



**Friends of  
the Earth  
Europe**



## **The European Parliament – what's the point?**

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*In May 2014 people in 28 countries across Europe will elect new Members of the European Parliament (MEPs).*

*But what do MEPs actually do? What does the European Union (EU) do? Why should we care?*

*Should someone who cares about the local, national and global environment be interested in these elections?*

### 1. Introduction

At the end of May 2014 people in 28 countries around Europe will get the chance to vote for the Members of the European Parliament who will represent them in European Union (EU) decision making.

Does it matter though? Do MEPs have any power – and does it make any difference who I vote for?

The answer to all these questions is yes – it does matter, MEPs do have power & it does make a difference who you vote for.

**This briefing explains why.**

### 2. What do MEPs do?

MEPs participate in deciding what laws should be made at EU level, and also in other key parts of EU decision making, such as how money in the EU budget should be spent.

It's easier to understand what MEPs do if you know the basics of what the EU is & how it works:

#### 2.1 What is the EU?

The European Union (EU) was created by intergovernmental treaties between the Member States (EU member countries). It's a unique institution, e.g.:

- It is a free trade area, with agreed standards for most products
- It is an area with free movement of labour
- It has many common environmental standards
- It has many common social standards

EU Member States continue to exist, with their own politics and parliaments. However, in some areas – e.g. laws concerning the trading of goods (the 'internal market') – they have very little freedom to go against agreed EU regulation. Equally, environmental legislation is to large extent decided on the EU level and member states are obliged to implement it.

Within the EU there is also the Eurozone, sharing a common currency. The Eurozone also has some specific governance structures [1], but the European Parliament has limited powers in this area, and it isn't covered further in this briefing.

## 2.2 How does the EU work?

The EU treaties have created a system of governance for the EU, including decision making bodies, regulatory processes and organisations which do the day to day work of the EU. The EU structure is currently defined by the Lisbon treaty.

For most laws, like environmental policy for example, EU decision making can be simplified to three key components:

- The European Commission (which is unelected) who propose new laws, but can't vote on them
- Member State governments, working together as Council, who are one of the two chambers of decision making on new laws
- The European Parliament, the other chamber of decision making

## 2.3 How does the EU parliament work?

The European Parliament is elected by the population of the EU every 5 years. In May 2014, 751 MEPs will be elected; each EU Member State has an allocation of seats, with the larger Member States electing more MEPs. MEPs meet in Brussels and Strasbourg, and also spend time in their constituencies. The MEP code of conduct states that they should act solely in the public interest.

MEPs organise themselves into political groups, and also into committees to enable effective scrutiny of legislation. The biggest political group in the current parliament is the European People's Party (EPP), made up of centre-right MEPs from around Europe.

The European Parliament acts as one of the two chambers of EU decision making for most EU decisions. There are a few exceptions, where decisions are made entirely by Council.

The European Parliament has a [comprehensive web site \[2\]](#), and all committee meetings and plenary sessions are public; most are streamed on-line.

### **Making – or changing – EU law**

Most EU legislation is passed through what is known as the ordinary legislative process, in which the European Commission drafts a proposal, then both the European Parliament and Council (EU Governments) discuss, amend and vote on the proposal through up to three 'readings'.

At the end of the process, both Council and Parliament must reach an agreement, which then enters into law on publication in the EU's 'Official Journal'. Governments must then implement the law in each country.

Most EU law is enforced by national governments – but the EU Commission checks that they are doing this.

### 3. What have MEPs done?

#### 3.1 Promoting recycling 😊

Recycling helps the environment & creates jobs – and EU targets help make sure things happen across Europe. The European Parliament voted to add a 50% recycling target to a key waste law – some EU governments weren't happy, but it got into law in the end. A few countries already achieve this target, and many others are investing in improving recycling, rather than dumping in incinerators or landfills.

The next parliament is likely to be voting on whether these targets should be increased – parts of the EU already recycle more than 70% of their waste.

#### 3.2 Car fuel efficiency 😊

The European Parliament voted for stronger targets for cars to become more efficient (saving money & reducing CO2 emissions). Unfortunately the German government is blocking a deal on the final law [3].

#### 3.3 Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) ☹️

Of course, MEPs don't always do the right thing for the environment. This year, for the first time, the European Parliament had real power over CAP. Unfortunately the parliament sided with big farmers over the interests of small farmers, the environment & taxpayers [4].

#### 3.4 Ending fish discards (almost) 😊

The EU's Common Fisheries Policy has many problems, one of them being an incentive for fishermen to discard fish into the sea, to avoid breaking quotas.

Following major, cross-EU, campaigning, including 'FishFight', MEPs voted against discards, then entered negotiation with EU governments, who weren't keen on this ban. The final deal "*will hugely reduce discards across Europe*" [5].

### 4. Conclusions

The European Parliament is important – you may not hear much about it, and what you do hear may sometimes be inaccurate, but it is influencing you & your environment.

If you do *one thing* after reading this briefing, **please vote**; *two things* – **talk to the people you know about why voting is important (give them this briefing!)**.

This briefing doesn't tell you how to vote. Clearly some political parties – and individual politicians – will be more positive on environmental issues than others.

Key issues that you could ask candidates about include:

- Do they support measures to make Europe more resource efficient, by substantially increasing reuse & recycling rates around Europe?
- Do they support new policies & investments in renewable energy & energy efficiency –creating jobs & reducing our climate changing emissions?

## 5. For more information

- A short introduction to the EU: <http://euenvironmentblog.eu/what-is-the-eu/>
- How have MEP's been voting? <http://www.votewatch.eu>
- Euromyths are imaginary things that the EU is supposed to be doing; there are a range of sites to check them, try this from the Commission: <http://blogs.ec.europa.eu/ECintheUK/category/euromyths/>
- Campaigning on EU issues: [http://www.foeeurope.org/publications/2011/bringing\\_the\\_voices\\_to\\_brussels.pdf](http://www.foeeurope.org/publications/2011/bringing_the_voices_to_brussels.pdf)

## 6. References

1. E.g. see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eurozone>
2. <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/headlines/>
3. <http://www.transportenvironment.org/press/german-political-muscle-used-delay-vote-2020-car-emissions-limits>
4. <http://www.foeeurope.org/cap-reform-failure-environment-developing-countries-small-farmers-260613>; [http://www.wwf.eu/media\\_centre/?209195/Environment-in-danger-because-of-EU-agriculture-deal](http://www.wwf.eu/media_centre/?209195/Environment-in-danger-because-of-EU-agriculture-deal)
5. [http://www.fishfight.net/blog/CFP\\_deal/](http://www.fishfight.net/blog/CFP_deal/)

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