



EDUCATION
SERVICE

PARLIAMENT

FIND

YOUR

WAY



FIND YOUR WAY...

Almost everywhere we look and in every choice we make Parliament has played a role, from the laws that govern our day-to-day lives to the public services we use and the role of the UK in the global community.

This guide takes you to the heart of Parliament and helps you find your way through the history, people and processes. You can also find out how to get involved and make your voice heard.

Whether you are studying for a qualification or simply looking for more information about politics and Parliament, this guide is for you.

Look out for the topics and icons that suit you and the next steps you can take to find out more.

KEY



THE JARGON

Definitions of key words and phrases



TALKING POINT

Debate and discussion points



TEN...

Ten facts not to miss



DID YOU KNOW?

Facts, statistics and quotations



NEXT STEPS

Where to go to find out more

CONTENTS

Highlights	Page 2
History	Page 4
Democracy	Page 6
The Constitution	Page 8
The EU	Page 10
Parliament	Page 12
House of Commons	Page 14
House of Lords	Page 16
Legislation	Page 18
Elections and Voting	Page 20
Political Parties	Page 24
Pressure Groups	Page 26
Get Involved	Page 28

HIGHLIGHTS

CENTRAL LOBBY

Lobbying, page 26: Find out how pressure groups have their say in the political process and what you can do to get your own voice heard.



WESTMINSTER HALL

History, page 4: Follow the history of Parliament, from its medieval origins through to votes for women and up to the present day.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

House of Commons, page 14: What happens in the chamber; what do MPs do, and who do they represent?



HOUSE OF LORDS

House of Lords, page 16: Who are the Members of the House of Lords and how does their work impact on the decisions made in Parliament?



ROYAL GALLERY

The Monarch, page 12: How does the role of the monarch fit into Parliament?



HISTORY

The history of Parliament goes back nearly 1,000 years and there are many fascinating dates to pick from, so here are just a few to get you started. You can delve deeper into the past by visiting the Next Steps links online.

1099

WESTMINSTER HALL

Westminster Hall is commissioned by King William II and completed in 1099. The hall is the only part of the old Palace of Westminster still standing today.



1295

MODEL PARLIAMENT

The first recognised Parliament is made up of nobles, bishops and two representatives for each county and town – the model for future Parliaments.

1605

THE GUNPOWDER PLOT

Guy Fawkes is caught trying to blow up Parliament.



1689

BILL OF RIGHTS

In the Glorious Revolution of 1688–89, James II flees England and Parliament offers the crown to William III and Mary II. Parliament passes legislation setting out exactly what is expected of an English monarch. The Bill of Rights helps to establish the constitutional monarchy and political order which we still have today.

1836

THE NEW PALACE

Charles Barry wins the competition to design Parliament's new home after the fire in 1834. Augustus Welby Pugin takes the role of interior designer, creating everything from fireplaces and furniture to inkwells.

1897–1928

VOTES FOR WOMEN

The National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies is formed in 1897, gathering together different groups campaigning for the right to vote. The Representation of the People Act 1918 gives votes to women – with certain conditions. The Equal Franchise Act 1928 finally gives women the same voting rights as men.

1999

HOUSE OF LORDS ACT

Passing of the House of Lords Act changes the membership, reducing the number of hereditary Peers to 92 and setting up a new panel to select independent Members.



HISTORY

HISTORY

4

5

King John agrees to a Great Charter of Freedoms ("Magna Carta Libertatum" in Latin). This limits the king's power over the Church and nobility.

MAGNA CARTA

1215

The House of Commons finds a permanent home in old St Stephen's Chapel.

THE COMMONS CHAMBER

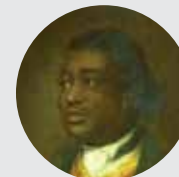
1547

King Charles I is executed in 1649. In 1653, Oliver Cromwell becomes Lord Protector and establishes the Nominated Assembly, which introduces civil marriages and the registration of births, marriages and deaths.

OLIVER CROMWELL

1653

Ignatius Sancho (1729–80) makes history as the first black voter on record. He also writes accounts of political events, campaigns against the slave trade and gives advice to MPs at his grocery shop in Westminster.



THE FIRST BLACK VOTER

1780

Referendums on devolution are held, and results across the board lead to separate devolved legislatures being established – the Scottish Parliament and the National Assembly for Wales. The Northern Ireland Assembly is established in 1998 following referendums on the peace process in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

DEVOLUTION REFERENDUMS

1997



Discover the whole fascinating story of Parliament with the Houses of History interactive online timeline: www.parliament.uk/housesofhistory

And for more insight into the political, social and cultural history of Parliament visit: www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage

DEMOCRACY



Get started

The way we are governed involves decisions about society and how we live our lives. In the UK, we live in a democracy, with elected representatives who make decisions on our behalf, so the power is ultimately in the hands of the people.

In detail

In a democracy, the government's power is dependent upon the consent of the governed population. Abraham Lincoln described democracy as 'government of the people, by the people, for the people'. The word has its origins in two Greek terms – demos (people) and kratia (rule by) and translates as 'rule by the people'.



The three main principles in modern democracy:



1. All citizens have the right to stand as candidates in local, regional and central government elections, where there is free competition between political parties.
2. It is the duty of citizens to actively participate in the democratic process (vote in free and fair elections) where there is political equality ('one person, one vote').
3. All decisions should be made by majority vote.

Types of democracy:

Representative Democracy

In a representative democracy, the citizens choose representatives to make decisions on their behalf. Representative democracies can be found in many parts of the world, including the UK, Germany, Greece, South Africa, Taiwan, the USA, Canada and Australia.

Direct Democracy

In a direct democracy, the citizens assemble to make decisions for themselves, rather than electing representatives to make decisions on their behalf. This type of democracy began in ancient Athens, where male Athenian citizens had the chance to debate and decide issues of public importance. Examples of modern direct democracy are the Swiss cantons and some US states.

