

Understanding Politics & Democracy

A UK-wide perspective

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Politics and democracy across the UK can look a little different depending on where you live. Over the next few pages we'll explore how democracy isn't just about voting and turning up at the polls on election day- although this is an important part of it- and how you can get involved in your corner of the UK.

Democracy is about [having your say](#) and [getting involved](#) all year round. The first step is to [recognise](#) what you are passionate about. The second step is to [choose](#) what the best course of [action](#) is; whether it's social action or a petition, protesting, campaigning, voting or contacting your elected representative.



What does that look like in your country?

Now listen carefully this is where it might get confusing!

You have more than one elected representative. Everyone in the UK is represented by an MP and several Councillors, and some also elect a Mayor. If you live in a **devolved nation** (Wales, Scotland & Northern Ireland) you **elect members of that devolved parliament/legislature** too. In Wales they are called **MS** (Members of the Senedd), in Scotland **MSP** (Members of the Scottish Parliament) and in Northern Ireland **MLA** (Members of the Legislative Assembly). Councillors are **elected by Ward/District** to represent you at local government level. You will have several Councillors who represent you at City or County Council Level which is often called your Local Authority.

Northern Ireland has 90 Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLA). In Northern Ireland you would have 5 Constituency MLA.

Wales has 60 Members of the Senedd/Welsh Parliament (MS). If you live in Wales you would have 1 Constituency MS & 4 Regional MS.

Scotland has 129 Members of the Scottish Parliament (MSP). If you live in Scotland you would have 1 Constituency MSP & 7 Regional MSP.

UK has 650 Members of Parliament (MP). Each member represents a single constituency.



What are the different levels of governance & how does it affect me?

Local Government: Local Government (your Council/Local Authority) deals with the local stuff – your **bins, streets, public buildings** and **open spaces** like your local parks and schools. Some people in the UK will also have a **Community, Town or Parish Council**. Most local authorities (Councils) opt for the ‘**leader and cabinet**’ model where the council leader is selected from the councillors, but in some areas they have a ‘**mayor and cabinet**’ model, where a directly elected mayor is established to replace the council leader. The **Leader or Mayor chooses the Cabinet**.

Devolved Government: Devolved Governments (Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland) oversee the big things e.g. **Health, Education, Culture, Sport, Agriculture, Transport and Local Government**. Devolved governments have **law making powers** for these. The **leader** of the political party with the **majority of seats** in a devolved parliament becomes **First Minister** and forms a government and chooses the cabinet.

UK Government: The **leader of the political party with the majority MPs** in the UK parliament becomes **Prime Minister** and forms a government and chooses the cabinet. The UK Government looks after things for people in **England only**, and decisions on these **issues are devolved to Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland**. The UK government also looks after **foreign relations, defence, the constitution, immigration** and many aspects of **economic policy** for the whole of the UK. These are reserved powers. This means that **only the UK parliament and government can make decisions on these matters**.

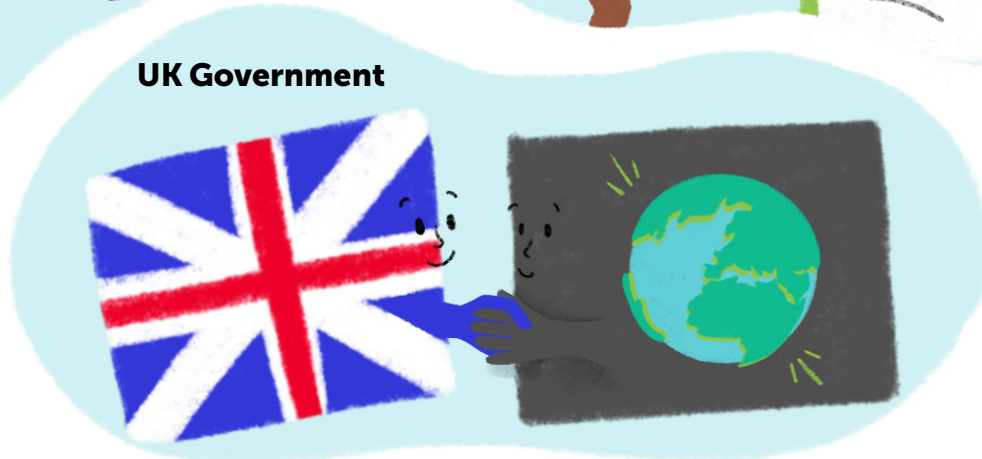
Local Government



Devolved Government



UK Government



The UK Parliament makes laws for England and for the UK. The UK Parliament scrutinises the UK Government. The UK Parliament (Westminster in London) is made up of 3 things.

1. Monarch

Has the final seal of approval on any legislation – this is called ‘Royal Assent’. Although the Monarch has the right to refuse Royal Assent, nowadays this does not happen, and it is regarded today as a formality.

2. The House of Commons

“Ordinary people” who have been elected by ordinary people.

