

Changed rules for qualified majority voting in the Council of the EU

From 1 November 2014, decisions in the Council of the EU (Council of Ministers) requiring a 'qualified majority' are adopted by means of the new 'double majority'. The change lowers the threshold required for adoption by Council, and is intended to increase the speed and efficiency of Council decision-making and to make it more transparent and legitimate.

The old weighted-vote system

The voting system for Council decisions following the 2001 Nice Treaty was intended to adapt to the new weighting of votes which enlargement from 15 to 25 Member States would entail. Qualified majority voting (QMV) was redefined to introduce a combined threshold for votes to pass. The three criteria for decisions to be adopted were 74% of Member States' [weighted votes](#), cast by a majority of Member States, and, optionally, a check that the majority represented 62% of the EU's total population. The main criticism levelled at this system was that the threshold for Member States' approval was simply too high, leading to the problem of gridlock. Ultimately it meant that generally only proposals of limited ambition could gain broad support across the Council and be adopted.

The Lisbon Treaty and the new qualified majority

In order to overcome these drawbacks, and increase legitimacy, in line with the 'one citizen – one vote' principle, the European Convention proposed moving to a double-majority method. The new voting method, included in the EU Constitutional Treaty, was confirmed in the Lisbon Treaty (Article 16 TEU/ Article 238 TFEU) although slightly modified. In contrast to the previous majority rules, which are said to have better protected smaller and medium-sized Member States, the new system focuses on the demographic weight of Member States. The adoption of acts by the Council now requires the approval of 55% of Member States (16) (72% if the act has not been proposed by the Commission), which must represent at least 65% of the EU's population (currently approximately 328.6 million of a total 505.5 million). To limit the possibility of larger states joining together to stop proposals, a blocking coalition must include at least four Member States representing at least 35% of the EU's overall population. In cases where not all Member States participate in voting (e.g. acts adopted only by euro area or Schengen Member States, or within enhanced cooperation), the qualified majority is calculated only on the basis of the participating Member States. Until 31 March 2017 any member of the Council can request, on a case-by-case basis, that the old voting rules be applied.

Winners and Losers?

The new voting method aims to strike a balance between legitimacy and efficiency. However, [commentators](#) agree that medium-sized and smaller Member States now have less weight in the Council. Larger Member States such as Germany, France, and the UK on the other hand are seen as the main beneficiaries of the change. Postponing the introduction of the new system for five years after the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty enabled reluctant Member States to agree to the new Treaty.

The new rules could be seen as reducing in the future the likelihood of Council decisions being taken collectively, leading more often to individual Member States or groups being outvoted. However, [analyses](#) show that despite qualified majority, the greater part of Council decisions (some 80%) are still adopted by consensus. This trend is [expected](#) to continue with the new rules in place. The formal voting rules could however speed up the negotiation process prior to Council decisions taken by consensus, since fewer Member States will need to be persuaded to create a de facto majority during the bargaining process.

The tables show the Member States' populations as of 1 November, and their voting power under the old and new voting systems, in both the EU and the euro area. The graph illustrates the changes in Member States' voting power, in percentage points.

Table 1: Council Voting weights in the EU and euro area

Member State	Population (thousands)	Old voting system			New system based on share of population	
		votes	% of EU total	% of euro area	% of EU total	% of euro area
DE	80 523.7	29	8.2	13.3	15.93	24.2
FR	65 633.2	29	8.2	13.3	12.98	19.7
UK	63 730.1	29	8.2		12.61	
IT	59 685.2	29	8.2	13.3	11.81	17.9
ES	46 704.3	27	7.6	12.4	9.24	14.0
PL	38 533.3	27	7.6		7.62	
RO	20 057.5	14	3.9		3.97	
NL	16 779.6	13	3.6	5.9	3.32	5.3
BE	11 161.6	12	3.4	5.5	2.21	3.4
EL	11 062.5	12	3.4	5.5	2.19	3.3
CZ	10 516.1	12	3.4		2.08	
PT	10 487.3	12	3.4	5.5	2.07	3.1
HU	9 908.8	12	3.4		1.96	
SE	9 555.9	10	2.8		1.89	
AT	8 451.9	10	2.8	4.6	1.67	2.5
BG	7 284.6	10	2.8		1.44	
DK	5 602.6	7	1.9		1.11	
FI	5 426.7	7	1.9	3.2	1.07	1.6
SK	5 410.8	7	1.9	3.2	1.07	1.6
IE	4 591.1	7	1.9	3.2	0.91	1.4
HR	4 262.1	7	1.9		0.84	
LT	2 971.9	7	1.9		0.59	
SI	2 058.8	4	1.1	1.8	0.41	0.62
LV	2 023.8	4	1.1	1.8	0.40	0.61
EE	1 324.8	4	1.1	1.8	0.26	0.4
CY	865.9	4	1.1	1.8	0.17	0.26
LU	537.0	4	1.1	1.8	0.11	0.16
MT	421.4	3	0.8	1.3	0.08	0.13

Figure 1: Comparison of voting weights prior to and after 1 November 2014