Politics: the activities and affairs of a government or state.

Dictatorship: a form of government in which one person (dictator) or small group exercises absolute power.

Suffrage: the right to vote.

What would the UK be like if we didn't live in a democracy?

What are the strengths and weaknesses of the UK system of democracy?

What other options are there and where are they in place right now?



Watch 'Democracy? You Decide' online with author and journalist Danny Wallace taking a light-hearted look at governance in the UK: www.parliament.uk/democracyyoudecide

BBC Democracy Live – search, find and watch the politics that interests you including recorded lectures, interviews and information: www.bbc.co.uk/democracylive

Watch live and archived coverage of UK parliamentary proceedings from the last 12 months: www.parliamentlive.tv/Main/Archive.aspx

THE ORIGINS OF UK DEMOCRACY

10 DATES

1 1215: In England, the first step towards forging a democracy came in 1215 with Magna Carta, which limited the king's power over the Church and nobility.

2 1265: Simon de Montfort led a rebellion against Henry III – and briefly captured him. He then called a Parliament for support and consultation. For the first time, representatives of towns and counties across England were consulted along with the great barons.

3 1430: The 40-Shilling Franchise was established to determine who had the right to vote – this remained unchanged for the next 400 years. It meant that everyone who owned or rented land with an income of 40 shillings or more per year could vote in county elections.

4 1512: Henry VIII abandoned the Palace of Westminster as a home in favour of the nearby Palace of Whitehall and so the Palace of Westminster became the permanent home of Parliament.

5 1689: The Bill of Rights was created, limiting the powers of the monarch and setting out the rights of Parliament.

6 1832: The first changes were made to the voting system in 400 years. The Reform Act 1832 made representation and the franchise fairer and simpler. It reworked constituency boundaries and meant that one in seven men could vote. Further electoral reform followed in 1867 and 1884.

7 1889: Thomas Hansard began publishing transcripts of parliamentary debates in 1812. In 1889, the Commons began to pay for Hansard to be produced as a permanent record of proceedings. For more than 100 years, all debates have been printed – and now also put online – by the following morning.

8 1918: The Representation of the People Act 1918 made radical changes to the electoral system – and gave votes to women over the age of 30 and all men over the age of 21.

9 1928: The Equal Franchise Act 1928 finally meant both men and women over 21 years old could vote.

10 1969: The age at which men and women could vote was lowered from 21 to 18, as it remains today.

These key dates set the scene for modern democracy. The system has continued to develop and will do so in the years to come, ensuring it continues to support an ever changing UK.

THE CONSTITUTION

Get started

The UK Constitution provides a framework of rules and fundamental principles that govern the country. It defines the structure, procedures, powers and duties of the Government and therefore encourages Government stability by enabling everyone to understand the rules.

The origins of the British Constitution go back to before 1066. It is an uncodified constitution and although many of the constitutional rules have been written down, they have never been collated in one place. It is also a flexible constitution, which means that changes can be made through Acts of Parliament and referendums.

In detail

Parliamentary sovereignty

Parliamentary sovereignty is the most important principle of the UK constitution. It makes Parliament the supreme legal authority in the UK, which means that it can create, change or end any law. No Parliament can pass laws that future Parliaments cannot change. However, over the years, Parliament has passed laws that limit the application of parliamentary sovereignty, such as:

- The devolution of power to the Scottish Parliament, Welsh Assembly and Northern Ireland Assembly
- The Human Rights Act 1998
- The UK's entry to the European Union in 1972
- The decision to establish a UK Supreme Court in 2009, which ended the House of Lords' function as the UK's final court of appeal



STORMONT



HOLYROOD

Find out more about the devolved legislatures by visiting the following websites:

The Welsh Assembly:
www.assemblywales.org

The Scottish Parliament:
www.scottish.parliament.uk

The Northern Ireland Assembly:
www.niassembly.gov.uk



THE SENEDD

Devolution – why did it happen and what does it mean?

Following referendums in Scotland and Wales in 1997, and in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland in 1998, certain powers of UK Parliament have been devolved, or passed on, to the Assemblies in Northern Ireland and Wales, and to Scotland's Parliament. They have the power to decide on matters such as education, health and social services.

The Scottish Parliament has greater control over Scotland's internal affairs. However, the UK Parliament remains the main law-making body in Britain and controls such matters as UK defence, broadcasting and space exploration.

The devolved legislatures have the power to make laws or policy on certain issues known as devolved matters. These include:

- Agriculture, forestry, fishing and the environment
- Education and training
- Health, housing, home affairs and local government
- Natural and built heritage
- Police and fire services
- Social work, sport and the arts
- Statistics and public records
- Tourism, economic development and transport

