

KS4:

The Council of Ministers



Part 1

What it does

The Council of the European Union, usually known as the Council of Ministers, is one of the two groups or institutions as they are called, that consider proposals put forward by the Commission. The other group is the Parliament. Together they decide what should be made law.

The Council of Ministers is made up of elected politicians from the member states who hold senior jobs in the government back home.

The President the Council is Herman Van Rompuy (former Prime Minister of Belgium and a member of the European Peoples Party) who was elected for a two and a half year term in December 1, 2009.

The Council holds separate meetings to deal with the separate matters, or portfolios, that the European Union is concerned with. These include agriculture, finance, the environment, foreign affairs, justice and home affairs, consumer affairs.

The ministers who attend the meetings are those who have similar responsibilities in their own governments.

So for example, the UK Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, attends meetings of the Council of Ministers that deals with finances.

The Council of Ministers, like the Parliament, conducts its business in all the 23 official languages of the EU.

Part 2

How it votes

When they debate new laws ministers very often reach agreement by consensus, that is to say without having to vote.

If it does come to a vote, each member state votes according to the number of votes it holds. The allocation of votes is largely in proportion to size of population with some weighting in favour of the smaller countries. The UK has 29 votes. The countries have a total of 345 votes between them.

When it comes to a vote, in a few cases a decision is taken by a simple majority. In most other cases it is by qualified majority (QMV).

Qualified majority vote is reached:

- if the measure is approved by a majority of the member states (on some issues a two-thirds majority is needed), and ...
- a minimum of 255 votes has been cast in favour.

A member state may also ask for confirmation that the votes in favour represent at least 62% of the total population of the Union. If this is not so, the decision cannot be adopted.

In a few other matters such as amending the Treaties of the Union or allowing a new country to join, everyone has to agree.

When the Council of Ministers meets to decide on new laws, its proceedings take place in public. When it meets to discuss sensitive matters such as relations with countries outside the EU, it meets behind closed doors.