

A Guide to the European Union

There are three main political institutions within the EU

Council of Ministers

The Council is the European Union's main decision-making body. It is composed of ministers from the national governments of the 27 Member States, and meets in Brussels or Luxembourg to agree legislation and policy. On some issues, the Council shares equally legislative power with the European Parliament, known as co-decision, and both institutions share responsibility as the EU's budget authority.

The 'Council of Europe' is made up of all EU Leaders, while different Council Committees debate and decide policy on different issues, e.g. trade, agriculture, fisheries, represented by the relevant Ministers.

Each Member State holds the Presidency of the Council on a rotating basis for six months. The Council of Europe meets at least twice a year, where long term strategic decisions are taken, while the individual Council committees tend to meet monthly.

European Commission

The Commission is the EU's executive body, with the responsibility for proposing and then enforcing legislation approved by the Council/Parliament, and is based in Brussels.

A President – currently Jose Manuel Barroso, a former Portuguese Prime Minister – heads it and each Member State nominates one Commissioner. Each Commissioner has a specific portfolio, and all are appointed for a five-year term of office.

European Parliament

Elections are held every five years for the European Parliament at the same time across Europe – the next elections will be in 2014. The Parliament oversees the work of the Commission, and makes recommendations to the Council on proposed legislation, with specific committees established for specific legislation. The Parliament also scrutinises the EU's annual accounts and also questions each Commissioner before their appointment, and has the power to veto or sack the entire Commission.

While it is primarily based in Brussels, the Parliament also meets monthly in Strasbourg, under the terms of the existing EU treaties, where the Parliament takes decisions as a whole, following the work of the committees.

Members of the European Parliament represent regions from their own country, and under the electoral system used, a region will have a number of MEPs from different parties representing them. The UK is divided into 12 such regions, with the number of MEPs allocated to a region based on population size.