THE CONSTITUTION



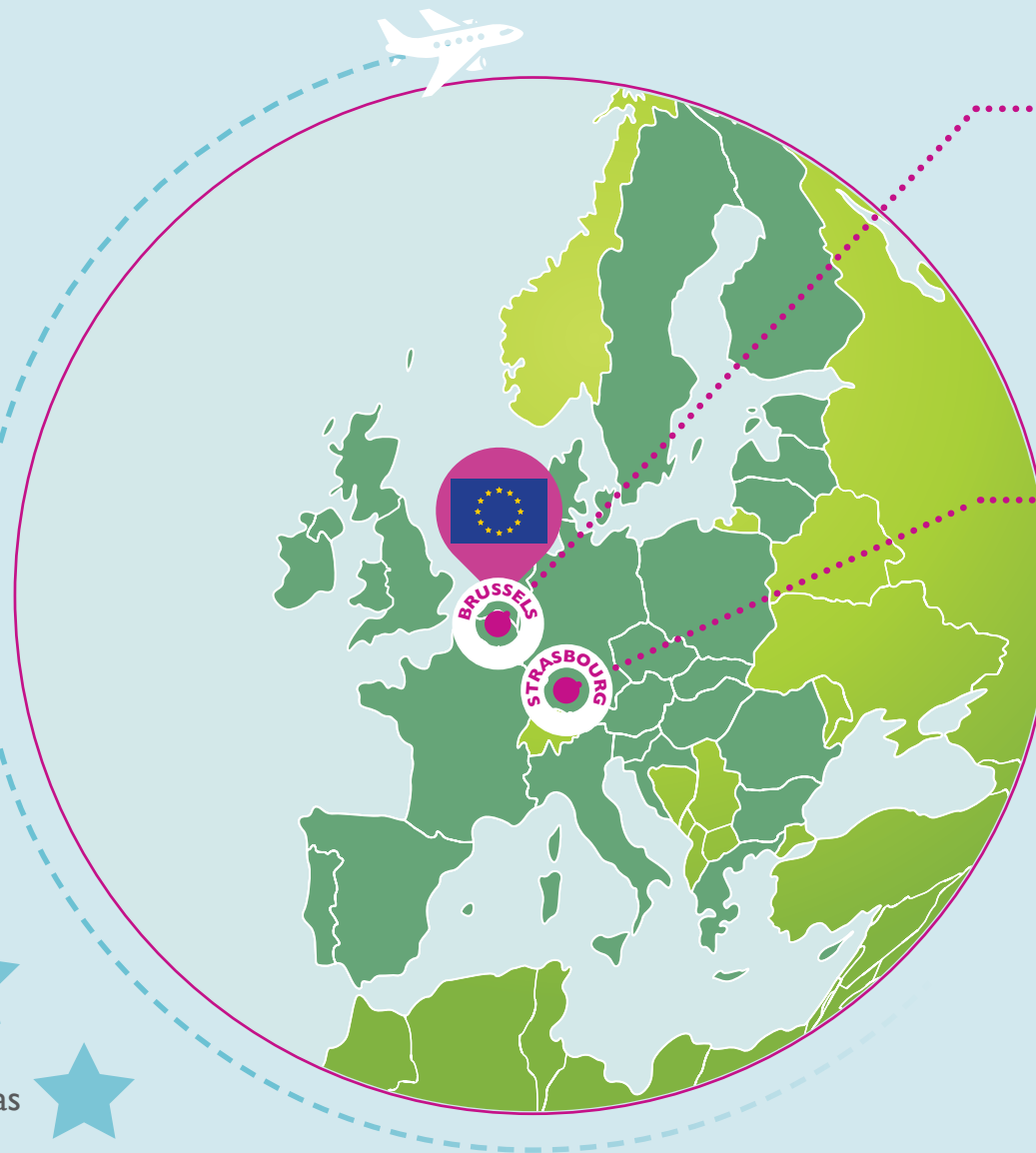
THE EU

EU – How does the UK fit in?

The European Union (EU) is a partnership of 28 democratic countries, working together for the benefit of all their citizens. It aims to promote social and economic progress, common foreign and security positions, police and judicial co-operation in criminal matters, and European citizenship.

The European Parliament makes decisions on new European laws jointly with the Council of the European Union. The Parliament is the only directly elected body of the European Union. It has 766 Members (MEPs), including 73 from the UK who represent people in different areas of the country.

Where EU member states have agreed to act together, all laws passed at the European level are considered legally superior to domestic law – in these circumstances, should European Community (EC) law and UK law conflict, EC law prevails, as was the case with the Working Time Directive.



The European Parliament sits in both



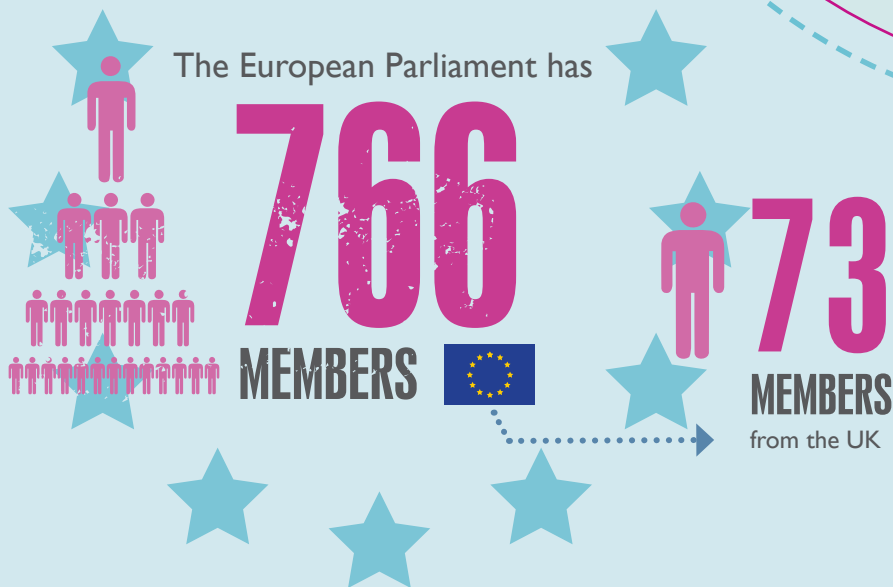
BRUSSELS



STRASBOURG

What do you think are the pros and cons for the UK of being a member of the EU?

When has EC and UK law conflicted and what has been the outcome?



Find out more about the UK Constitution by clicking on 'Find out about your rights' here: www.direct.gov.uk/rights

Information on this page is subject to change. For updates and to explore the European Union further, visit <http://europa.eu>

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EU BY NUMBERS

1 Six countries made up the EU when it was first established on the 23rd July 1952 – Belgium, France, Italy, the Netherlands, West Germany and Luxembourg.

