

# Democratic control: Parliament's powers of investigation

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**Parliament is not just there to amend and approve new laws, but also to scrutinise the EU institutions. One of the tools at its disposal are committees that investigate specific issues. In recent months committees have been set up to look into revelations on car emissions cheating and wealthy individuals stashing money offshore. Read on to find out how Parliament uses its investigative powers to address people's concerns and put important issues on the political agenda.**

Parliament is the only directly-elected EU institution and as such is responsible for keeping an eye on how the EU operates. Its scrutiny powers have been clearly defined by the EU treaties. MEPs often prefer to set up special committees to look into more general issues or issues involving countries outside the EU. Parliament has also been looking to improve the way inquiry committees function in order to make this form of scrutiny more efficient.

## Inquiry committees

Parliament has the right to set up inquiry committees to investigate alleged violations of EU law or maladministration of EU law by EU institutions or member states under the Maastricht treaty. (For more details, check out article 226 of the [Treaty on the functioning of the European Union](#).)

A committee can invite witnesses and request documents, but it is up to EU countries and European institutions to decide who they send to represent them. They can also refuse cooperation on the grounds of secrecy or public or national security. The rules for this have been set out in a joint [decision of the Council, Parliament and Commission](#).

Over the past year Parliament has set up two inquiry committees to investigate the revelations in the [Panama papers](#) and [how emissions are tested in the car industry](#). However, there have also been three other [inquiry committees](#), including one on how the mad cow disease crisis was handled.

## Additional controls

MEPs are interested in improving how inquiry committees do their work. As inquiry committees affect member states and other EU institutions, any legal act changing how these committees operate will also require their approval.

In April 2014 MEPs adopted a regulation that would give Parliament more binding powers to summon specific officials and impose sanctions if people refuse to appear before a committee without having a valid reason. The Council and the Commission have expressed reservations about the proposal, but Parliament is looking to negotiate on a possible compromise.

## Special committees

If Parliament wants to look into more general issues that are not directly related to EU legislation, for example because it involves countries outside the EU, MEPs can decide to set up a special committee.

# Article

Special committees have no formal powers of investigation so they rely on the good will of people and organisations, including governments, to cooperate. Often these committees look at how to best tackle a specific issue and come up with proposals for new legislation.

So far there have been 16 special committees dealing with issues ranging from climate change, organised crime, the financial crisis, corruption and money laundering, CIA rendition of terrorist suspects and taxes paid by multinationals.

## Find out more

- Detailed provisions governing the exercise of Parliament's right of inquiry:  
<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+RULES-EP+20150909+ANN-08+DOC+XML+V0//EN&language=EN&navigationBar=YES>
- Briefing:  
[http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2016/582007/EPRS\\_IDA\(2016\)582007\\_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2016/582007/EPRS_IDA(2016)582007_EN.pdf)
- Constitutional affairs committee's working document: Parliament's right to inquiry (November 2015):  
[http://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2014\\_2019/plmrep/COMMITTEES/AFCO/DT/2016/06-15/1080009EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2014_2019/plmrep/COMMITTEES/AFCO/DT/2016/06-15/1080009EN.pdf)
- Constitutional affairs committee's working document: Parliament's right to inquiry (January 2015):  
[http://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2014\\_2019/plmrep/COMMITTEES/AFCO/DT/2016/06-15/1045561EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2014_2019/plmrep/COMMITTEES/AFCO/DT/2016/06-15/1045561EN.pdf)