

UK Politics Introduction 2022

Representative democracy

In the UK there are too many people to ask, and too many decisions to take for everyone to vote on every issues. The UK is therefore a representatives democracy.



In a representative democracy, representatives are elected to make decisions. Our representatives are the Members of Parliament we vote for in a General Election. The UK Parliament meets in Westminster, London. It has two parts – the House of Commons and the House of Lords. The House of Commons is made up of 650 MPs and the House of Lords of around 810 Lords or, as they are sometimes known, peers.

Elections

Members of Parliament (MPs) are elected every five years at a General Election. For the purposes of the General Election, the country is divided into 650 constituencies or areas. Each constituency elects one MP to Parliament. The last General Election in the UK was held in December 2019. Currently for General Elections only those aged over 18 can vote. Prisoners are also banned whilst they are in prison.



Some people argue that 16 year olds should be able to vote, especially as their lives will be impacted by events like Brexit and Covid 19. Wales and Scotland do let 16 year olds vote in their elections, but the Conservative Party in England is strongly against the idea. They say 16 year olds lack maturity and that most would not vote anyway. Have a look at the article below and consider your own opinion.

<https://www.tutor2u.net/politics/reference/extending-the-franchise-lowering-the-voting-age>

Referendums

Whilst elections are a form of representative democracy, where we choose someone to make decisions on our behalf, referendums are a form of direct democracy. A referendum is a vote in which all adults can take part, normally giving a "Yes" or "No" answer to a question. Whichever side gets more than half of the votes wins.

There are no rules that say when a referendum should be held or on any particular issues. However, it has become a custom, or expectation, that they will be held on issues of constitutional change. This means something that significantly changes the political system of the UK.

The UK does not hold referendums often but the two most recent ones have caused controversy. In 2014, Scotland voted on whether they wanted to become independent. The result was 55% no, but the SNP in Scotland say they want a second referendum as more people now support the idea.

Even more controversial was the 2016 Brexit referendum. The result was very close with 52% voting to leave. Over 5 million people signed a petition asking for a second referendum. Many argue that people did not understand what leaving the EU meant and also that false information was used during the referendum campaign. Some argue more referendums should be used, as they are the most pure form of democracy. Others argue they create more divisions in society and undermine elected politicians.

<https://www.britpolitics.co.uk/uk-elections-arguments-referendum-vote-democracy/>

The Government

The UK government is in charge of running the country and deciding the way taxes are spent. Different government departments have responsibility for separate areas of business for example, the Department of Health or the Department of Transport.



Led by the Prime Minister, the UK government is formed by the political party (with the greatest representation in the House of Commons. This means the party who won most of the 650 seats. The PM selects a team of MPs and members of the House of Lords to help run the country. These people become Ministers who are in charge of particular areas, for example the Secretary of State for Education Gavin Williamson. All the other MPs and members of the House of Lords who are not ministers carry out the work of Parliament.

The Prime Minister

The Prime Minister (PM) is the leader of the largest party in a government or the leader of the party who wins an election. We do not vote directly for the Prime Minister, instead, they are the leader of whichever party won most of the 650 constituencies in the election. At the General Election of 2019, the party with the most MPs was the Conservative Party and so Boris Johnson became PM.

The PM has several roles include setting the direction of government policy and representing the UK at home and abroad. Other key roles are selecting cabinet ministers to run particular departments and chairing meetings of the cabinet.

The PM and their cabinet are collectively accountable for their policies and actions They are expected to appear before parliament each week and answer questions from MPs. One way the PM is held to account is at Prime Minister's Question (PMQs). PMQs takes place every Wednesday at midday.

Parliament

Parliament is responsible for approving and changing the country's laws. Most new laws presented to Parliament are suggested by the government but some MPs are able to put forward suggestions as well. A proposed law is called a bill and once it passes, it becomes an Act. To pass a new law both the House of Commons and the House of Lords must agree it is a good idea. However, the Commons alone is responsible for making decisions on financial Bills, such as proposing new taxes. The House of Lords can consider these Bills but cannot block or amend them.

MPs are responsible for keeping an eye on the work of the government and members of both the Commons and the Lords will look at how the government is spending the money it receives from taxes.

The work of an MP

The role of a Member of Parliament (MP) is to represent their constituents, including those who did not vote for them or did not vote at all. At the same time, many MPs will feel that they have a responsibility to their political party as the party helped the MP secure election. A backbench MP is someone who does not have a government role and is not a minister.



One role of MPs in the UK Parliament is to represent their constituents in areas where the UK Parliament takes decisions e.g. immigration or defence. MPs either debate or ask questions in the

House of Commons or they work in smaller groups known as committees. Other important roles of MPs in Parliament are to help make laws and to scrutinise (check-up on) the work of the government or investigate issues.

MPs in their day-to-day activities will represent their constituents by:

- Writing or organising meeting with a relevant minister
- Speaking in Parliament during a debate
- Asking questions during Prime Minister's Questions (PMQs)
- Introducing Members Bills on topics of concern to their constituents
- Lobbying other organisations (such as local councils, health boards) and individuals on behalf of their constituents
- Raising the profile of an issue in the media
- Involvement in committees which scrutinise new legislation or question the work of the government

Although there is not much time available, an MP may try to introduce a Private Members Bill.. A minority of Private Members' Bills become law but, by creating publicity around an issue, they may affect laws indirectly. An example of a successful Private Members' Bill is a law which made 'up skirting' photos a criminal offence. The bill was introduced by Lib Dem MP Wera Hobhouse in 2018.