3. The House of Lords

These are not elected. Historically these were passed down through families, however members now get their role by being appointed by the King on the advice of the prime minister or nominated by the House of Lords Appointment Commission.

Decisions made in one House generally have to be approved in the other. If the **House of Commons propose** a new law, the **House of Lords** need to **approve** it before it gets approved and **signed off** by the **King**. This is called a **two-way chamber system**.

Similar to the UK parliament, the **devolved parliaments scrutinise the devolved Governments**. So the Welsh Parliament/Senedd makes laws for Wales and challenge, examine thoroughly and closely inspect. A difference in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland is that they **do not have a second chamber like the House of Lords** in Westminster. All **devolved parliaments have law making powers** and can create laws about devolved areas without reference to Westminster. It is therefore very important that people in the devolved nations vote in the General election (UK Government) and the Welsh/Scottish/Northern Irish elections.

Voting

One way of taking part in democracy is by voting for someone to **represent you** and **your passions** in councils and parliaments. You **elect** the people **who you want to represent you** in your **local area**, councils, your country and parliament to discuss things and make laws on your behalf. All those **elected representatives** are paid by you (the taxpayer) and **work for you**, and they have to listen to you all year round not just at election time.



To be able **to vote** on election day you **must be registered**. It takes 5 minutes and you can do it via this [link](#).

What you will need to vote:

A **National Insurance Number** – you can find this on your **pay slip** or on a **letter** sent to your home. If you are **under 18** and **don't have a National Insurance Number** you can **register without** it. If you're stuck on what to do contact your Electoral Registration Office.

Who can vote?

Depending on where you live and the type of elections you can vote at different ages.

For local/devolved elections:

From **May 2021 16-17** year-olds and **qualifying foreign nationals** in **Wales**, will have their **first opportunity to vote** alongside the rest of the population in Senedd elections. In **Scotland 16–17** year-olds **gained the vote** during the **independence elections** in **2014**.

While in **England** and **Northern Ireland** the voting **age** is still **18**. For UK **general elections the voting age is 18** no matter where you live.

Who could I vote for?

See below who you can vote for depending on your area.

Wales:

- Welsh Labour
- Welsh Conservatives
- Plaid Cymru
- Abolish the Welsh assembly Party
- Reform UK
- Welsh Liberal Democrats
- Welsh National Party
- UK independent Party
- Green party

UK:

- Conservative Party
- Labour Party
- Scottish National Party
- Liberal Democrats
- Democratic Unionist Party
- Sinn Féin
- Plaid Cymru
- Social Democratic and Labour Party
- Green Party of England and Wales
- Alliance Party of Northern Ireland

Northern Ireland:

- Alliance Party
- Democratic Unionist Party
- Green Party
- People Before Profit Alliance
- Sinn Fein
- Social Democratic and Labour Party
- Traditional Unionist Voice
- Ulster Unionist Party

Scotland:

- Scottish National Party
- Scottish Conservatives
- Scottish Labour
- Scottish Liberal Democrats
- Scottish Greens
- Reform UK
- Orkney Manifesto Group
- Independence for Scotland Party
- Rubbish Party
- Scotia Future
- Scottish Libertarian Party
- West Dunbartonshire Community Party

There are also several parties who have representatives at local government level, raising awareness on a range of **local or marginalised issues** many of these groups are classed as **independents or have their own party name**.

Whichever political **party wins** an election is then in Government and gets to **form a Cabinet**. Whichever **party** (or parties) came **second** becomes the **opposition**. If there is **no clear winner there may be a Coalition Government**.

Key words:

Mayors:

Most local authorities opt for the 'leader and cabinet' model where the council leader is selected from the councillors, but in some areas a 'mayor and cabinet' model has been adopted, where a directly elected mayor is established to replace the council leader. Many authorities with or without elected mayors have a ceremonial mayor who holds no executive power and the two roles of elected mayor/nominated council leader and ceremonial mayor exist concurrently.

Members of parliament:

(MPs) Elected by Constituency. Elected to represent you at UK Government level (Westminster) Everyone in the UK is represented by an MP in the UK Parliament in Westminster. There are 650 MPs representing 650 Constituencies.

Members of devolved governments:

(MS, MSP, MLA) Elected by Constituency & Region. Elected to represent you in the devolved Government realm if you live in Wales, Scotland, or Northern Ireland.

Parliament:

comes from the French word parler, which translates as to speak.

The most common meaning refers to a country's legislative (law-making) body. This is the group of people who are elected to make and change the laws of a country.

Legislature:

an institution that has the power to make or change laws.

Government:

the group of people who are officially responsible for governing (running) the country or political part of the country.



Our Bright Future is an ambitious and innovative partnership led by The Wildlife Trusts which brings together the youth and environmental sectors. This £33 million programme, funded by the [National Lottery Community Fund](#), is formed of 31 [projects](#) across the UK. Each project is helping young people aged 11-24 gain vital skills and experience and improve their wellbeing. At the same time, they act as catalysts for delivering change for their local environment and community; whilst contributing to a greener economy.

