

Introduction

The Council of the European Union is made up of government ministers from each member state. It is informally known as the Council of Ministers. For EU law to be passed, or for deals on the EU budget to be agreed, the Council, usually along with the European Parliament, must approve it. It also has the power to sign international agreements with non-EU countries and organisations on behalf of the EU.

How does the Council of the EU work?

The Council of the European Union is attended by the most relevant minister from each of the 28 EU member states. For example if there are proposals on fishing laws the fisheries minister from each country will attend. As representatives of the government of each member state, the ministers play an important role in co-ordinating their countries' policies with those across the EU.

Proposals are passed to the council from the European Commission, the only EU institution able to propose new laws. The council then negotiates and approves or rejects proposals. In most cases proposals are also passed to the European Parliament for approval. Negotiations and amendments in the Council and parliament often mean it takes more than one attempt to pass a new proposal or agree the budget. Ministers will often avoid a vote, instead agreeing by consensus whether to approve or reject a policy. If a vote is needed, qualified majority voting is used.

Prior to meetings, 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 permanent representatives act like their country's ambassador to the EU. The General Secretariat of the Council of the European Union also provides administrative support to the council.

Member states take it in turns to hold the Presidency of the Council of the EU for six months. When a country holds the 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).

History

Established under the Treaty of Rome (1957), the council's role has expanded, giving it powers over more areas of policy. 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. In its place a system of qualified majority voting was introduced, where the number of votes per country was determined by population.

This power of member states to veto legislation through ministers in the council was reduced in subsequent EU treaties. Most recently, the Lisbon Treaty (2007) extended the system of qualified majority voting into over 40 new areas, including certain external affairs. Changes made in the Lisbon Treaty also meant that all the council's considerations and decisions on new EU proposals must be made a matter of public record.

From 2014 a new system of qualified majority voting was introduced, so at least 55% of member states representing at least 65% of the EU population must support a proposal for it to be passed. Until 2017, member states can request to use the previous system.