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Factsheet G1 General Series

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Contents

Democracy within Parliament	2
<i>Government and Parliament</i>	2
The Role of the House of Commons	3
<i>Scrutinising the Government</i>	3
<i>Proposing and Amending Legislation</i>	3
<i>Representing the People</i>	4
<i>Taxation</i>	4
The expansion of the right to vote	4
Further reading	6
Contact information	6

House of Commons Information Office

The House of Commons and the right to vote

It is important to understand the role of the House of Commons within the UK democratic system.

This factsheet outlines the role of the House of Commons within Parliament and the functions it performs. It also provides an overview of the development of how the right to vote has expanded since the Great Reform Act of 1832.

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Democracy within Parliament

Parliament is the primary democratic body in the UK and is comprised of three parts: the House of Commons, the House of Lords and the Sovereign. The UK is a parliamentary democracy and different from many other democracies in not having a written constitution.

Each House of Parliament has its own set of Members and rules by which it conducts its business. Those members each have an equal say in the running of their House and neither House interferes in the running of the other. Legislation may impact on either House but any such legislation would normally require assent of both Houses to come into force.

The House of Commons is the obvious focus of democratic attention as all of its members are elected to their seat in their House but both the Commons and the Lords play their part in the parliamentary process and provide very individual contributions.

The democratic mandate of the House of Commons provides several benefits over the House of Lords such as the right to legislate on financial matters. The Parliament Acts of 1911 and 1949 provided the House of Commons the ultimate say on the passage of legislation (the Lords were now only able to delay legislation rather than block it indefinitely) but also limited the term of a Parliament to five years. The House of Lords, through the Salisbury Convention, acknowledges the democratic process in not blocking legislation brought to parliament in fulfilling the manifesto of an elected government.

The democratic mandate of the House of Commons arises through the fact that all UK citizens over the age of 18 are eligible to vote in Parliamentary elections. An overview of the expansion of the right to vote (franchise) is provided later in this document.

Government and Parliament

After a General Election, the leader of the political party with the most MPs in the House of Commons is asked by the Sovereign to take the role of Prime Minister and to form a government. If no single party has a majority of MPs in the Commons, two or more parties can work together as a coalition government. The Prime Minister may select people (most often MPs and Peers) to become Ministers. Ministers run government departments such as the Home Office and the Treasury and are responsible for formulating policy in the areas they are responsible. If the policy requires new legislation then the Ministers bring Bills before Parliament, hoping that Parliament will allow these Bills to become Acts of Parliament.

The government of the day has a commanding role in the House of Commons to reflect the dominance of the political party which achieved a majority membership in the House. The government controls the business of the House of Commons and dictates the subject of debate apart from 13 opposition days. This ensures that the elected government can progress the issues upon which it was elected to govern the country.

The procedures of the House of Commons serve both the needs of the government and the requirements of political control over government. The executive is entitled to use Parliament for the purposes of governing and will expect to secure the passage of its legislation. But equally it has to account publicly to Parliament and in turn Parliament has powers of control in relation to government. What those relationships mean in

practice is that Britain must be governed by parliamentarians, that is to say by elected politicians who have served in the House of Commons.¹

The committees of the House reflect the relative strengths of the political parties. If the government has a majority of MPs in the House of Commons (the usual situation) then the government will also have a majority on committees of the House.

The Role of the House of Commons

The House of Commons has four core roles; it scrutinises the work of government, proposes and amends legislation, represents the citizens of the UK within the Parliament system and has the ability to amend taxation.

Scrutinising the Government

The House of Commons has a variety of ways to ensure that the government is working for the benefit of the country.

MPs may question government ministers. They can do this directly on the floor of the House during the regular question times throughout the week. Each government department will regularly send Ministers to the House of Commons to answer questions of MPs. They can also ask questions in writing.

Through careful questioning of Ministers, MPs can become better informed as to how government policy is working in a variety of policy areas. More detail on how the Parliamentary questions work can be found in factsheet P1 'Parliamentary Questions'.

The House of Commons has a broad range of committees through which it also scrutinises the government.

The Departmental Select Committees were established to 'shadow' government departments and to conduct inquiries into issues where there may be cause for concern over the performance of government departments. The government is committed to providing people and papers to produce evidence before such committees and to responding to recommendations made in committee reports. For more information see factsheet P2 'Departmental Select Committees'.

