Parliament Explained 1

Parliamentary Elections

Elections allow citizens to determine how the country should be governed.

Parliamentary Elections

What is an election?

In an election those eligible to vote (the 'electorate'), select one or more options – usually a person or a political party – from a list of candidates. This booklet concentrates on the election of Members of Parliament (MPs) to the House of Commons but in the United Kingdom regular elections also take place for the Scottish and European Parliaments, the National Assembly for Wales, the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Greater London Authority (and directly elected Mayor of London) and for local government (county and district councils, unitary authorities, etc).

Why have elections?

Fair and free elections are an essential part of a democracy, allowing citizens to determine how they want the country to be governed.

Who oversees elections?

The Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 created the Electoral Commission. The Commission is an independent body that oversees controls on donations to, and campaign spending by, political parties and others. It also has a remit to keep under review electoral law and practice and to promote public awareness of the electoral process.

General Elections

What is a general election?

A general election is held when Parliament is dissolved by the Queen on the advice of the Prime Minister of the day. General elections must be held every five years at least. All seats in the House of Commons are vacant and the political party that wins the most seats in the Commons in the subsequent general election forms the government.

The results of the last two general elections in the United Kingdom were:

Party	Seats 1997	Seats 2001
Labour	418	412
Conservative	165	166
Liberal Democrat	46	52
Ulster Unionist	10	6
Scottish National	6	5
Democratic Unionist	2	5
Plaid Cymru	4	4
Sinn Fein	2	4
SDLP	3	3
United Kingdom Unionist	1	
Other	1	1
Speaker	1	1
Total	659	659
Women MPs	120	118
Turnout (%)	71.4	59.4

Further information about the 2001 General Election is available from the Electoral Commission's publication *Election 2001: The Official Results* (available at www.electoralcommission.org.uk).

Political Parties

What are political parties?

A political party is a group of people who seek to influence or form the government according to their agreed views and principles. It is not always easy to distinguish between political parties and some pressure groups. Essentially a political party will have policies to cover all general areas of public policy, whereas a pressure group will seek to influence one specific policy area, for example environmental issues.

Why do we need political parties?

Political parties are essential to provide voters with a free choice between options. They help to organise public opinion on national matters, they provide a permanent link between Parliament and the electors and they provide stability and cohesion in Parliament.

Which political parties do we have in the United Kingdom?

The Westminster Parliament has traditionally been dominated by the two party system, with two main parties forming the Government and the Official Opposition. Over the years these have been Whigs and Tories, Liberals and Conservatives and, since the development of the Labour Party at the beginning of the twentieth century, Labour and Conservatives. A number of other parties have also won seats in Parliament. After the 2001 election (see results, on page 2) the Liberal Democrats were the third largest party with 52 seats.

Registration

Why do political parties need to be registered?

In order to have a party description on a ballot paper, and to have lists of candidates for certain elections (such as European Parliament, Scottish Parliament and National Assembly for Wales) which are elected under proportional representation systems, parties must register with the Electoral Commission. Registration is also necessary so that parties can record donations and expenditure in accordance with the 2000 Act.

Candidates

Who can stand as a candidate in a general election?

Any person who is a British, Commonwealth or Irish Republic citizen may stand as a candidate at a parliamentary election providing he or she is aged 21 or over.

Those disqualified from sitting in the House of Commons are:

1) Members of the House of Lords including those bishops who are Lords Spiritual.
2) Undischarged bankrupts.
3) Offenders sentenced to more than one year in prison while detained serving their sentence or unlawfully at large.
4) Persons convicted of illegal or corrupt practices at elections (disqualified for 7 years).
5) Those holding offices listed by the House of Commons Disqualification Act 1975 (such holders need to be politically impartial whilst carrying out their jobs) including: senior civil servants, judges, ambassadors, members of the regular armed forces, members of the police force, paid members of the boards of nationalised industries, government-appointed directors of commercial companies and directors of the Bank of England.
6) 'Idiots' and 'lunatics' (in their non-lucid periods) as legally defined.

What happens if a disqualified person stands successfully in a general election?

In the event of a disqualified candidate standing successfully in a general election the person is unable to take his or her seat in the House of Commons and the defeated opponent may apply to have the election declared null and void.

How are candidates chosen?

