

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).

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

- ❖ <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/showPage.aspx?lang=EN>
- ❖ http://europa.eu/about-eu/institutions-bodies/council-eu/index_en.htm