

Politics Knowledge Book



British Constitution

This sets out how we are governed. Most countries have a written constitution, which means there is a single document that outlines the governance of the country. The UK is very different as there is not one single document instead our constitution comes from many sources and has been shaped over hundreds of years by different laws and events e.g. Magna Carta, Human Rights Act.

Parliamentary Sovereignty

Central to the British Constitution is the idea of Parliamentary Sovereignty. This means that Parliament is the only body that can make laws. It is hugely powerful. It also means that UK law and policy can be changed when new Parliaments are formed, it's adaptable. However, once law and policy are created by Parliament, all individuals and public bodies must follow it.

Democracy and political rights

Being able to play an active role in the government of your country. In a democracy, citizens can vote and stand as a candidate themselves. For a true democracy, citizens need access to information, free press and the right to freedom of speech, so that they can vote for who they wish, using a range of information that is available to them. North Korea is a good example of a country that allows citizens to vote but is undemocratic because citizens do not have access to information or freedom to vote for who they wish.

In the UK we have political rights. Just as the United Nations has outlined everyone's human rights, it has done the same for political rights. We are entitled 'to vote and to be elected at genuine elections which shall be held by secret ballot' (International Covenant of Political Rights)

Article 21 of the UNDHR states 'everyone has the right to take part in the government of his country, directly or through a freely chosen representative.'

Who can we vote for?

It is important to remember, that at every level. Elected representatives are there to represent the electorate. In simple terms, they work for us. Elected representatives should listen to the views of the electorate and consider these views when making laws or changing policy. They need to ensure they do not alienate or anger the electorate as if this happens, they are unlikely to be voted into power again.

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| European Parliament | The European Union has a parliament, which represents all member countries of the EU. This group have a say in plans that are developed for Europe, often involving trade and employment. <i>The UK is set to leave the EU.</i> |
| National Parliament | This is what most people think of when they imagine politics. Our national Parliament is based in Westminster. The elected body (MPs) sit in the House of Commons and have the power (along side the rest of Parliament) to make laws and shape national policy. |
| Local council | Councillors are elected by citizens who live in their ward. They cannot make laws, but they can make decisions about your local area, they aim to improve your local area. |
| School council | A small group of students are elected by their peers to feedback school opinion to the senior leadership team. |

Local Council

This is a group of people who are elected to look after the affairs of a town, district or county. They primarily make decisions about and provide, local services. Local council elections take place every 4 years.

Local councillors represent different parts of the town, these are called wards.

Political parties will put forward candidates, but people can also stand as independent candidates. Each party or independent candidate will produce a manifesto that outlines their plans for the local area if they are elected. Most councils end up being a mix of different political parties, they will need to work together to improve the local area.

When the elected local council meet for the first time, they will elect a leader. The leader will then appoint a cabinet (individuals who will be responsible for leading on key areas of the councils work e.g. children and young people) The leader and cabinet will be from the political party that received the most votes.

Local councillors normally work on a voluntary basis and often have another full-time job; therefore, a Chief Executive is also employed to take responsibility for the overall organisation of the council.

In most councils, the mayor has little power and is mainly involved in ceremonial duties e.g. opening a new school. In councils where mayors are elected, they have more power e.g. London.

The local council is responsible for a wide range of services e.g. leisure, waste management, libraries, housing and the police.

To run these services, the council receives money in the following ways:

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| Council tax (largest source of income) | This is paid by the citizens that live within that local area. The amount you pay depends on the size of the house you live in and the quality of amenities it is near to. |
| Business rates (2 nd largest source of income) | Like council tax, but this time for owners of businesses. If you rent a shop/caf /factory in the local area, you pay business rates to the local council. You will pay more for desirable, more profitable areas e.g. renting a shop on Oxford Street. |
| Central government grant | Local councils also receive money from central government. Poorer areas will receive more money than richer areas. |

Parliament (national)

This diagram shows how Parliament is structured.

All sections will work both independently and together.

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| Monarch | the Monarch sits at the top, but puts democratic trust in the legislature, executive and judiciary. | | |
| Legislature This section of Parliament makes law, this includes the House of Commons and the House of Lords. | Executive This section creates and actions policy, this includes the Prime Minister and the Cabinet. | Judiciary This section makes judgements about the law and is made up of Judges. | |

The UK is broken down into 650 constituencies. Each constituency is represented by a Member of Parliament (MP) MPs are elected during a general election that happens every 5 years. MPs have two major responsibilities, to represent the citizens from their constituencies and to work with Parliament to make and shape law and policy.

As with local councils, most MP candidates represent political parties, although they may also be independent. In the run up to an election, each political party will produce a manifesto outlining their plans for the UK if successful. MPs will follow their political parties' manifesto and will apply this to the constituency they wish to represent.

