

How to vote in the Council of the European Union?

European politicians have learnt a lesson from the Irish 'No' for the Treaty of Lisbon. Analysing key reasons that caused this outcome, one may wonder to what extent the citizens of Member States of the European Union feel that their votes do matter. In particular, it is a good opportunity to re-examine the voting procedures adapted by the Council of the EU.

The problem of analysing voting power in various voting systems has been a subject of scientific research for a long time. Experts in the field agree that the Treaty of Nice gives too much power to a number of countries, while other states are granted less power than appropriate. On the other hand, the Lisbon Treaty assigns too much voting power to the biggest and the smallest states at the expense of all middle size countries.

Both voting systems seem to violate the basic democratic principle that the vote of any citizen of every Member State of the Union should be equal. Assuming that all potential coalitions in voting bodies are equally likely one can show that this rule is satisfied by the weighted voting system designed by a British scientist Lionel Penrose already sixty years ago for the purpose of the United Nations. In this system the voting power of each country should be proportional to the square root of its population. This can be achieved if we also assign the weights proportional to the square root of population and find the optimal threshold for qualified majority (at the level of 61.5% for EU-27).

The idea of dividing votes proportionally to the square root of population is in fact the simplest implementation of the principle of degressive proportionality and lies exactly between two extremes: the 'one country - one vote' system and the system assigning votes proportional to population. A similar degressive system is used in the German Bundesrat to assign the number of representatives to each Land.

The Penrose system is efficient, representative, transparent and objective, so is not subjected to political bargaining. It can be easily implemented independently of the number of member countries. Such a system was already proposed by Sweden in 2000, by Poland in 2007, and was recently endorsed in a number of scientific articles. This proposal vastly increases the legitimacy of the European institutions. It derives the power of those who govern, the EU politicians, in a visible and equitable way from those who are being governed, the EU citizens.

Several of the undersigned raised this issue in June 2004 in an open letter to the governments of the EU member states. Any system implemented without due regard to the scientific analysis of voting power may become a major drawback to democratic development in the European Union. The scientific community may help politicians to overcome the current stalemate in reforming the EU institutions.

Scientists for a democratic Europe

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