

Operation of the European Parliament

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URL: http://www.cvce.eu/obj/operation_of_the_european_parliament-en-f52db1eb-4206-43c7-8f82-6d869e142149.html

Last updated: 09/07/2016



Operation

Operation of the Common Assembly

The Treaty establishing the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) made provision for the Common Assembly to hold an annual session, without requiring to be convened, on the second Tuesday in May, which might not be extended beyond the end of the current financial year (i.e. 30 June). It also provides for the convening of extraordinary sessions, either at the request of the Council, in order to deliver an opinion on such questions as might be put to it by the Council, or at the request of a majority of its Members or of the High Authority (Article 22).

In practice, the annual session gradually split into two parts, one part in May, the other in June. The High Authority considered that the Common Assembly should meet at least every six months. The Common Assembly therefore increased the number of sessions once again. It eventually held three or even four sessions per year: in November, February, May-June and October.

Operation of the European Parliamentary Assembly

That system was altered by the implementation of the 1957 Treaties of Rome and the establishment of a single assembly, the European Parliamentary Assembly, for the three Communities. Article 130 of the Treaty establishing the European Economic Community (EEC) and Article 109 of the Treaty establishing the European Atomic Energy Community (EAEC or Euratom) made provision for the Assembly to hold an annual session, without requiring to be convened, on the third Tuesday in October. It could also convene extraordinary sessions at the request of a majority of its Members and at the request of the Council or the Commission.

To resolve the problems of overlap created by the differences in the length of ordinary sessions, the Assembly held a single annual session, effectively subdivided into several part-sessions. It met, without having to be convened, on the dates specified by the Treaties, and it decided on the length of adjournments of the session. The number of part-sessions was not laid down.

After the entry into force of the Merger Treaty of 8 April 1965, the beginning of the annual session was brought forward to the second Tuesday in March (Article 27).

Operation of the European Parliament

The election of the European Parliament by direct universal suffrage, provided for by the Act of 20 September 1976, introduced a five-year legislative period coinciding with the term of office of Members.

As before, the European Parliament holds an annual session, without requiring to be convened, and now meets on the second Tuesday in March. It may convene extraordinary sessions at the request of a majority of its Members and at the request of the Council or the Commission.

The European Parliament meets during part-sessions for one week per month, with the exception of August. Each part-session is broken down into sittings.

Part-sessions were held in Strasbourg and Luxembourg from 1979 until 1981. Since then, Strasbourg has been the venue for the twelve part-sessions, with the exception of one extraordinary part-session held in Brussels (April 1983) and one part-session held in Luxembourg (July 1985). Additional part-sessions ('mini-part-sessions') are held in Brussels.

The parliamentary committees generally meet in Brussels for two weeks per month.

The order of business of the European Parliament is determined by its Rules of Procedure. The draft agenda is drawn up by the Conference of Presidents on the basis of recommendations by the Conference of

Committee Chairmen and of the agreed annual legislative programme. At the beginning of every part-session, Parliament adopts the final draft agenda. Changes to the draft agenda may be proposed by a committee, a political group or at least thirty-two Members. Once the agenda has been adopted, it may be altered only if there is a request for urgent debate, if the inadmissibility of a matter is put to vote, if a report is referred back to committee, if the debate is closed, or on a proposal from the President.

Parliamentary debates are open to the public. The committees likewise normally meet in public. In keeping with Article 1 of the Treaty on European Union, the European Parliament ensures the utmost transparency of its activities through respect for the principle of openness, and decisions are taken as closely as possible to the citizen.

Save where provided otherwise, the European Parliament acts by an absolute majority of votes cast. A quorum exists when one-third of the Members of Parliament are present in the Chamber. All votes are valid whatever the number of voters unless the President, in response to a request made before voting has begun by at least thirty-two Members, establishes that a quorum is not present. The right to vote is personal; Members cast their votes individually and in person. Parliament usually votes by show of hands; alternatively, a vote may be taken using the electronic voting system, by sitting and standing, by roll call or by secret ballot.