co-decision-making EU institution, required to approve legislation, and will thus become even more important for consolidating and safeguarding European democracy.

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The European Parliament, with its predecessor being the Common Assembly of the European Coal and Steel Community, has a long history. It is one of the oldest community institutions, together with the High Authority, now known as the Commission; the Council of Ministers; and the European Court of Justice. From the very beginning, Christian Democrats, conservatives, socialists, Social Democrats and liberals from the founding member states advocated establishing a European parliamentary system with its own budget and specific procedures.

Over the course of time, a range of efforts and numerous initiatives by various parliamentary groups have forced the heads of state and government to grant the EP ever more rights. Even before the first direct elections in 1979, the representatives had already achieved respectable successes. The close cooperation of the groups across the political and ideological divides has been decisive, with there always having been a fundamental pro-European consensus among the Members of the European Parliament on the need for Europe's unification. Both in the context of crises and in the course of the enlargements from 6 to 27 members, a growing number of tasks and challenges have not been able to be solved on a purely national level.

As a result, there has been a continual need to further legitimise decision-making through the introduction of increasingly democratic parliamentary processes; this has enabled the EP to acquire more and more opportunities for co-decision. During this process, European Christian Democrats, in particular, have played a major role. In the face of the recent onslaught from EU opponents and populists, the European People's Party has held the European flag high, while also defending and strengthening the EP, the development of which represents one of the greatest achievements of European unification.

This paper attempts to periodise this evolution of the Parliament.