Minor legislation making powers are often delegated to government departments and that legislation can be scrutinised by Delegated Legislation Committees. For more information see factsheet L6 'General Committees'.

More generally, MPs scrutinise the government by debating issues on the floor of the House and by questioning Ministers when they make statements to the House.

Proposing and Amending Legislation

All new legislation has to be approved by both Houses of Parliament. The House of Commons looks at legislative proposals (Bills) several times before approving them or not.

Bills can be introduced to the House by the government or by individual MPs (known as Private Members' Bills).

¹ p54, *Fundamentals in British Politics*, Eds. Ian Holliday, Andrew Gamble & Geraint Parry, Macmillan Press, 1999

The House will debate the principles of the legislation before asking a committee of MPs to scrutinise the Bill line by line. The committee often make changes to the text and this amended text will be sent back to the floor of the House for further consideration and potential change by the whole of the House of Commons. When all of the consideration and change is complete the House has to agree to the finished text before the Bill can progress.

The House of Lords follows a similar process of scrutiny on a bill and both Houses must come to an agreed text before the Bill can be passed to the Queen for Royal Assent at which point the Bill becomes an Act of Parliament.

The full details of how Bills can become Acts of Parliament are detailed in factsheets L1 'Parliamentary Stages of a Government Bill' and L2 'Private Members' Bill Procedure'.

Representing the People

The UK democratic system provides citizens with the ability to elect representatives (MPs) into the House of Commons.

The UK is divided into 650 areas called constituencies. Each Member will have gained a majority of the votes cast in their constituency at the last election and will retain the position of MP until the next election or they give up the role (though this only happen in rare occasions).

All residents within a constituency can contact the MP for that area about issues that affect them or that are coming to Parliament for consideration. It does not matter whether they voted for the MP during the election or whether the resident is entitled to vote.

Factsheet M1 'You and Your MP' covers the role of an MP in more detail.

Taxation

The House of Commons as the democratically elected element of Parliament has the right to raise taxes from those living in the UK. The raising of taxes is done to ensure that the government has enough money available to deliver the policies that it proposes to carry out. The Chancellor of the Exchequer comes before the House on an annual basis to provide a budget that details how the government would like to tax the people to pay for its policies. The House, if convinced, passes a Finance Bill to enable these taxes to be paid.

The expansion of the right to vote

In the UK, citizens over the age of 18 are eligible to vote in elections. In each of the 646 constituencies a majority of voters resident in that constituency choose one candidate to send to the House of Commons. Those people, MPs, constitute the part of Parliament that represents the people of the country. It is possible for non-UK citizens to vote in UK elections, more detail on eligibility to vote is available from the Electoral Commission.²

The question of who can vote for an MP (who has the franchise) has been a changing issue over the years. For many years eligibility to vote was strictly based on property ownership.

The *Reform Act 1832* began the process of change. The Act added small land-owners, tenant

² <http://www.aboutmyvote.co.uk>

farmers and shopkeepers to those eligible to vote but the franchise was still based on a property qualification. The Act also provided for a re-distribution of seats.

Further milestones on the road to democracy were the Representation of the People Acts of 1867 and 1884. These extended the franchise to all householders who paid rates in 'constituency boroughs' and then to 'county constituencies' which resulted in almost 60 per cent of the adult male population having the right to vote.

All forms of property qualification were finally removed by the *Representation of the People Act 1918*. This Act established residence alone as the qualifying basis for the vote and, possibly more significantly, introduced votes for women but only at the age of 30 years. The 1918 Act gave businessmen who occupied business premises worth more than £10 per year an extra vote, so long as the premises were in a different constituency from their residence. Businesswomen had a similar extra vote if their premises were worth only £5 per year.

The *Representation of the People (Equal Franchise) Act 1928* reduced the female franchise to 21 years.

The *Representation of the People Act 1948* abolished all plural voting and university constituencies which had been 'notional, not geographical, bodies of electors, comprising the graduates of particular universities'.

The *Representation of the People Act 1969* extended the franchise to those aged 18 and over.

The *Representation of the People Act 1985* extended the franchise to British citizens resident outside the United Kingdom to qualify as 'overseas voters' in the constituency for which they were last registered. This was initially for a period of 5 years but was later extended to 20 years by the *Representation of the People Act 1989* and then reduced to 15 years by the *Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000*.

Further reading

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Factsheet G1 The House of Commons and how it is elected

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