

“The new voting system means that France and Germany will be able to bully us due to their size...”

FALSE

The Claim

This is big countries doing what big countries do...take over.

According to the National Platform, “Lisbon is a power-grab by the Big States for control of the new post-Lisbon European Union. By basing EU law-making primarily on population size, the Lisbon Treaty would double Germany’s say on the EU Council of Ministers from 8% to 17%. France’s say would go from 8% today to 13%...Ireland’s voting weight on a population basis would be more than halved to 1%.”¹

The CAEUC have said that the Treaty undermines democracy, and that “the [new] voting balance would change to favour countries with larger populations.” They claim that it would “greatly reduce the areas where governments could veto policy proposals” and that “in future the Heads of State would be allowed to agree to change EU policies and remove vetoes without referendum.”²

The Short Answer

This is not true. They did not bully us and they cannot bully us because the system is specifically built to stop the small countries ganging up on the large and the large bullying the small.

The Long Answer

Now that the Union has 27 countries, the Lisbon Treaty makes the voting system in the Council simpler. It also includes measures that prevent countries with large populations from dominating decisions one way or another.

Whereas under the current system Ireland has 7 votes out of 345, the new system brought in by Lisbon would give us 1 vote out of 27 while taking our population into account. The table over the page shows the system proposed by the Treaty.

It is important to note that consensus is the way that the EU decides matters usually. It’s really not best practice to bully one country into doing something, large or small. It’s just not the EU way.

Speaking of bullying, we at European Movement Ireland are still looking for any tangible example where France and Germany did bully us with the old system of voting in the 36 years of working with them. We’ll get back to you if we find any.



This European Movement Ireland fact sheet is part of a series of research conducted to clarify the issues in the Lisbon Treaty debate. European Movement Ireland is a pro-European non-profit organisation which does not advocate either side of the Lisbon Treaty Referendum, we advocate the facts.



Current legal situation

Overview

The Council, along with the European Parliament, is the main decision-making body in the Union. The Council is made up of government ministers, who act in the interest of the country they represent. Their job is to approve the law (or indeed reject it).

This is not just one Council, but Councils depending on what's being handled in the draft piece of law. If it is an agricultural piece of law, then our Agricultural Minister meets with his or her fellow Agricultural Ministers to approve or reject the law. If it is an environment law, then Minister John Gormley heads to Brussels. There are some Ministers, therefore, that have few trips to Brussels as their national portfolio is one that does not have European law to deal with, for example, Minister Eamon O'Cuiv. Below are all the Councils that the EU has and who represents Ireland at them:

Council	Lead Minister
General Affairs and External Relations	Micheal Martin
Economic and Financial Affairs	Brian Lenihan
Justice and Home Affairs	Dermot Ahern
Employment, Social Policy, Health & Consumer Affairs	Mary Coughlan, Dermot Ahern & Mary Harney, Mary Hanafin
Competitiveness	Mary Coughlan
Transport, Telecommunications and Energy	Noel Dempsey & Eamonn Ryan
Agriculture and Fisheries	Brendan Smith
Environment	John Gormley
Education, Youth and Culture	Batt O'Keeffe & Martin Cullen

The main Council is the European Council where our Taoiseach meets with his counterparts a number of times of year to decide the key pieces of law or decide the overall strategy for the European Union in a key area. For example they recently set targets for all European countries in the area of climate change. So to be exact, the following should be added to the list:

European	Taoiseach Brian Cowen
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Powers and Responsibilities

The Council shares the power to legislate with the European Parliament. In most situations, European laws are made by a co-decision procedure. This means that the Council and the Parliament jointly agree proposals for legislation that have come from the European Commission. The Council and the Parliament can make amendments to the legislation under this procedure. However, there are certain important areas, for example, indirect taxation, where

the Parliament may only give an opinion as to whether a proposed piece of legislation can become law.

The Council is also responsible for the co-ordination of the economic policies of EU countries.

The power to approve the budget of the EU lies with both the Council and the Parliament. The Parliament supervises spending by the EU and it also adopts the annual budget for the EU. It has the last word on spending on the European Regional Development Fund, the European Social Fund, cultural and educational programmes, humanitarian aid and refugee programmes. However, when it comes to spending on agriculture and spending arising from international agreements, the Parliament can propose modifications but the Council has the final say.

Voting

Decisions in the Council can be taken by either a unanimous vote or a Qualified Majority Vote (QMV). Under QMV, the bigger the country's population, the more votes it has, but the numbers are actually weighted in favour of the less populous countries. The current system does disproportionately favour small countries. For example, while Germany currently has over eighteen times the population of Ireland, it only has just over 4 times the amount of votes in the Council.³

The voting system is explained in Article 205 of the Treaty establishing the European Community:

"4. When a decision is to be adopted by the Council by a qualified majority, a member of the Council may request verification that the Member States constituting the qualified majority represent at least 62 % of the total population of the Union. If that condition is shown not to have been met, the decision in question shall not be adopted."

