

Research impact: making a difference

Influencing reform in EU voting structure

LSE's Voting Power & Procedures (VPP) initiative influenced the design of an EU voting system that would ensure all citizens an equal voice

What was the problem?

In the early years of the 21st century the voting rules in the European Union were hotly contested. The rapid addition of new member states – many of them small, formerly Eastern bloc countries – fueled claims that the rules enabled countries with larger populations to wield undue influence.

There was broad agreement that EU voting should be based on a simple, transparent procedure giving equal power to every citizen of the EU. Moreover, there was agreement on the need for an easy and unambiguous way to extend voting rights whenever new member states joined the union. However, there was little agreement as to how to achieve this and insufficient research to inform discussion and policy formulation.

What did we do?

Since its establishment in 2000, the Voting Power & Procedures (VPP) initiative at the LSE Centre for Philosophy of Natural and Social Science (CPNSS) has become a leading international research centre for the measurement and improvement of voting systems.

Founded by LSE Professor of Philosophy Moshé Machover and Visiting Research Fellow Rudolf Fara, the work of the VPP programme has been largely based on a landmark book by Machover and Dan S. Felsenthal of the University of Haifa titled *The Measurement of Voting Power* (Edward Elgar, 1998). That book was credited with reviving the field of voting research, and the VPP was subsequently created with the explicit aim of informing decision makers and their advisers, the media, and the general public on key issues in voting theory, policy and application.

In 2001 and 2006, the VPP received grants from the Leverhulme Trust to research the measurement of voting power, with particular emphasis on the challenge of designing of a system of weighted voting in the EU Council, which is comprised of ministers from each member state and is responsible for setting the EU's political agenda.

In this context, the work of VPP focused on both voting power – the ability of a single nation or bloc to affect decision-making – and voting weight, which is the number of votes wielded both by EU citizens and in national blocs. Voting power can be disproportionate to voting weight: for instance, a shareholder with 51% of company stock has only 51% of all votes (voting weight) but would have 100% of the voting power if the company took decisions by a simple majority vote.

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As a result of their analysis, VPP was able to recommend a variety of ways to balance voting weight and voting power to help ensure that EU citizens had a more equal voice in EU decision-making, regardless of the size and influence of their home nation.

What happened?

VPP's research informed analyses of power distribution within the EU and the voting rules for the EU Council. Negotiations around the Treaty of Lisbon, which proposed significant changes in EU Council voting procedures, provided the context for Machover's presentations.

In 2007, Machover took part in the policy dialogue 'Rules for Decision-Making in the Council: Which Way Forward?' at the European Policy Centre, Brussels, and subsequently advised a joint meeting of the European Policy Centre and the Centre for European Policy Studies. Machover also presented a paper on EU voting power at the European Centre Natolin in Warsaw.

In late 2007, Machover advised the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office on the potential effect of the Lisbon Treaty on the UK's voting power at the EU Council of Ministers. The following year he advised the Liberal-Democrat peer William Wallace (Lord Wallace of Saltaire) on the same topic. Machover also delivered a paper at a seminar in Prague, *Voting Systems in the [EU] Council [of Ministers]*, hosted by the Czech Prime Minister, Mirek Topolánek.

The Treaty of Lisbon was signed into law in 2009. As a result, the EU Council now uses qualified majority voting – with approval requiring 55% of member states, representing at least 65% of the EU population – for more than three-quarters of its decision-making. The previous EU Council voting system relied more frequently on simple majority voting, a system now used only for non-legislative votes.

In 2011, the work of Felsenthal and Machover was honoured in a *festschrift* – a book celebrating the achievements of a living person – at a special VPP symposium. Thirty-two academics from around the world contributed to the book.

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