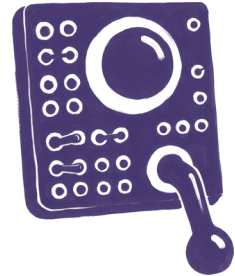


How does the EU actually work?

The Commission proposes laws; the directly elected Parliament and the member states' governments amend and pass them; a common court referees. That's the machine.



Everything else is detail – but the detail is where the arguments live, so here is the machine explained honestly, including why it's genuinely hard to follow.

The four rooms

Think of EU decision-making as four rooms in one building.

The Commission – one member per country, a president (currently confirmed by Parliament) at the top – is the executive and the only body that can formally propose an EU law. It also polices the rules: when a government breaks treaty commitments or a company abuses a market, the Commission is the prosecutor. What it cannot do is pass anything alone.

The European Parliament – 720 members you elect directly every five years – amends and votes on every ordinary law, approves the budget, confirms the Commission and can dismiss it. It is the chamber of citizens.

The Council – ministers from the 27 national governments, meeting by topic (finance ministers on tax, agriculture ministers on farming) – is the chamber of states, and the second signature every law needs. Above it sits the European Council, the presidents and prime ministers, which sets direction and handles crises but passes no laws.

The Court of Justice in Luxembourg referees it all; its rulings bind national governments, which is the feature that makes the whole construction more than a debating club.

How a law actually happens

The ordinary route: the Commission drafts a proposal (usually after governments or Parliament asked it to). Parliament amends and votes. The Council amends and votes. If the two texts differ, negotiators converge on one, and both chambers pass the final version. National authorities then apply it, and the Court settles disputes. A directive gives each country latitude in how to implement; a regulation applies word-for-word everywhere.

In the Council, the default rule is **qualified majority**: 55 % of the states, representing 65 % of the population. Note the double lock – a law needs both breadth (most countries) and weight (most people). Fifteen small states cannot outvote the big four's populations; three big states cannot outvote everyone else.

Where the veto lives

Some domains never moved to majority voting: foreign and security policy, taxation, the seven-year budget, treaty change, admitting new members. There, every one of 27 governments holds a veto – which is why the EU can fine a trillion-dollar company on Tuesday and fail to agree a sanctions statement on Wednesday. **Whether that's a bug or the design** is the central argument about the EU's future, and the honest answer is: it's the unfinished part of the building.

The honest criticism

Is it too complicated? Yes – and not as a matter of taste. The system grew by **seventy years of treaty accretion** rather than one constitutional design, and it shows. The cost isn't just confusion; it's

accountability. When a decision emerges from a Commission proposal, amended by two chambers, implemented by your national government, citizens can't easily answer democracy's basic question: **who do I vote out if I don't like this?** Everyone involved was elected or appointed by someone elected – the “unelected bureaucrats” line doesn't survive contact with the org chart – but responsibility is so distributed that blame evaporates, and evaporated blame usually condenses on “Brussels.”

A simpler machine would need something Europe hasn't yet chosen to build: a clearer government, facing a clearer opposition, answerable to **a European public that is still half-formed**. The complexity, in other words, isn't a decoration on the halfway house. It is the halfway house.

All questions →

FREQUENTLY ASKED

Who actually makes EU laws?

Two chambers together: the European Parliament (720 members, directly elected) and the Council (the 27 national governments' ministers). Both must pass the same text. Only the Commission can formally propose it.

What is the European Commission?

The EU's executive: one commissioner per country, led by a president approved by Parliament. It proposes legislation, enforces the treaties and manages the budget – a civil service with an initiative monopoly, not a government.

Where do national vetoes still apply?

Foreign and security policy, taxation, the multi-year budget, treaty change and admitting new members all require unanimity – any one of 27 governments can block. Most other lawmaking uses qualified majority.

What is qualified majority voting?

The Council's default rule: a law passes with at least 55 % of member states representing at least 65 % of the EU population. It protects small states from being steam-rolled and big states from being outvoted by coalitions of tiny ones.

Is the EU run by unelected bureaucrats?

Its laws can't pass without your directly elected MEPs and your elected government's minister. The Commission is appointed – like most civil services – but confirmed and dismissible by Parliament. The real problem is diffusion, not absence, of accountability.

SOURCES

- Treaty on European Union / TFEU (ordinary legislative procedure, Art. 294)
- Qualified majority definition: Art. 16(4) TEU (55 % of states / 65 % of population)
- European Parliament: 720 seats (2024– term)
- Unanimity domains: CFSP, taxation, MFF, enlargement, treaty revision