It should be noted that while there is a voting system in place, agreement is usually found through consensus rather than invoking a strict voting procedure to pass a law.

Number of acts passed in 2008	Opportunities to use QMV	Actual use of QMV
504	426 (84.5%)	37 (8.2%)

This compares with 82.7% of decisions that could have been taken under QMV in 2007, of which 10.5% involved a recorded vote. These figures demonstrate a steady increase in the use of consensus and a decrease in the use of voting, especially with regard to the more technical files⁴ since 2005.

What Lisbon Introduces

The Lisbon Treaty will change the system of QMV from 2014 onwards to a "double majority". This means that a minimum of 55% of the EU members (i.e. 15 out of the current 27 members) representing a minimum of 65% of the EU's population is required for European legislation to be passed.

A blocking minority must include at least four EU countries.⁵ **This latter element was introduced specifically to reassure smaller and medium-size countries and would prevent three of the biggest four from blocking them.**

Furthermore, in order to continue to seek maximum consensus for Council decisions, it was agreed that from 1 April 2017, if a measure is opposed by members of the Council representing at least 55% of the population or 55% of the EU countries needed to constitute a blocking minority, further discussions would take place in an effort to achieve wider agreement.

Under the Treaty, the Council will also meet in public when it is considering or voting on legislation.

For reference: Current system of voting in the Council⁸

EU country	Population	Votes	% EU Population	% Vote
Germany	82,217,837	29	16.5	8.4
France	63,983,000	29	12.8	8.4
United Kingdom	61,193,524	29	12.3	8.4
Italy	59,619,290	29	11.9	8.4
Spain	45,283,259	27	9.1	7.8
Poland	38,115,641	27	7.7	7.8
Romania	21,528,627	14	4.3	4.1
The Netherlands	16,405,399	13	3.3	3.8
Greece	11,213,785	12	2.2	3.5
Belgium	10,666,866	12	2.1	3.5
Portugal	10,617,575	12	2.1	3.5
Czech Republic	10,381,130	12	2	3.5
Hungary	10,045,401	12	2	3.5
Sweden	9,182,927	10	1.9	2.9
Austria	8,318,592	10	1.7	2.9
Bulgaria	7,640,238	10	1.5	2.9
Denmark	5,472,093	7	1.1	2.0
Slovakia	5,400,998	7	1.1	2.0
Finland	5,300,484	7	1	2.0
Ireland	4,401,335	7	0.9	2.0
Lithuania	3,366,357	7	0.7	2.0
Latvia	2,270,894	4	0.5	1.2
Slovenia	2,010,269	4	0.4	1.2
Estonia	1,340,935	4	0.3	1.2
Cyprus	789,269	4	0.2	1.2
Luxembourg	483,799	4	0.1	1.2
Malta	410,290	3	0.1	0.9
Total	497,659,814	345	100	100

EU country	Population	% EU Population	Vote
Germany	82,217,837	16.5	1
France	63,983,000	12.8	1
United Kingdom	61,193,524	12.3	1
Italy	59,619,290	11.9	1
Spain	45,283,259	9.1	1
Poland	38,115,641	7.7	1
Romania	21,528,627	4.3	1
The Netherlands	16,405,399	3.3	1
Greece	11,213,785	2.2	1
Belgium	10,666,866	2.1	1
Portugal	10,617,575	2.1	1
Czech Republic	10,381,130	2	1
Hungary	10,045,401	2	1
Sweden	9,182,927	1.9	1
Austria	8,318,592	1.7	1
Bulgaria	7,640,238	1.5	1
Denmark	5,472,093	1.1	1
Slovakia	5,400,998	1.1	1
Finland	5,300,484	1	1
Ireland	4,401,335	0.9	1
Lithuania	3,366,357	0.7	1
Latvia	2,270,894	0.5	1
Slovenia	2,010,269	0.4	1
Estonia	1,340,935	0.3	1
Cyprus	789,269	0.2	1
Luxembourg	483,799	0.1	1
Malta	410,290	0.1	1
Total	497,659,814	100	27

In order for legislation to pass under the new system, it must be supported by at least 15 of the 27 Council Members representing at least 65% of the EU population.

¹ Article 16 of the Treaty on the European Union. The National Platform, <http://www.lisbontreaty2008.info/wordpress>

² <http://www.caec.org/index.php?q=node/9>

³ See reference below for full details of population sizes and voting weights in the Council under the current system.

⁴ Coreper is the acronym of the Permanent Representatives Committee. Coreper works in two configurations:

Coreper I, consisting of the deputy permanent representatives, deals with technical matters; Coreper II, consisting of the ambassadors, deals with political, commercial, economic or

institutional matters.

⁵ Article 16.4 TEU, as modified by the Lisbon Treaty.

⁶ Sources: http://europa.eu/institutions/inst/council/index_en.htm and <http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/eurostat/home>