SPECIAL REPORT

Europe's parliamentary priorities

This week's Europe-wide elections will affect researchers more than they realize, reports **Alison Abbott**.

Chris Davies, a former British Member of Parliament who has been a Member of the European Parliament (MEP) for the last ten years, is convinced that “you can do more for environment legislation in Brussels through parliamentary committee work than you can in any national parliament”. His view is shared by many MEPs across parties, political groups, nations and political themes. The European Parliament has an intrinsic dynamism, they say, and although it has no tax-raising powers, it can get things done. And more than any of the other institutions of the European Union (EU), it can allow elected individuals to make a difference: personal enthusiasm counts.

“The European Parliament is very important in developing the European Research Area and influencing its budget,” says Philippe Busquin, a former European Research Commissioner and an MEP (Socialist Group, Belgium) in the outgoing parliament. “So it is very important to elect MEPs who are attentive to the issues of science and technology.”

In the past decade, the parliament has demonstrated that it can have a direct effect on European (and global) science and technology policies. Against all the odds, for example, it managed to find financing for the Galileo satellite navigation system in 2007 when the ministers of member states insisted there was no money to spare.

The parliament also has a direct effect on the working lives of scientists and the research paths available to them. In May, in the final days of the last legislature, MEPs saved proposed legislation governing the use of animals in scientific experiments from going down a path that would have outlawed key areas of medical research (see *Nature* 459, 139; 2009). But they are also behind some of the bizarre complexity that scientists find themselves faced with when applying for grants through the EU Framework Programme — such as the requirement to explain the gender relevance of research on single-celled organisms, as on every other topic.

In the elections on 4–7 June this year, 380 million electors in the union's 27 countries will be able to choose the parliament's 736 members, although if the turnout is similar to that seen in 2004, well under half will bother to vote. The new MEPs will take their seats in July and serve for five years; they will thus be deeply involved in the development

‘What does the European Parliament do?’). Yet its influence has long been underestimated, for two main reasons. In the past, its decision-making power was much more limited than it is now, and perceptions have been slow to catch up with the gradual increase of power brought about by successive treaties. That power will grow again if the 2007 Lisbon Treaty is ratified later this year by the last few member states that have not yet signed up. Under that treaty, the parliament's realm of codecision would be extended to new areas, including agriculture and fisheries policies and the allocation of structural funds — subsidies to poor EU regions that can be used to help build up research infrastructure.

Second, the complexity of parliament means that many people are flummoxed by its decision-making processes. The 200 or so national political parties represented in the 2004–09 parliament sat in seven political groups (see ‘Europe's political spectrum’). Each group is a relatively loose coalition without the sort of party whip familiar in national parliaments; no group has consensus on all policies. Sensitive ethical issues, such as whether human embryonic stem cells should be used in EU-funded research, for example, are voted on according to conscience rather than party membership. Voting on other issues, such as those relating to development of particular technologies, is sometimes governed more by national allegiance than ideology, with members keeping an eye out for domestic industries.

Expert input

Most of the parliament's work is done in expert committees, which examine proposed legislation. MEPs divide themselves among the committees, and each of the political groups has at least one expert policy adviser (who is not an elected politician). Work on the animal-testing directive, for example, was led by the agriculture committee, with input from the research and environment committees. At the first reading, the MEPs and their expert advisers were quick to see major problems in the commission's draft and insert corrective amendments; these were then approved in the plenary session in May.

This was far from the largest of the science-related issues the last parliament had to deal with. The giant €50.5-billion FP7 programme was finally approved in 2006. In the process it was seen by 8 committees and MEPs had to

of the multi-billion-euro Eighth Framework Programme (FP8), which should launch in 2014. The parliament will also have to consider whether to allow the fledgling European Research Council to become an independent agency or to remain attached to the European Commission, with all its attendant bureaucracy, as part of FP8. With the right MEPs in place, says Busquin, lobbying for high research budgets is more likely to be successful.