2 Around 500 million people live in the EU – the largest population is Germany, with 82.1 million people, and the smallest is Malta, with 0.4 million people.

3 24 official languages are spoken in the EU.

4 766 Members sit in the European Parliament.

5 €147.2 billion was the EU budget for 2012.

6 4,381,376 km² is the total land mass of the EU.

7 One motto for the EU – 'United in Diversity'.

8 9th May is the official 'Europe Day' each year.

9 Two main bases for the European Parliament – Committee meetings are held in Brussels and plenary sessions in Brussels and Strasbourg. Additional administration is located in Luxembourg.

10 As of 2013, 17 of the 28 member countries make up the Eurozone using the Euro as their official currency.

PARLIAMENT

Get started

In British parliamentary democracy, there are three elements: the House of Commons, the House of Lords and the monarch. The main work of Parliament is to make laws (legislation), keep a check on the work of Government (scrutiny) and represent the views of people across the country (representation).



The role of the monarch

In the UK, power lies with Parliament, not the monarch. However, the monarch does play a role in the processes of Parliament, including:

- Meeting the Prime Minister once a week to discuss current business.
- Formally opening Parliament and delivering 'The Queen's Speech', which announces the Government's plans for the year.
- Formally agreeing new laws by giving Royal Assent to Bills that have completed their passage through both Houses of Parliament.

In detail

The two-House system

The UK has a bicameral legislature, which means that the business of Parliament takes place in two Houses – the House of Commons and the House of Lords. Both Houses of Parliament hold debates in which Members discuss Government policy, proposed legislation and current issues. The House of Commons is also responsible for granting money to the Government through approving Bills that raise taxes. Over 60 countries operate bicameralism because the existence of a second chamber is believed to offer several advantages, including more thorough scrutiny of legislation.



Scrutiny and the role of Committees

Committees are a crucial tool for scrutinising the work of Government. Most Committees fall into one of two categories:

Select Committees

Made up of Backbench MPs or Members of the House of Lords, Select Committees examine the spending, administration and policy of Government departments.

In the Commons, there is a Select Committee for every Government department. Each has a minimum of 11 members who decide upon a line of inquiry and call for written and oral evidence from people involved in or affected by the topic being examined. The outcome of the inquiry is presented as a report with recommendations, which the Government usually responds to.

Select Committees in the House of Lords investigate specialist subjects, taking advantage of the Lords' experience and knowledge in specific areas. These Committees concentrate on four main areas: Europe, science, economics, and the UK constitution.

Joint Select Committees consist of both MPs and Lords and have similar powers to Commons or Lords Select Committees. Some are set up on a permanent basis, like the Joint Committee on Human Rights, and others deal with a specific matter, such as examining draft proposals for Bills on subjects ranging from gambling to stem cell research.



Take a video tour of Parliament:

www.parliament.uk/about/podcasts/video-tours

Find out more about the role and types of Committees: www.parliament.uk/business/committees

Look out for lots of great books about Parliament, including 'How Parliament Works' by current Clerk of the House of Commons and Chief Executive, Robert Rogers and Rhodri Walters.

General Committees

The main role of General Committees is to consider proposed legislation in detail. Most Bills are dealt with in Public Bill Committees, which are unique to the House of Commons, as the Lords generally meet as a whole House to perform this function. A Committee usually has 15 to 50 members who reflect the make-up of the House, with the Government always holding a majority.

Public Bill Committees undertake in-depth scrutiny of Bills. Activity focuses on discussion and debate, but since 2006, Public Bill Committees have had the power to take written and oral evidence from outside officials and experts.

Once a Committee has finished looking at a Bill, it reports its conclusions and any amendments to the House of Commons. Members debate the Bill again 'on Report' in the main Chamber, where more amendments may be tabled.

Other General Committees include Delegated Legislation Committees, European Committees, and Grand Committees, which deal with matters relating to Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

PARLIAMENT — HOUSE OF COMMONS

The House of Commons is the elected chamber of Parliament. Members of the Commons debate the big political issues of the day and proposals for new laws. The Government is accountable to Parliament and the public. In the House of Commons, MPs can hold the Government to account in a number of ways. Prime Minister's Questions and Ministerial Questions offer the opportunity to question and challenge the Government's policies.



Representation

MPs represent their constituents (including those who didn't vote for them) and their party. They split their time between working in Parliament itself and working in their constituency. Some MPs from the governing party (or parties) are chosen to become Government Ministers with specific responsibilities in areas such as health, education or defence.



Backbencher: An MP who does not hold Government office as a Minister or, in the Opposition, does not sit as a frontbench spokesperson in the Shadow Cabinet. In the debating chamber they sit on the back benches.

The Executive: The group of people who exercise executive power over the state, with ultimate responsibility for its daily administration. In the UK, this is the members of the Government led by the Prime Minister. The term also applies to the devolved Governments of Scotland and Wales, and to the Northern Ireland Executive.

The Legislature: The group of people who exercise legislative power, including making laws. In the UK, this refers to the two parliamentary chambers of the Westminster Parliament, as well as the Scottish Parliament and Welsh and Northern Ireland Assemblies.



Government: The national Government in the UK has responsibility for developing and implementing policy and for drafting laws. It is also known as the Executive. Government Members sit on the benches to the right of the Speaker.

Opposition: Includes the political parties other than the governing party or parties. They are called the Opposition because they sit on the benches opposite the Government in the House of Commons and House of Lords chambers.



Cabinet: Made up of about 20 senior Ministers chosen by the Prime Minister. It makes decisions on Government policy and co-ordinates the work of the different Government departments. Ministers sit on the front bench in the Chamber. A full list can be found here: www.number10.gov.uk

Speaker: The Speaker of the House of Commons chairs debates in the Commons chamber and ensures that MPs follow the House's rules and traditions.