When they are not working in parliament, MPs work in their constituencies, communicating with their constituents by writing letters, emails and replying to phone messages. Often MPs will hold 'surgeries' where local people can meet with their MP and ask questions. Constituents usually meet with their MP to seek help with a problem or issue. Some MPs send out newsletters to their constituents and communicate via their own website or social media accounts.

MPs are asked to attend a large number of meetings and events, including with their local constituency political party. They require the support of the local party to ensure that they will be selected to stand as a candidate in future elections. The election of MPs who are not linked to any political party is rare. At the moment, there are no independent MPs.

Select committees

One way members of Parliament scrutinise or check on the government is by regularly meeting in small groups called select committees. These committees can make recommendations to the government on particular issues such as education, the environment and foreign affairs.

For example, the Petitions Committee of the House of Commons exists to consider any petitions or e-petitions and make recommendations for which petitions should be debated in Parliament. If a petition gets 10,000 signatures then it gets a response from the government, petitions of over 100,000 can be considered for debate.

Select committee recommendations are given to the head of the government department (minister) in charge of that particular issue. This means reports by the Health Committee will be sent to the minister responsible for that area of health policy.

There are also Bill Committees, which are created on a temporary basis to scrutinise in detail new laws which are being proposed. For example, a committee was set up to scrutinise (check) the Armed Forces Bill.

The House of Lords

The House of Lords is the second chamber of the UK Parliament. The House of Lords has approximately 810 members referred to as 'peers'. Most peers have been appointed by the Queen on the advice of a prime minister in recognition of their expertise in a particular area e.g. business, law or science. Others are Church of England bishops and 92 are hereditary peers or people with who have inherited the right to sit in the Lords.



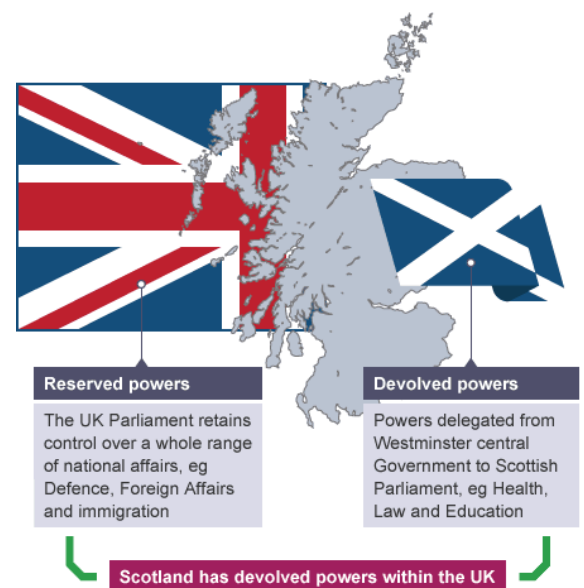
The Lords main role is to debate and revise major laws. The Lords also have the freedom and time to discuss other national issues as they arise. Peers in the House of Lords are not under the same pressure to vote with their party as MPs. Supporters of the Lords argue this means peers make a vital contribution to the quality of laws that are passed. They believe peers look at Bills on their merits, rather than whether or not they will win them an election. They also point out that many peers are appointed because they have skills and expertise from outside politics. In contrast, a growing number of MPs have only ever worked in politics.

However, many people oppose the House of Lords because the peers are appointed and not elected. Others criticise the appointments system as leading to 'cronyism' where the Prime Minister gives peerages to his or her friends and supporters. Recent attempts to reform the Lords so members have to be elected have failed. Proposals have included shrinking the Lords down so that are fewer peers, or making them all elected.

Devolution

Devolution means giving power to local areas. The UK started the process of devolution in the 1990s when Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland were given their own political powers.

The Scotland Act 1998 created the Scottish Parliament. The Scottish Parliament works in a similar way to most other parliaments around the world. Members of the Scottish Parliament (MSPs) can hold debates and make new laws in the areas where the Scottish Parliament has responsibility. MSPs also work in committees where the work of the Scottish Government is scrutinised (checked-up on). Importantly, the parliament and the MSPs within it, have responsibility for spending the parliament's budget.



The Scottish Parliament does not have a second chamber like the House of Lords. Instead, it has a powerful committee system which can propose as well as scrutinise bills. In committees, small numbers of MSPs discuss legislation in detail and work closely together.

MSPs are elected to the Scottish Parliament at Holyrood, Edinburgh, every four or five years (this varies to avoid any clash with Westminster elections). The most recent Scottish election took place on May 5th 2021 where the SNP was the most popular party. They campaign for Scotland to have another referendum on becoming independent. A referendum is when the public can vote on a single issue in the format of a yes no question. Although the SNP want this, MPs in the Labour and Conservative parties are opposed to the idea.

The Scottish Government is given an annual budget of around £30 billion and has the power to make laws on a range of 'devolved' issues. These include the NHS in Scotland, education, the environment, common laws and prison services, tax and environment policy. However, the UK Parliament reserves powers over defence foreign affairs, some benefits and any constitutional changes. This means changes to the way the political system works in the UK.