The European Parliament has considerable, but not absolute, power in such issues, as it is just one of the EU's three key institutions (see

SHARING THE WEALTH

Between 2002 and 2006, Europe's Sixth Framework Programme for Research and Technological Development disbursed €16.7 billion between participating states (figures below in millions of euros). The Seventh Framework Programme, covering the period 2007 to 2013, is likely to see member states taking similar proportions of more than €50 billion in funding.

sift through more than 1,500 proposed amendments. Nearly all legislation passes through the equal-opportunities committee, which brings in gender issues wherever it sees an opportunity; this is where the demand for justification of research projects in terms of gender were spawned. In 2006, the parliament dealt with the Registration, Evaluation, Authorisation and Restriction of Chemical substances (REACH) regulation, the largest piece of legislature — and one of the most contentious — ever handled by the European Union. This directive went to 10 committees and MEPs had to consider 2,400 amendments. And in 2008, the parliament approved a package of climate and energy laws to cut greenhouse-gas emissions and promote renewable energies according to legally binding targets. MEPs insisted on a package without wiggle room. “It was parliament that insisted, against the will of the council of ministers, that the targets remain binding,” says Umberto Guidoni (Group of the European United Left, Italy), a former astronaut.

Stand-offs between the parliament and the council also ensured that smaller research

initiatives continued to promote innovation in small and medium-sized enterprises and determined the final — very modest — shape of the European Institute of Innovation and Technology (EIT), says MEP Jorgo Chatzimarkakis, a member of the German Free Democratic party who sits in the liberal Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe group. Commission president José Manuel Barroso had envisioned the institute as a mighty competitor for the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge. But neither the

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What does the European Parliament do?

The European Parliament is a law-making body based mainly in Strasbourg, France, and made up of representatives (MEPs) who are elected for five-year terms by the 27 member states of the European Union. The number of MEPs from each member state varies according to the size of the

country's population.

The parliament has the power to accept, reject or amend legislation, except in key areas such as taxation, agriculture and defence. Unlike national parliaments, it does not directly propose new legislation — that is the remit of the European Commission, based in Brussels, Belgium,

which is divided into a number of departments.

The European Union Council of Ministers, made up of one representative from each of the member states, also meets in Brussels, and is the power broker of the triumvirate, responsible for approving all EU legislation. **Natasha Gilbert**

council or the parliament were persuaded, and the institute was cut down to a pilot scheme of large research networks. “But we introduced the word ‘Innovation’ into the title,” says Reino Paasilinna, a Finnish Social Democrat who sits in the Socialist group. Paasilinna sees his mission as to “mainstream innovation and research into each bit of legislation”.

European stand-off

With the exception of FP8, the 2009–2014 parliament is likely to have fewer major pieces of science-related legislation to get to grips with, but there will be plenty of fine-tuning and updating, particularly to bring regulations covering climate and energy in line with evolving international agreements, as well as to oversee the planned evaluations of the newer institutions such as the EIT and the European Research Council. It could also find itself revisiting EU legislation allowing cultivation of genetically modified crops, subject to safety control, an issue on which some individual states have reached a stand-off against the union.

This should leave the parliament with the energy to deal with two important, difficult to resolve, issues for European research. One concerns the support of infrastructure — such as the planned European Mouse Mutant Archive — a project that may be too large for an individual nation, but is not strictly in the EU's legal remit. The second concerns the mobility of researchers, who often find it difficult to move smoothly from institution to institution because of the differing national employment laws, or because of visa requirements. The mobility issue is a hard one to crack because it involves so many different areas of legislation. “But it is absolutely key for the future of Europe,” says Paasilinna.

“The great thing about the European Parliament is that we can usually find consensus,” adds Davies. “We are not beholden to our national governments — the separation between the European institutions allows us to explore common ground across parties rather than having to knee-jerk reject what the opposition suggests.” ■

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