

Glossary

A-item

Council agendas are divided into A and B items. A-items are those on which agreement has been reached and which can be adopted without debate. This does not exclude any Council or Commission member expressing an opinion when the item is put to the vote.

Absolute majority (in the European Parliament)

An absolute majority is the majority of all members of the European Parliament (including those absent or not voting). In its present configuration with 751 MEPs, the threshold for an absolute majority is 376 votes.

Associated committee

If a matter to be discussed by Parliament falls almost equally within the competence of two or more committees, or parts of the issue fall within the competence of two or more committees, one committee is made the responsible committee and the other(s) associated committee(s). Responsible and associated committee work within a jointly agreed timetable, rapporteurs keep each other informed and try to agree on the texts to be proposed to their committees and on their position regarding amendments. They divide areas of competence.

B-item

Council agendas are divided into A and B items. B-items are those on which there is no agreement and on which there will be a debate. They are often politically sensitive issues.

Citizens' initiative

The citizens' initiative allows 1 million citizens from at least a quarter of EU member states to ask the European Commission to come up with proposals for new laws in fields in which it has competence.

Co-decision

Term previously used for what is now the ordinary legislative procedure. Still widely used unofficially.

College of Commissioners

The College is composed of 28 European commissioners.

Commissioner

The European Commission is made up of commissioners, each of whom is assigned responsibility for a specific policy field by the President of the Commission. Currently, there are 28: 1 from each member state.

Committee in the European Parliament

Parliament's 20 permanent committees draw up, amend and adopt legislative proposals, which are then voted by the EP as a whole during plenary sessions. The political make-up of the committees reflects that of Parliament. The EP can set up sub-committees, special temporary committees and formal committees of inquiry.

Committee of Regions

The Committee of the Regions is an EU consultative body with 353 members, representing local and regional authorities. It must be consulted during EU decision-making in the fields of: economic and social cohesion, trans-European infrastructure networks, health, education and culture, employment policy, social policy, the environment, vocational training and transport.

Conciliation

Conciliation is the third and final phase of the ordinary legislative procedure. It takes place when Parliament and Council can't reach agreement on a legislative proposal during the first two readings. Delegations from Council and Parliament look for a compromise acceptable to both.

Conciliation committee

The Conciliation Committee sits during the conciliation phase of the ordinary legislative procedure. It is composed of the same number of member state representatives and MEPs (currently 28/28). The committee is responsible for drawing up a joint text, which is put to the Council and Parliament for approval at third reading.

Conference of Committee Chairs

Parliament's Conference of Committee Chairs is composed of the chairs of all standing and temporary committees. Its task is to improve cooperation between EP committees.

Conference of Presidents

The Conference of Presidents organises Parliament's business and legislative planning, decides on the responsibilities and membership of committees and delegations and is responsible for relations with other EU institutions, national parliaments and non-EU countries. It includes the EP President and political groups chairs.

COREPER

A Council committee made up of the permanent representatives of the member states, which prepares the work of the Council. COREPER I includes deputy ambassadors and COREPER II is made up of ambassadors.

Council of the European Union

The Council of the European Union, generally known as the Council (previously the Council of Ministers), represents EU member state governments. Together with the European Parliament, the Council adopts legislation proposed by the European Commission. It is one of the 7 EU institutions.

Court of Justice of the European Union

The Court of Justice (ECJ) interprets EU law and makes sure it is applied uniformly in all member states. It also settles legal disputes between EU governments, individuals, companies or organisations and EU institutions. It is one of the 7 EU institutions.

Decision

A "decision" is binding on those to whom it is addressed (e.g. an EU country or an individual company) and is directly applicable.

Directive

A "directive" is a legislative act setting a goal to be achieved by all EU countries, but leaving the method to each member state.

EU law

EU law is divided into 'primary' and 'secondary' legislation. The treaties (primary legislation) are the basis for all EU action. Secondary legislation which includes regulations, directives and decisions are derived from the principles and objectives set out in the treaties.

European Central Bank

The European Central Bank (ECB) manages the EU's single currency - the euro - and tries to ensure price stability in the EU. It is responsible for framing and implementing the EU's economic and monetary policy. It is one of the 7 EU institutions.

European Commission

The European Commission (EC) is the EU's executive body and represents the interests of the EU as a whole. It proposes new EU legislation and ensures its correct application. It is one of the 7 EU institutions.

European Council

The European Council brings together the Heads of State or Government of the EU member states. It makes decisions on broad political priorities and important initiatives. It does not wield legislative power. It is one of the 7 EU institutions.

European Court of Auditors

The European Court of Auditors audits EU finances. Its role is to improve EU financial management and report on the use of public funds. It is one of the 7 EU institutions.

European Economic and Social Committee

The European Economic and Social Committee is an EU consultative body with 353 members representing civil society, employers and workers. It must be consulted about EU decision-making on the economy and social policy.

