

Working methods of the Council of the European Union

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The Council's working methods take their inspiration from traditional styles of diplomatic negotiation and have evolved little over time. To this day, the Council has adhered to the practice of working through different-ranking levels of negotiation, ranging from working parties to Coreper and the Council, reflected in a series of plenary meetings. The placing of items on the agenda, the pooling of views, debates and voting, consensus seeking or the drafting of minutes — all these are everyday practice at the Council. The running of meetings by the Presidency and the logistical and legal back-up supplied by the General Secretariat are also characteristic features.

However, the rise in the number of activities in which the Council is involved and in the number of people taking part in its meetings has led to a number of developments:

- there is greater planning of the Council's work;
- the Rules of Procedure have become stricter, with a view to making the enlarged Council more efficient in its procedures;
- limits have been placed on unanimous voting, and qualified majority voting has become more common; the practical effect of this is to sideline the right of veto and make it easier to secure a consensus;
- there has been a reweighting of the votes in the Council to make voting more demographically representative; it had become progressively less so in the course of successive enlargements, to the detriment of the larger Member States;
- working timetables are better coordinated, and closer ties have been set up with the European Parliament since the codecision procedure became more general practice.

The discussions which took place during the negotiations on the ratification of the EU Treaty regarding the need for a Union which is more democratic and closer to its citizens have opened the way for the adoption of rules on public access to debates and their outcomes which are leading to a gradual relaxation of the principle that the Council's deliberations are confidential (see below, *Operation*).