The Council of the European Union

Introduction
Commonly known as the Council of Ministers, this institution is made up of the relevant government ministers from member states. It does not have the power to propose new legislation, as this is the remit of the Commission. However, for any law to be passed or for deals on the EU budget to be agreed, the Council of the European Union (along with the European Parliament) must vote in favour of it.

In matters relating to policy areas in which member states have not delegated powers to the other EU institutions, the Council plays the predominant role. For example, it sets political guidelines and has the power to sign international agreements with non-EU countries on behalf of the EU.

History
Established under the Treaty of Rome (1957), the Council’s role has expanded during the history of the EU to give it jurisdiction over many areas of policy. However, as the activities of the EU have expanded, the Council has lost some authority to the Commission. Under the Single European Act (1986) the ability of individual member states to veto Council decisions was reduced to cover only the most important issues, as Qualified Majority Voting (QMV) was introduced. This reduction has continued in subsequent EU treaties; most recently the Lisbon Treaty (2007), which extended majority voting into over 40 new areas, controversially including certain external affairs.

How does the Council of the EU work?
The European Commission proposes most of the issues discussed in the Council. Ministers then consider these proposals and have the power to commit their governments to new policies. Council meetings are attended by whichever ministers are responsible for the items to be discussed: for example foreign ministers, finance ministers or farm ministers. The most important gatherings are Ecofin (for economic issues), the Council of Agriculture Ministers, and the Council of Foreign Ministers. Each group of ministers meets monthly. Prior to meetings, COREPER – a committee of permanent representatives of the member states’ civil services – plays a major behind-the-scenes role in seeking common ground between member state governments. The Council is also aided by a powerful bureaucracy and a General Secretariat to run its administration, currently headed by Uwe Corsepius.

The number of votes that each country has in the Council broadly reflects the size of their population (vote allocation is, however, weighted in favour of smaller countries). Ministers will often avoid a vote by consensually agreeing to a policy. If a vote is needed, QMV is used.

Member states take it in turns to hold the Presidency of the Council of the EU for 6 months. When a country holds the ‘rotating’ Presidency, its head of government is the President and is responsible for chairing Council meetings (apart from the Council of Foreign Ministers, which is chaired by the EU’s High Representative of Foreign and Security Affairs, Federica Mogherini).
How does a General Election actually work?

The UK is a liberal democracy. This means that we democratically elect politicians, who represent our interests. It also involves that individual rights are protected.

The type of liberal democracy we have is a constitutional monarchy, where the powers of the monarch are limited by the terms and conditions put down in the constitution.

Parliamentary system

The UK has a parliamentary system of democratic governance. Unlike presidential and semi-presidential systems, there is an interconnection between the legislative (law-making) and executive (law-enforcing) branches of government in a parliamentary system. In the UK, this means that the executive (consisting of the Queen and the governments of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland) is accountable to the legislature or Parliament (House of Commons, House of Lords and devolved Assemblies in Wales and Northern Ireland).

Appointed Prime Minister (or chancellor) as Head of Government and a monarch (or ceremonial president) as Head of State.

First-Past-the-Post

Members of Parliament in the House of Commons are elected using the first-past-the-post electoral system. Each of the 650 voting constituencies in the UK are represented by an MP. During the general and most local elections, the candidate with most of the votes becomes the local representative. Candidates campaign door-to-door, hold debates and publish manifestos (comparable to shopping list of what they are planning to do once they are in power). Eligible voters, about 46m in the UK, receive their polling card once they register online, or they can vote by post.

Party with most of the votes is invited by the Queen to form a government. If there is no clear winner, there is a hung Parliament. In this case, a minority or coalition government can be formed. A minority government does not have an overall majority in Parliament. A coalition government means that two or more political parties agree to share power in government. If that does not work out, new elections may be called.

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Facts and figures

- The Council’s own permanent secretariat numbers some 2,500 officials in six departments.
- The Council used to meet primarily in secret, yet changes made in the Lisbon Treaty mean that all legislative deliberations undertaken in the Council must now be made public.

Arguments

For

- The Council of the European Union enables much decision-making to remain in the hands of ministers elected democratically in their home states.
- The Council is more accountable than the Commission because ministers are answerable to national parliaments and their electorates.
- The Council’s power helps balance the interests of member states with those of the EU.

Against

- As Council meetings on issues that do not relate to legislation can still be taken in secret, it can be difficult for national parliaments to keep track of changes that are being made.
- QMV means that countries sometimes have decisions forced upon them that they do not support and may not be able to pass through their national parliaments.

“The Council has given no valid reasons for refusing to meet in public when acting in its legislative capacity...”

Nikiforos Diamandouros, European Ombudsman, 2005

“The EU is the only legislature in the world, except North Korea, that still makes laws in secret.”

Open letter from British Conservative MEPs to the EU, September 2005

Technical Terms

- Power to commit: the power given to ministers to take decisions on behalf of their whole governments in the Council without consulting their Parliaments first.
- Qualified Majority Voting: ‘double majority’ voting system whereby 55% EU Council members (15 states), representing at least 65% of the EU's population must vote in favour of a proposal for it to pass. Votes are distributed amongst member states in relation to the size of each country.

Links