European investment bank

The European Investment Bank (EIB) supports projects in EU countries, and invests in future member and partner countries. It borrows money on capital markets rather than drawing on the EU budget and lends it on favourable terms to projects in line with EU policy objectives. It is owned by the 28 EU countries.

European Parliament

Composed of 751 directly-elected MEPs from 28 countries, the European Parliament (EP) represents EU citizens. It acts as a co-legislator with the Council on nearly all EU law and holds the other EU institutions to account. It is one of the 7 EU institutions.

Green Paper

Green Papers are published by the European Commission to stimulate discussion with interested parties at European level. They may lead to proposals for EU action outlined in White Papers.

Hearing

A parliamentary committee can organise a hearing with experts if it is considered useful to its work. Hearings are usually public.

Inter-institutional relations group

A Commission body responsible for coordinating political, legislative and administrative relations with the other institutions, in particular the European Parliament and Council. It brings together members from all the Commissioners' cabinets tasked with monitoring inter-institutional affairs.

Joint committee meetings

If a matter referred to Parliament cannot be given to one responsible committee because it is clearly within the competences of several, the respective rapporteurs draw up a single draft report, which is voted on jointly by the committees concerned, under the joint chairmanship of the committee chairs.

Member of the European Parliament

Members of the European Parliament are directly elected for a five-year period. The 751 MEPs represent EU citizens.

Modified proposal (Commission proposal after first reading in EP)

Between the first reading in Parliament and the first reading in Council, the Commission can alter its proposal to incorporate Parliament amendments which, in its view, improve the initial proposal and/or are likely to facilitate an agreement between Parliament and Council.

Official Journal

The Official Journal of the European Union (OJ) contains EU legislation, information, notices and preliminary legislative work. It is published each working day in all of EU official languages. Only legal acts published in the OJ are binding.

Official language

There are 24 official EU languages: Bulgarian, Croatian, Czech, Danish, Dutch, English, Estonian, Finnish, French, German, Greek, Hungarian, Irish, Italian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Maltese, Polish, Portuguese, Romanian, Slovak, Slovene, Spanish and Swedish. All EU law is published in all official languages.

Opinion (of a committee)

The parliamentary committee in charge of an issue can ask other committees for their opinion. The chair and rapporteur of the committee giving an opinion are often invited to take part in meetings of the committee responsible. The opinion is often in the form of a written report.

Orange card

When the Commission introduces a new legislative proposal, it is sent to national parliaments. If a majority of those bodies find the draft legislation does not comply with the subsidiarity principle, the Commission must re-examine the proposal. If it retains the proposal, the Commission must justify its position by means of a reasoned opinion. If Council and Parliament vote against the proposal during the first reading, it will be abandoned.

Ordinary legislative procedure

Under the ordinary legislative procedure (formerly co-decision) the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union decide jointly on Commission proposals on a wide range of areas (for example, economic governance, immigration, energy, transport, the environment and consumer protection). Most EU law is now adopted this way.

Own initiative report

In addition to legislative reports, parliamentary committees can produce "own initiative reports" on issues falling within their remit. These reports can be the means of raising awareness on a given issue.

Parliamentary questions

Parliamentary questions are addressed by MEPs to other EU institutions and bodies. The recipient must provide an answer within a given timeframe. Parliamentary questions are a direct form of parliamentary scrutiny over other EU institutions and bodies.

Petitions to the European Parliament

Any EU citizen, resident, or company, organisation or association with its headquarters in the EU, can petition Parliament on any subject falling within the EU's remit and which directly affects them. Such petitions give the European Parliament the opportunity of calling attention to any infringement of a European citizen's rights by a member state, local authority or other institution.

Plenary

Parliament's plenary sessions take place 12 times a year in Strasbourg, with shorter plenaries in Brussels. Plenary brings together all 751 MEPs to debate and vote on EU legislation and adopt a position on political issues.

Political group

MEPs are organised not by nationality, but by political affiliation. There are currently 7 political groups in the European Parliament. Members may belong to only one political group. Some MEPs do not belong to a political group and are known as non-attached members.

President of the European Parliament

The President of the European Parliament chairs plenary sessions, the Conference of the Presidents and the Bureau (made up of EP vice-presidents). He represents Parliament within the EU and internationally.

Proportionality

According to the principle of proportionality, the involvement of EU institutions must be limited to what is necessary to achieve the objectives of the Treaties.

Public consultation

In public consultations the European Commission asks different stakeholders, such as public authorities, member state authorities, enterprises, (private) organisations, industry associations, citizens, to submit their views on intended legislation. It usually takes the form of a questionnaire with open and closed questions.

Qualified majority in Council

A qualified majority in the Council corresponds to at least 55% of the Council members (member states), comprising a minimum of 16 countries, representing at least 65% of the EU population. A blocking minority may be formed by at least four Council members.