Watch MPs in their own words – MPs reflect on politics, popularity, parties, procedure and much more in these short video clips: www.parliament.uk/mpinterviews

Find out more about the House of Commons online: www.parliament.uk/business/commons/what-the-commons-does

Watch videos including Prime Minister's Questions on the official YouTube channel for the United Kingdom Parliament to see the House of Commons in action: www.youtube.com/ukparliament

Discover more about Government departments here: www.number10.gov.uk/the-coalition/the-government

PARLIAMENT — HOUSE OF LORDS

The House of Lords is the second chamber of the UK Parliament. It is independent of the elected House of Commons and shares the task of making and shaping laws and checking and challenging the work of the Government.

It has three main roles:

- Making laws: All Bills have to be considered by both Houses of Parliament before they can become law.
- In-depth consideration of public policy: Members use their individual experience to debate public policy in the House and in Select Committees.

- Holding Government to account: Members scrutinise the work of the Government during Question Time and debates, where Government Ministers must respond.

An Open House: The Lords chamber was first televised in 1985, and the Lords currently has members from all parties blogging together (lordsoftheblog.net). It also tweets from [@UKHouseofLords](https://twitter.com/UKHouseofLords).

Government: Just as with the Commons, one side of the House of Lords is made up of the Members who represent the governing party or parties.

Opposition: As with the Commons, Members from the main Opposition party and all other parties sit opposite the Government benches.

Crossbenchers: Crossbench Peers are so called because they sit on benches between the Government and Opposition. They are independent Members who don't take a party whip.

Lord Speaker: Sits on the 'Woolsack' and chairs daily business in the House of Lords chamber. They also act as an ambassador for the work of the House.

In 2010–11, Members of the House of Lords put

7,546

questions to the Government.



Members of the House of Lords

The House of Lords Act 1999 ended the right of most hereditary Peers to sit and vote in the House and led to significant changes in its membership. Ongoing discussions explore further possible reforms, but currently the House of Lords is made up of three groups:

- Life Peers: The majority (about 700) of Members are appointed for their lifetime by the Queen on the advice of the Prime Minister. Any British, Irish or Commonwealth citizen who is a UK resident aged over 21 is eligible to be nominated or can apply. Life Peers are appointed based on their knowledge and experience. Many are experienced politicians, but others have expertise in areas such as business, the arts, education and sport.
- Elected hereditary Members: A smaller group of hereditary Peers (92) are also Members.
- Archbishops and bishops: 26 Church of England archbishops and bishops sit in the House of Lords.



What are the pros and cons of having an unelected second chamber?

If the chamber became part or wholly elected, how might this change the make-up and work of the House?

Who might you nominate as a Life Peer?



Download: A quick guide to the House of Lords: www.parliament.uk/documents/lords-information-office/HoLwhat-the-lords-and-its-members-do-v2.pdf.

LEGISLATION

MAKING NEW LAWS

Get started

Making laws is one of the main functions of Parliament: a Bill is a proposal for a new law, or a proposal to change an existing law. New laws may be needed due to:

- Emergency issues such as the threat of terrorism
- Pressure on the Government to update old laws
- Changes to case law in the courts

In detail

Public Bills change the law as it applies to the general population and are the most common type of Bill introduced in Parliament.



Play MyUK, an online game that allows you to take charge of Britain and choose and pass your own laws: www.parliament.uk/myuk

Track the progress of new Bills through Parliament www.parliament.uk/business/bills-and-legislation



What one law would you make and why?

How would you enforce the law?

What implications might it have for communities in the UK?



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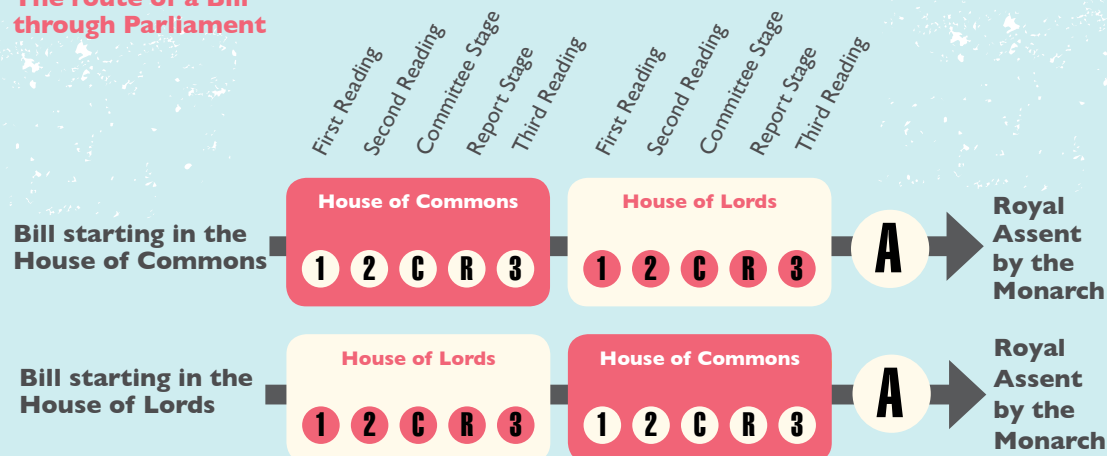
The two types of Public Bill:

Government Bills: Bills introduced by Government Ministers. These take priority in Parliament because they are backed by the Government.

2

Private Members' Bills: Bills introduced in Parliament by Members who aren't Government Ministers.

The route of a Bill through Parliament



10

LAW-MAKING WORDS AND PHRASES

1 Amendments: Changes to a Bill proposed by MPs or Members of the House of Lords when debating it.

2 Division: The House of Commons or House of Lords divides into supporters and opponents to vote on a motion in a debate. When a division is called, bells ring throughout the Parliamentary Estate.

