

Political parties at European level: statute and financing

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The committee adopted the report by Jo LEINEN (PES, D) amending the Commission proposal under the 1st reading of the codecision procedure. To avoid creating false expectations, MEPs decided that the regulation should simply lay down the rules on funding and not establish a statute as such for European parties. It was felt, following criticism by the Court of Auditors in 2000, that the issue of financing must be dealt with as a matter of urgency. The committee also amended the definition of "European political party" as laid down in the regulation, specifying that it meant "an association of citizens, or federation of political parties from Member States, recognised by or established in accordance with the legal order of at least one Member State and contributing at European level to forming and expressing the political will of the citizens of the Union while being represented in, or seeking to be represented in, the European Parliament". On the most controversial issue, namely, who should be responsible for managing the funding available (EUR 8.4 million per year), MEPs disagreed with the Commission's proposal that these funds should be regarded as special expenditure of Parliament and should therefore be placed under Parliament's responsibility. Instead, they wanted the Commission to take on this task. The Commission had proposed that, to qualify for funding, a European political party must be represented in the European Parliament or in legislative assemblies at national or regional level in at least one third of the Member States, or must have received at least 5% of the votes cast at the most recent European elections in at least one third of the Member States. However, MEPs wanted to set thresholds of one quarter of the Member States in these cases. Moreover, they did not believe that separate, preliminary registration with Parliament, as proposed by the Commission, was needed. In other amendments, the committee said that a European political party which receives funding must specify donors and donations exceeding EUR 1 000 (rather than EUR 100 as proposed by the Commission). It also raised to EUR 15 000 per year the threshold beyond which donations from individuals or organisations should not be accepted (the Commission had proposed a threshold of EUR 5 000). MEPs also proposed that European political parties should be allowed to charge membership fees. Although the proposal stipulated that funds provided to European political parties from the EU budget must not be used for direct financing of national or regional political parties, the committee wanted to allow two exceptions: the funding of European Parliament election campaigns and "party activity at any level that is directly associated with the politics of the European Union". Lastly, to enable existing European parties to adapt to the new rules, MEPs called for the regulation to apply as of the start of Parliament's next term of office rather than three months after it has been published in the Official Journal, as the Commission had proposed.