Rapporteur

An MEP, appointed by the parliamentary committee responsible for handling a legislative proposal, who will steer the proposal through the EP and will prepare a report on it.

Regulation

A "regulation" is a directly applicable form of EU law, which has binding legal force in all member states. National governments do not have to take action to implement EU regulations.

Report

When a Commission proposal is forwarded to a parliamentary committee, the committee appoints a rapporteur to prepare a report, which usually consists of amendments to the proposal, short justifications and an explanatory statement, including a financial statement evaluating the financial impact of the proposal and its compatibility with the long-term budget.

Right of initiative

The Commission's right of initiative empowers it to make proposals either because the Treaties explicitly provide for it or because the Commission considers it necessary. The Council and European Parliament may also ask the Commission to come up with proposals.

Secretary General of the Council

The head of the General Secretariat of the Council, which assists the Council and the European Council. With the President of the Council, he signs all acts adopted jointly by Parliament and Council.

Secretary General of the European Parliament

The Parliament's most senior official, responsible for Parliament's administration. He ensures the smooth running of parliamentary business under the leadership of the President and the Bureau. With the President, he verifies and signs all acts adopted jointly by Parliament and Council.

Shadow rapporteur

The shadow rapporteur is an MEP who monitors a dossier or EP report on behalf of a political group other than that of the rapporteur.

Simple majority (in the European Parliament)

A proposal adopted by simple majority is approved if the number of "yes" is higher than number of "no" votes.

Subsidiarity

According to the subsidiarity principle, the EU should not act (except in areas that fall within its exclusive competence), unless EU action is more effective than action taken at national, regional or local level. Constant checks are made to verify that EU-level action is justified.

Treaties

A treaty is a binding agreement between EU member countries. It sets out EU objectives, rules for EU institutions and how decisions are made and the relationship between the EU and its member countries.

Treaty of Amsterdam

The Treaty of Amsterdam came into force 1 May 1999. Its purpose was to reform the EU institutions in preparation for the arrival of future member countries. It amended, renumbered and consolidated the EU and EEC treaties and increased the use of co-decision.

Treaty of Lisbon

The Lisbon Treaty entered into force on 1 December 2009. It comprises the Treaty on European Union (TEU) and the Treaty on the functioning of the EU (TFEU). The Lisbon Treaty gave more power to the EP, changed voting procedures in the Council, introduced the citizens' initiative, created a permanent president of the European Council, a new High Representative for Foreign Affairs, a new EU diplomatic service and clarified which powers belong to the EU, which to EU member states and which are shared. It changed the name of co-decision to the ordinary legislative procedure and increased the number of areas to which OLP is applied.

Treaty of Maastricht

The Treaty of Maastricht, or the Treaty on the European Union, entered into force on 1 November 1993. It established the European Union (previously the EU was the European Communities), introduced co-decision and cooperation between EU governments on defence and justice and home affairs. It paved the way for Economic and Monetary Union and introduced elements of a political union (citizenship, a common foreign and internal affairs policy).

Treaty of Nice

The Treaty of Nice entered into force on 1 February 2003. Its purpose was to reform the institutions so that the EU could function efficiently after reaching 25 member countries. It introduced methods for changing the composition of the Commission and redefining the voting system in the Council.

Treaty on the European Union TEU

The Maastricht Treaty, in force since 1993, was amended and renamed the Treaty on the European Union by the Lisbon Treaty. It establishes the EU as legal entity, defines its values, aims, institutions and competences. It is one of the two principal treaties on which the EU is now based.

Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union TFEU

The Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), started life as the Treaty of Rome in 1958, but has since been much amended. It sets out the organisational and functional details of the EU. It is one of the two principal treaties on which the EU is now based

Trilogue

Informal meetings attended by the European Parliament, Council and Commission. Their purpose is to get an agreement (on a package of amendments or on the wording of laws) acceptable to Council and Parliament.

Unanimity (in the Council)

Unanimity requires all member states meeting within the Council to agree on a proposal before it can be adopted. Since the Lisbon Treaty only a restricted number of policies judged to be sensitive remain subject to unanimity voting.

White Paper

Commission White Papers are documents containing proposals for EU action in a specific area. In some cases they follow a Green Paper published to launch a consultation process at European level. When a White Paper is favourably received by the Council, it can lead to an action programme for the Union in the area concerned.

Written declaration

A written declaration is a text of a maximum of 200 words on a matter falling within the European Union's sphere of activities, submitted by MEPs. If signed by majority of the MEPs, it is forwarded to the institution to which it is addressed. MEPs can use written declarations to launch or relay a debate on a subject that comes within the EU's remit.

Yellow card

When the Commission introduces a new legislative proposal, it is sent to national parliaments. If a third of them find the draft legislation does not comply with the subsidiarity principle, the Commission has to review the proposal and decide whether to keep, amend or withdraw it and to justify its decision.