3 Filibuster: The practice of speaking in a debate for a long time to delay a vote on a Bill, so that it does not complete its passage through the House and cannot become law.

4 Free Vote: When votes by MPs and Members of the Lords are not controlled by party whips, who manage parliamentary business. Free votes are used when moral, ethical or religious issues are considered a significant factor.

5 Green Paper: A discussion document put together by a Government department considering a new law. Allows people from inside and outside Parliament to debate and give feedback.

6 Motion: A proposal for action put forward in the House of Commons or House of Lords for consideration, debate and decision.

7 Ping-Pong: The to and fro of amendments to Bills between the House of Commons and the House of Lords when they disagree on legislation.

8 Tellers: The Members who count the votes in the House of Commons or the House of Lords during a division.

9 Wash-Up: The last few days of a Parliament, after the election has been announced. All unfinished business must be dealt with swiftly and the Government seeks the co-operation of the Opposition in dealing with legislation that is still in progress.

10 White Paper: A document produced by the Government setting out details of future policy on a particular subject. It will often be the basis for a Bill to be put before Parliament.

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Get to grips with even more terms used in political business with this glossary: www.parliament.uk/site-information/glossary

ELECTIONS AND VOTING

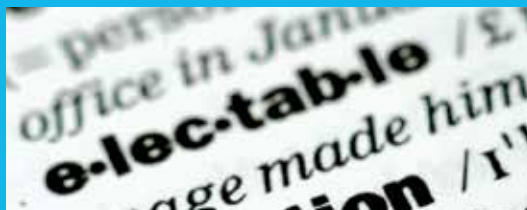
Get started

Local councillors, MPs, Members of the House of Lords and Members of the European Parliament represent you and your interests. Depending on where you live, you may also be represented by devolved bodies, like those that represent Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Voting in elections gives you the chance to have a say on who represents you locally, nationally and in the European Parliament.

In detail

Types of election in the UK

- **General elections:** Held every five years in Britain to elect Members of the House of Commons (MPs) and ultimately decide who will be the governing party/parties and the Prime Minister. An election can be held sooner if the Government falls. Uses First Past The Post system.
- **Devolved Assembly/Parliament elections:** Held every four years (except when they clash with UK general elections) in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales. Scotland and Wales use the Additional Member System, Northern Ireland uses the Single Transferable Vote system.
- **European elections:** Held every four years. England, Scotland and Wales elect Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) by proportional representation. In Northern Ireland, European elections use the Single Transferable Vote system.
- **Local elections:** Held every four years to elect members of local councils and some local mayors (not all mayors are elected). England and Wales use the First Past the Post system, Northern Ireland and Scotland use the Single Transferable Vote system.
- **By-elections:** Take place when there is a need to fill vacancies that arise when an elected representative is disqualified, passes away or quits while in office.



The following chart includes just some of the potential pros and cons of different types of voting systems – but what do you think?



Types of voting systems

Type of Voting System	Pros	Cons
First Past The Post (FPTP): In the United Kingdom, votes for both general and by-elections are counted by the First Past the Post system. Under this arrangement, each voter is allowed to cast one local vote, and the candidate with the most votes becomes the Member of Parliament for that constituency.	It is simple for voters to understand – one person, one vote. It usually produces a single-party government. Note this was not the case in 2010 with the coalition.	Election results are not proportional to votes cast overall and small parties and minority groups can be under-represented.
The Alternative Vote (AV): Under the AV system, voters rank candidates in order of preference, indicating their first choice, then their second, and so on. Candidates are elected outright if they gain more than half of the first-preference votes. If not, the candidate with the least votes is eliminated and their votes are redistributed according to the second (or next available) preference marked on the ballot paper. This process continues until one candidate has half of the votes and is elected.	The constituency link characteristic of the current First Past the Post system is retained. Voters can put forward alternative choices which can have more impact on the overall result, particularly if their first choice has little chance of winning.	As with FPTP it can produce a disproportionate distribution of votes into seats and gaining 50% of votes can be particularly difficult for smaller parties.
Supplementary Vote (SV): Used in London Mayoral elections, this combines elements of the two-stage ballot used in France and the Alternative Vote, yet is a slightly simpler process. If no one candidate wins the election outright, the second choice votes of all other candidates are split between the top two so that one candidate has the overall majority.	Likely to lead to majority governments. Avoids multiple counts and redistribution, as only records first and second choices at ballot box.	Parties may not be rewarded for the share of votes that they gain.
Closed List System (CLS): Used in European Parliamentary elections. Each voter has one vote for the party of their choice. Parties present lists of candidates and seats are awarded according to their party's share of the vote. Seats in each region are awarded in proportion to the number of votes cast. This system is likely to produce coalitions.	Often leads to better representation for smaller parties and minority groups. Often a strong connection between votes won and seats gained.	There is no choice of candidates for voters and there may be no clear link between the MP and the constituency.
Single Transferable Vote (STV): Used for local, devolved and European elections in Northern Ireland. When an election takes place, a number of seats will be available in each area, and voters indicate on their ballot paper their choice of candidates in order of preference. A candidate is elected as soon as they reach a certain number (known as a quota) of first votes. It is likely to produce coalitions.	Offers voters a choice of candidates from the same party. Good connection between votes won and seats gained.	As with CLS there may be no clear link between the MP and the constituency and it is a complicated system to administer.
Additional Member System (AMS): Voters in elections for the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly have two votes – one to elect a Member for their local constituency, and the other to indicate their choice of favourite party. This is known as the Additional Member system. Votes for their local constituency Member are counted using the First Past the Post system. The second vote, for the choice of party, is used to select regional Members. It can make coalitions more likely.	Retains the MP-constituency link. Often leads to fairer representation for smaller parties and minority groups.	Results are not as proportional as in Proportional Representation systems like STV.