The 2 main political parties are Conservatives and Labour. For over a hundred years, these two parties have been the most

popular, with the UK having either a conservative or labour government.

There are also smaller political parties such as the Liberal Democrats, Green and the Scottish National Party.

During a general election, citizens over the age of 18 can vote for the MP they wish to represent them. How people vote depends on lots of things, ideally, citizens should read the manifestos from every party and vote for who they agree with the most. However, some people vote in line with their parents, peers or are heavily influenced by the media, which is often politically biased. Before an election, potential MPs will do lots of canvassing (going door to door to speak to constituents) and media will cover the election in detail.

In each constituency, the candidate with the most votes secures a seat in the House of Commons. The political party with the most seats overall 'wins' and forms the government. The leader of this political party becomes the Prime Minister. The political party in 2nd place becomes the official opposition and the leader becomes the leader of the opposition. MPs from other political parties become back benchers.

The UK voting system outlined above is known as first past the post. Some people think this is a good system because it is simple to follow and stops extremist parties from gaining seats (power) however, others think it is unfair as it means that not every vote counts and that politics is always dominated by Conservatives and Labour. Some people think we should switch to proportional representation where the percentage of votes is roughly equal to the percentage of seats.

Occasionally the government might hold a referendum, this is where people are asked to vote yes or no on a single, big issue e.g. leaving the EU. This vote is not legally binding but informs the government of the electorates stance and is therefore normally followed.

Once a government is formed, the Prime Minister will appoint a cabinet. These are a special group of MPs who head major government departments e.g. health, education, defence. The government will work hard during the 5 years to put their manifesto into action. The opposition and back benchers will hold the government to account and represent the views of the full electorate.

If a political party does not gain enough seats to win a clear majority, they will have to persuade a smaller political party to join them (so that their seats are added, to ensure a clear

majority) this is known as a coalition government and is quite rare.

Bi-cameral

In the UK we have two houses, this means it is bi-cameral.

House of Commons - Elected MPs, including the government, sit in the House of Commons, this is the most powerful part of Parliament as it is the democratically elected house.

House of Lords - This house is both appointed and hereditary. They have less power than the House of Commons because they are not elected. However, they do work alongside the House of Commons when making and shaping laws.

Making laws

Parliament pass laws that have a huge impact on our day to day lives, laws that political parties want to pass have a huge impact on how people vote during a general election. The government will produce a Green Paper which puts forward ideas for future laws. Once these ideas are finalised, a White Paper is produced. Each proposal is then introduced to Parliament in the form of a bill. This bill goes through readings in both houses. If the bill has little support, it can be thrown out of parliament. Normally, the bill will go from house to house being amended and debated until everyone is happy. At this point it is sent for Royal Assent. Once this happens, the bill becomes an Act of Parliament (law)

Budget

As with the local council, the government receives most of its income from the citizens of the UK via income tax and national insurance. This money is deducted from citizens salaries and goes straight to the government. This money is then spent on running the country e.g. providing health services, social protection and education. This is a difficult balancing act. The government must decide where to spend money and where to make cuts. Whilst doing this they need to stay true to their manifesto to protect future votes. The cabinet member with budget responsibility is the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

With both local council and the government, budget decisions are very emotive because ultimately it is our money they are spending.

Devolution

This refers to the transfer of power from central to regional government. Our Parliament is based in England's capital city, London, as it is in most countries. However, the UK is also made up of Wales, Scotland and Northern Island. People from

these countries have fought for devolution so that power was shifted from London to their own capital cities. Referendums were held in 1998 and as a result, the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly were created. The amount of power held by these bodies represents how strong the referendum vote for devolution was. Scotland voted massively in favour of devolution so their Parliament has more power and can raise and lower taxes and make laws that apply to Scotland. Wales only voted for devolution with a tiny margin so they have no law-making powers and can only make smaller decisions regarding how government money is spent in Wales. Northern Irelands Assembly is very similar.

In summary

- The British Constitution is unwritten and derived from many sources, at its core is Parliamentary Sovereignty which means it is only Parliament that can make laws, although these can be adapted and changed by future Parliaments.
- Democracy is a political right and human right, it involves being able to vote but also having freedom of speech and information.
- Politics & democracy occurs at 4 levels. School, local council, national Parliament and European parliament.
- Local Councils provide services and aim to improve local areas. They receive money mainly via council tax and business rates.
- Parliament is made up of the Monarch, legislature, executive and judiciary.
- We have a bi-cameral parliament (two houses) the House of Commons is more powerful than the House of Lords because it is elected.
- The voting system the UK uses is called first past the post, the MP with the most votes wins the seat for that constituency.
- The political party that gains the most seats forms the government and the leader becomes the Prime Minister.
- MPs have 2 main roles, to represent their constituents and work with Parliament to make laws and shape policy.
- How local councils and the government spend money is very emotive because ultimately, they are spending our money.

