

Introduction to special issue

The European Parliament in challenging times: the ninth session of the EP, 2019 - 2024

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Abstract:

This special issue of the *Journal of Legislative Studies* analyses the different dimensions of the European Parliament's work in the 2019 - 2024 session, with each article focusing on one of the many challenges that MEPs have faced and are still facing as a result of political volatility. These include the impact of the increase in profile of Eurosceptic Members on both the coalition building and committee work that have been a traditional strength of the legislature, the activities of parliamentarians in relation to key policy areas such as public health and immigration, as well as the wider and broadly respected role of the EP in democracy promotion. Having faced these challenges for a number of years, it is even possible to argue that the 2020s will see a new 'era of the Parliament', following on from previous periods when either the Commission or the Council each in turn dominated EU affairs.

More than any of the institutions of the European Union (EU), it is the European Parliament (EP) that has been most affected by recent social, economic and political uncertainties. The 2019 elections had been the most unpredictable in the Parliament's history with 'Eurosceptic' parties performing well and challenging the established consensus of the more centrist groups like the European People's Party (EPP) and the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D). While the widely predicted 'surge' of Euroscepticism did not quite materialise in the end in 2019, the ninth session of the EP still witnessed a more fragmented and divided legislature, with substantial numbers of nationalist and populist MEPs elected to the Hemicycle (see Van Hecke and Costa 2023). Yet remarkably, that diversity of representation has almost appeared to

make the overall profile of the Parliament stronger and more secure - the way the 'centre' held from 2019 to 2024, with Christian Democrats, Social Democrats and Liberals continuing to dominate proceedings and forming the three largest groups showed a deeper institutional robustness that can be praised in relation to absorbing electoral volatility. The European Union may be open to criticism that it has not always responded sensitively to shifts in public opinion across EU-27 but the EP itself arguably represents the best conduit for recognising those shifts.

The European Parliament has long been the European institution most full of contradictions. On the one hand, it is formally the 'first' institution of the EU and has a type of symbolic seniority over the European Council, Commission and Court of Justice (see Corbett et al 2024; Ripoll Servent 2017). Yet on the other hand, it has always been perceived to be the least influential of the institutions with few formal powers granted to it when it was first created in the 1950s (see Burns 2012; Judge and Earnshaw 2014). Even more intriguingly, as those powers have gradually increased, culminating in the EP becoming an equal partner in the ordinary legislative procedure, turnout for its elections has been in steady decline, generally hovering around the level for local government polls in member states (see Daniel 2015). The shuttling of MEPs each month between its historic seat in Strasbourg on the border of France and Germany and its de facto Brussels headquarters also attracts much criticism - it is difficult to think of another legislature with two identical Hemicycles. When addressing these significant contradictions, experts find themselves even more perplexed when trying to come up with solutions - for the more powers the EP is given, theoretically the more power is perceived to be taken away from national parliaments in member states. If the European Parliament is the solution to the EU's (in)famous democratic deficit, it is a far from perfect one.

Yet despite these different challenges, the Parliament, its modern tower on Espace Léopold clearly visible from Brussels city centre, arguably goes from strength to strength institutionally. The Lisbon Treaty developed the powers of Members (MEPs) to scrutinise the work of the Commissioners while government

leaders such as French Presidents and German Chancellors come to the main plenary in Strasbourg to make keynote addresses about the overall direction of the Union. Controversial issues surrounding values, rights and equalities increasingly dominate European affairs and there is some evidence that the European Parliament has finally come into its own as a result of its status as the EU's main democratic forum. The EP's tested capacity for reflecting the considerable breadth of public opinion that now exists across EU member states can be interpreted as a political strength not a weakness. Having faced different types of challenges for a number of years, it is even possible to argue that the 2020s will see a new 'era of the Parliament', following on from previous periods when either the Commission or the Council each in turn dominated EU affairs.

This special issue of the *Journal of Legislative Studies* analyses the different dimensions of the Parliament's work in the 2019 - 2024 session, with each article focusing on one of the various challenges that MEPs have faced and are still facing. These include the impact of a substantial increase in visibility of Eurosceptic Members on both the coalition building and committee work that have been a traditional strength of the legislature, the activities of the parliamentarians in relation to key policy areas such as public health and immigration, as well as the wider and broadly respected role of the EP externally in democracy promotion. The *JLS* has a long history of publishing articles which comparatively analyse the activities of the European Parliament at important junctures in its history, including a special issue in 2018 focusing on the 2014 - 2019 session (the Eighth Parliament) edited by Nathalie Brack and Olivier Costa. How exactly have the different aspects of the work of the EP changed since the 2014 - 2019 parliamentary session (see Costa 2018)? Do MEPs take decisions differently from before and do they interact with the other European institutions (Commission, Council and Court of Justice) differently too? Taking a longer view, how does the present day European Parliament now compare with the original vision of the Founding Fathers back in 1952? Always considered an unconventional legislature, has the European Parliament perhaps finally reached a level of recognition that scholars of legislatures can formally acknowledge and shaken off the negative label of political 'talking shop' (Ripoll Servent 2015)?

The issue includes contributions from participants in an academic network set up in early 2020 that focuses solely on the work of the European Parliament. Many of the articles were presented as papers hosted by Jean Monnet EU Studies at Lancaster University starting in 2021, as well as at annual UACES (University Association for Contemporary European Studies) conference panels. The network involves political scientists, International Relations experts, academic lawyers and policy practitioners, and this volume in particular includes scholars from across nine different European countries. The academic study of legislatures has always involved researchers from across a range of different disciplines but the main rationale for the activities of the European Parliament Academic Research Network is that there has never been a more important time to study European party politics and the activities of the EP.

The European Union is a rules-based international organisation with a legal personality whose predominantly Christian Democratic leaders have viewed the creation of an institutional architecture as the main means of achieving political stability in post-war Europe. The 2019 to 2024 session of the European Parliament was arguably the first session that really tested its institutional capacity for 'shock absorption'. It is difficult not to conclude that the ninth session of the European Parliament was one of its most eventful, if not the most eventful in its seventy year history. As a number of the articles in this special issue highlight, a rise in prominence of the factions of Euro-sceptic MEPs coupled with a global pandemic saw the EP functioning and operating in a way that it not yet before experienced, forcing it to be as strong and as unified as possible as a political and law-making institution. Yet as some of the other articles in this special issue indicate, the 2019 to 2024 session also saw the EP proactively grow as an institution, and not simply consolidate or act defensively. In particular, its role as a democracy promoter, both across EU-27 and externally, has given the EP a genuine *raison d'être* in contemporary European and global politics, and one that is only likely to increase more in future parliamentary sessions.

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