ELECTIONS AND VOTING

TRENDS AND TYPES

Trends in voting in the UK

Voter turnout is measured on polling day as a percentage of the electorate. It is often used as an indicator of how engaged or disengaged with democracy the people are.

Over the last few decades in Britain, we have generally recorded lower voter turnout figures than most other European democracies. The lowest turnout in a general election was recorded in 1918 at 57.2% at the end of the First World War. Between 1922 and 1997, turnout remained above 71%. However, in 2001, turnout fell to 59.4% and stayed relatively low at 61.4% in 2005 before rising 4% to 65.1% in 2010.

The lowest turnout in a general election was recorded in 1918 at

57.2%

at the end of the First World War.

Australia is one of the small number of countries where voting is compulsory. By law, all voters must attend their local polling station – although, once there, they can choose not to vote. The fine for failing to attend is the equivalent of just under £10. Turnout in Australia averages over 90%.



Case study: The May 2011 Referendum

In May 2011, voters in the UK were asked to take part in a referendum to decide whether they wanted to change the way we vote in general elections. They had a choice between the First Past the Post system, which was already in use, and the Alternative Vote. 19.1 million people voted in the second UK-wide referendum in history – a higher than expected turnout of 42%. The final result saw 68% of voters opposed to changing the voting system to AV. As a result, First Past the Post will continue to be used in UK general elections.



Case study: Comparison – US and UK Systems

Although the political system in the US shares some of the ideas of our parliamentary system in the UK there are a number of important differences between the two systems.

See the table below for a brief comparison of the UK parliamentary and the US presidential systems:

	US Presidential System	UK Parliamentary System
Separation of Powers	Legislative and Executive branches clearly separated.	Powers of two branches more linked.
Method of Election	Legislative and Executive branches elected separately.	Legislative and Executive branches elected together.
Cabinet Selection	President.	Prime Minister.
Length of Term	Fixed Term: 4 years.	Fixed Term: 5 years.
Who initiates Legislation?	Both the Legislature and the Executive.	The Executive in most cases.

Referendum: The procedure by which a decision is referred to the electorate, who vote on it in a similar way to a general election.

Proportional Representation (PR):

An electoral system generally used to elect members of an assembly or council in which the seats won by a party will be roughly proportionate to the number of votes received. For example if 25% of voters support a particular party then roughly 25% of seats will be won by that party.



Why do you think voter turnout is low in Britain?

Should the UK make voting compulsory?

Are you planning to vote in the next election?

Should the voting age be lowered to 16?



Watch the General Election Xplained, an eight-minute video guide to the 2010 election campaign with comedian Jay Foreman: www.parliament.uk/electionXplained

Find out more about how and why you should register to vote at the Electoral Commission's website: www.aboutmyvote.co.uk

Find out more about referendums: www.parliament.uk/referendums

POLITICAL PARTIES

Get started

Political parties, and the competition and debate between them, are an important part of the democratic process.

All political parties are based on key ideas and principles that members feel are particularly important such as creating a fairer society, giving people greater opportunities, and protecting the environment. Political parties sometimes share certain aims but they tend to differ on how those aims are best achieved.



Choice for Voters

The three main political parties in the UK Parliament are the Conservatives, Labour and the Liberal Democrats, which are all represented in the House of Commons and the House of Lords. After the 2010 election, no single party had an overall majority, so the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats formed a coalition government, with Labour in opposition.

In addition to the three main parties, representatives from a range of other political groups are elected as MPs by the public. Those groups include nationalist organisations such as Plaid Cymru (the Party of Wales) and the Scottish National Party; political parties active in Northern Ireland such as the Democratic

In detail

Political parties have several key functions:

- To enable people with similar views about how the country should be run to come together and campaign for change.
- To structure the choices available to voters in elections making it easier for citizens to compare and contrast candidates on the basis of their party policies.
- To provide a strong source of opposition to the Government by giving parties that are not in power the tools to scrutinise and question the Government.

Unionist Party, the Social Democratic and Labour Party and Sinn Féin; and parties with a particular campaign focus such as the Green Party. These parties receive a much smaller percentage of overall UK support than the three main parties and rarely gain many seats in the UK legislature. However, they remain an important part of the political process because they take up issues and air grievances that the major parties may neglect. In addition, the Commons includes a few independent MPs not affiliated with any party, just as the House of Lords includes cross-bench Peers.

Compare and contrast the manifestos of the political parties in the UK. Who would get your vote and why?



Party Whips: MPs or members of the House of Lords appointed by a political party to help organise its contribution to parliamentary business. One of the Whips' responsibilities is making sure that their party's MPs vote, and vote in line with their party politics.

Party Rebels: Sometimes MPs disagree with their party's view and will vote against it. These people are called party rebels. Action can be taken against them by the party including, in extreme cases, 'withdrawing the whip' or expulsion from the party.

Coalition: When two or more parties join together to form a government, in order to have a clear majority.



Links to all the political parties represented in the House of Commons and the House of Lords can be found at

www.parliament.uk/about/mps-and-lords/members/parties

Watch this video about party rebels:
www.parliament.uk/partyrebels

PRESSURE GROUPS

Get started

Pressure groups are organisations that do not stand for election themselves, but instead aim to influence the Government and public policy, usually on one specific issue or a range of issues linked to a theme. Pressure groups can also provide the Government with information and assist with inquiries related to their area of interest.

In detail

It can be difficult for individuals on their own to influence policy and political decisions. A group of like-minded people working together can have more impact and can be more successful in getting their concerns heard by both the Government and the general public.

There has been a dramatic increase in the number and range of pressure groups in recent years. Pressure groups include registered charities, trade unions, women's organisations, faith-based organisations, professional and business associations, and community groups.

