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What is the role of the European Parliament?

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Between 23-26 May 2019 (26 May in France) European citizens will vote to elect the next European Parliament (EP), the European Union's (EU) only democratic structure. While, in the course of reforming treaties, Parliament's powers have been considerably strengthened, the European elections have been characterised by significant and growing abstentions.

Between 23-26 May 2019 (26 May in France) European citizens will vote to elect the next European Parliament (EP), the institution representing the people of European Union (EU) Member States, i.e. some 380 million voters for 500 million citizens from the 28 Member States (27 excluding the UK). **The EU's only democratic structure**, the EP consists of 751 members (705 excluding the UK), who, since 1979, have been elected for a term of 5 years under a proportional representation system. The number of seats per country is proportional to the population and cannot be less than 6 seats. After the elections in May 2019, the elected French members will have a little over 10% of the seats, all parties combined.

What are the objectives of this election? They are not very important according to Valéry Giscard d'Estaing who, on 18 October 2018, stated during an interview on the French radio station Europe 1: *"Make no mistake, they are not very important elections because the European Parliament is not very important"*.

Designed originally to be a consultative body with virtually no powers, **the European Parliament has seen its legislative and budgetary prerogatives constantly strengthened in the course of reforming treaties**. The Lisbon treaty, which came into force on 1 December 2009, enhanced the powers of the European Parliament, which **now has real powers**.

The European Parliament has **three main roles**:

- **Legislative:** it is a co-legislator on an equal footing with the Council of the European Union¹ in the vast majority of areas; consultation is now only used in a limited number of cases. Unlike national parliaments, it does not have the right of legislative initiative, which is the monopoly of the Commission, but it has a real capacity to amend or reject proposals.
- **Budgetary:** it is a co-decision maker on an equal footing with the Council for all budget expenditure². However, its budgetary powers remain limited because it has no remit with regard to the determination of revenue – therefore it only has a consultative role concerning taxation.

¹ The Council of the European Union (also referred to as "Council of Ministers of the European Union" or "Council") represents the Member States of the EU and brings together ministers of Member States who, depending on the subjects being discussed, meet in specialised configurations.

² Its powers regarding expenditure were extended by the Lisbon treaty as a consequence of the removal of the distinction between "compulsory expenditure" (the section of the budget, consisting essentially of agricultural expenditure, on which the Council had the last word) and "non-compulsory expenditure".

- **Supervisory:** it can censure the Commission (the EU's executive body), forcing the commissioners to collectively resign. Since the application of the Lisbon treaty, it elects the Commission president; however, it does not have the powers to choose the president as the European Council³ puts forward a single candidate "*taking into account the results of the European elections*". It has considerable capacity to conduct investigations: written or oral questions to the Council and the Commission; temporary committees of inquiry; access to the EU Court of Justice, etc.

The increased power of the European Parliament has, perhaps paradoxically, been accompanied by the **considerable and growing disaffection of European citizens for the European elections**. Since the first elections of directly-elected MEPs in 1979, the average participation rate has fallen significantly: in 1979, 62% of registered voters voted throughout the European Union, a figure that fell to 43% in 2014.

How can we explain the fact that the European Parliament, which today has important formal powers, does not (or no longer) interests voters? Firstly, it can be noted that the decline in the participation rate for the European elections also affects national elections. That said, the abstention rate for the European elections is higher than for national elections. There are numerous possible explanations, in particular:

- The EP, like the EU, remains sometimes misunderstood or even unknown
- The European campaigns are characterised by the prominence of national issues – “for or against Macron?” – rather than European issues
- The impact of the vote remains limited; it does not enable the European agenda to be significantly changed and even less so the nature of the European system since the EP does not have any constituent power
- The EP is not involved in major issues that concern European citizens such as fiscal and trade policies

The European Union is a unique organisation: neither a federation, nor a confederation of States, nor an international organisation, **the European structure is a supranational organisation**, where the **Member States must** (in particular) **ensure they do not break the rules set by the treaties⁴ in order to achieve the common objective**. However, the treaties, which the European Parliament has no possibility of modifying, contain, amongst other things, aspects of economic and trade policy that are at the heart of the concerns of EU citizens.

While the European Parliament clearly has increasing powers, **little clarity and visibility in the use of its prerogatives** could, once again, struggle to convince European citizens to go to the polling stations to elect their MEPs.

³ The European Council, which consists of the heads of state or government of the Member States, must not be confused with the Council of the European Union (see note 1).

⁴ The EU is governed by two separate and complementary treaties: the Treaty on European Union (TEU, commonly called Maastricht Treaty) and the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU, which has its origin in the Treaty of Rome).

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