Methods Used by Pressure Groups

Lobbying

Methods of lobbying range from sending letters to influential people to making presentations and providing briefing material to Members of Parliament, and organising rallies. Pressure groups may choose to lobby the Government and the legislature, including MEPs, MPs and Members of the House of Lords. Pressure groups can also lobby via the judicial route by taking court action at local, devolved and European levels.

Petitions

Groups and individuals can petition the House of Commons to make MPs aware of their opinion on an issue and to request action. Petitioning is a formal process in which a written appeal following a set format is sent to an MP and then presented to the Commons. The text of the petition is published in Hansard. Members of the public can also petition the House of Lords on a specific issue or if they are personally affected by a private Bill.

Engaging the Public

Television and the internet have improved pressure groups' ability to appeal to and engage the public. Different tactics include:

- **Popular Protest:** Large-scale organised protests are generally peaceful and aim to mobilise interest in a specific cause or participation in the political process.
- **Background Campaigns:** These are designed to present a group or its cause favourably over a period of time to raise awareness and influence the public. Media-savvy groups may use controversial or powerful images or well-known personalities to garner attention.
- **Direct Action:** Direct action goes beyond the usual legal or constitutional procedures for seeking political change, and includes occupying public spaces and obstructing access to a building: in other words, people taking matters into their own hands for a political or social goal. Direct action is more often than not peaceful, but violent action lies at the extreme end of the spectrum.

Case study: The Gurkha Justice Campaign

The Gurkha Justice Campaign group campaigned for the right of Gurkhas who fought in the British Army to reside in the UK. The campaign caught the media's attention in 2008 when actress Joanna Lumley, whose father served in the 6th Gurkha Rifles, gave it public support. In 2009, after many years in which the campaign raised awareness and lobbied the Government, the then Home Secretary Jacqui Smith announced that ex-Gurkhas who had served more than four years in the British Army would have the right to settle in the UK.

Find out more about the techniques used by the Gurkha Justice Campaign: www.gurkhajustice.org.uk

Take a look at the register of All-Party Groups to see which subjects MPs and Peers are interested in and who to approach for lobbying on particular subjects: www.parliament.uk/get-involved/have-your-say/lobbying

Research other lobbying groups to find out what methods they've used to get their voice heard – consider issues such as the environment, support or opposition for planned buildings or airports, and trade unions.

GET INVOLVED

Youth Parliaments

Youth Parliaments and similar organisations are a great way to debate issues that are important to you and offer the chance to make real changes locally and nationally. Some of the main groups run by young people for young people are:

The UK Youth Parliament (UKYP):

The UKYP aims to give young people aged 11 to 18 a voice at local and national level, and enables them to use their energy and passion to change the world for the better. They hold debates in the House of Commons and have also debated in the Lords chamber. For more information visit www.ukyouthparliament.org.uk

Funky Dragon (the Children and Young People's Assembly for Wales): A youth-led organisation whose aim is to give young people aged 25 and under who live in Wales the opportunity to get their voice heard on issues that affect them, and to work with decision makers to achieve change. Visit www.funkydragon.org

The Scottish Youth Parliament (SYP): The SYP listens to young people to understand what issues are important to them, and campaigns to try to make Scotland a better place for young people. Members are young people aged between 14 and 25 who are elected to represent different parts of Scotland and voluntary organisations. Visit www.syp.org.uk

The Northern Ireland Youth Forum (NIYF): The NIYF is the representative organisation for young people aged 11 to 25 in Northern Ireland. The NIYF is all about involving young people in decision making so that they can get their voices heard. Visit www.niyf.org



Don't forget social media

Parliament invites comments from the public through social media channels including Parliament web forums, Twitter and Facebook. Follow Parliament online and take part in discussions at www.parliament.uk/get-involved/have-your-say/online-discussion-rules



WAYS TO GET INVOLVED WITH POLITICS

1 Vote in elections: Make sure you are ready to cast your vote in local and general elections. You can register from the age of 16. Find out more at www.aboutmyvote.co.uk

2 Keep up to date with current affairs: Check www.parliament.uk for details of what's going on in Parliament, and to access Hansard, the official record of what is said in debates in Parliament. Newspapers, political websites and current affairs programmes will also help you keep up to date.

3 Join a political party: Most political parties have youth sections to deal with the issues relevant to you. Joining a party may also entitle you to certain benefits, including voting for party leaders.

4 Contact your MP: Find the details for your MP at www.parliament.uk/get-involved/contact-your-mp. Or meet them in person – MPs often hold a 'surgery' in their local office, where people can come along to discuss matters that concern them.

5 Visit Parliament: Parliament is free to visit, and no appointment is necessary. You can watch a debate or Select Committee evidence session. Devolved political institutions also allow visits: see their websites for more details.

6 Join a Youth Parliament: If you are under 25 (or under 18 in England) there are a range of youth representative organisations you can join. See page 28 for more information.

7 Take part in a Select Committee inquiry: Select Committees inquire into pressing issues affecting government and the public, and often use web forums to help gather evidence. Find out more at www.parliament.uk/get-involved/have-your-say

8 Petition Parliament: If you feel strongly about an issue you may want to start or sign a petition. Find out how at www.parliament.uk/get-involved/have-your-say or take a look at current e-petitions at epetitions.direct.gov.uk

9 Lobby an MP or a Member of the House of Lords: Find out how you can lobby Members of the Commons or Lords about issues that affect you at www.parliament.uk/get-involved/have-your-say

10 Stand as an MP: Any citizen of Britain or the Irish Republic, or any Commonwealth citizen entitled to reside in the UK, may stand as a candidate at parliamentary elections providing they are 18 or over and are not otherwise disqualified. Find out more at www.parliament.uk/about/mps-and-lords/members/electing-mps/candidates

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