Any eligible person can become a candidate whether or not he or she belongs to a political party. Anyone who wishes to stand for election must be nominated on an official nomination paper giving his or her full name and home address. They must stand either for a registered political party or as an independent; it is no longer possible to give a description on the ballot paper unless the candidate is standing for a registered political party. The nomination paper must include the signatures of ten electors who will support him or her including a proposer and a seconder. Candidates must consent to their nomination in writing. All candidates must pay a £500 deposit which is lost if they do not secure 5% of the total number of votes cast in their constituency and is set at this level to discourage large numbers of frivolous candidates from standing. The nomination papers and deposit must be submitted to the Returning Officer in each constituency during a specified period in the election campaign. In the last two general elections deposits lost were as follows:

Party	1997	2001
Conservative	8	5
Labour	0	0
Liberal Democrat	13	1
Other	1,572	1,171

However, to stand a realistic chance of being elected to the Commons under our present system a candidate needs to represent one of the three main political parties in Great Britain or a nationalist or unionist party in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland. Each party has its own method of selecting candidates.

Why does a person with no realistic chance of being elected stand as a candidate?

The fact that almost anyone can stand for Parliament is one of the essential freedoms in our democracy and provides voters with a choice. Publicity is a key factor for individuals: they may gain national publicity like the late Screaming Lord Sutch and his Monster Raving Loony Party, local publicity for a particular issue or cause which they feel strongly about, or for themselves as an individual.

Voters

Who is able to vote in parliamentary elections?

All British, Irish and Commonwealth citizens are entitled to register to vote in elections to the House of Commons providing they are 18 or over and are not disqualified in any way. Irish and Commonwealth citizens must be resident in the UK. Those who are unable to vote are:

1) Members of the House of Lords.

2) Offenders detained in mental hospitals.

3) Prisoners who have been sentenced to more than 12 months imprisonment, during the period they are detained (or unlawfully at large).

4) People convicted within the previous five years of corrupt or illegal practices during elections.

5) Citizens of European Union and other countries other than those of the Commonwealth and Republic of Ireland even if they are tax paying or long-term residents.

6) People who on polling day cannot make a reasoned judgement (i.e. 'idiots' and 'lunatics' as legally defined).

This is very different from the situation in the early 19th Century when only around 3 adults in every 100 were eligible to vote. The 'franchise' (the right to vote) has been gradually extended over the past two centuries. For example, the Representation of the People Act 1918 allowed, for the first time, most women over 30 to vote and the Representation of the People Act 1969 lowered the age at which people could vote from 21 to 18.

How do I ensure that I can vote?

You can only vote if your name appears on the electoral register. This is updated on a monthly basis and, if you move, you should alert your new local Electoral Registration Officer. Each autumn, there is also a canvass of every household to check eligibility to vote. The householder must give details of all occupants who are eligible to vote, as well as those who will be 18 during the next year. The register is published locally in public libraries, etc and it is the responsibility of each elector to check their inclusion and raise objections with the ERO.

Who can have a postal vote?

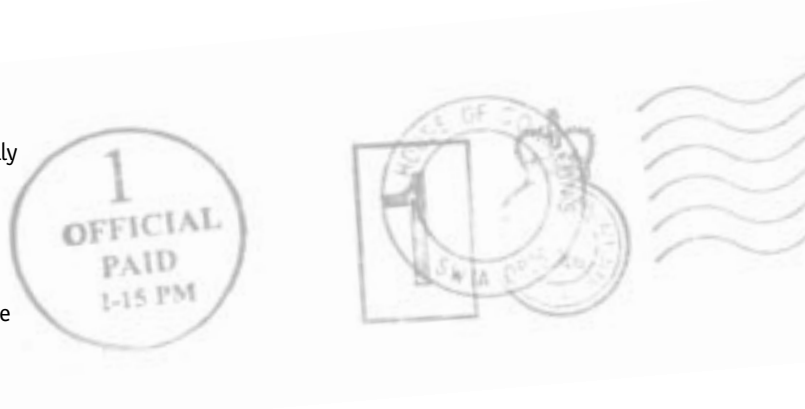
The ability to vote by post used to be confined to those who could not otherwise reach the polling station. Since 2001, however, it is available on demand in Great Britain, by application to the local Returning Officer. In Northern Ireland it is still necessary to provide a valid reason, such as illness or employment to obtain a postal vote. British citizens living abroad may vote by post or proxy.

Is voting compulsory?

No, unlike in some other countries such as Australia, voting in the United Kingdom is completely optional. You do not have to vote.

I want to see a particular party in Government but don't like my local candidate. What can I do?

Unfortunately there is no easy answer to this question. You only have one vote to use as you wish and must decide which is the most important factor for you. Remember your involvement in decision making does not have to end with your vote. You can lobby your MP over issues that you feel strongly about and can support pressure groups to try to bring about change. Your vote will give you a package of measures: support the areas that you approve of and try to secure change in areas where you disagree.



Constituencies

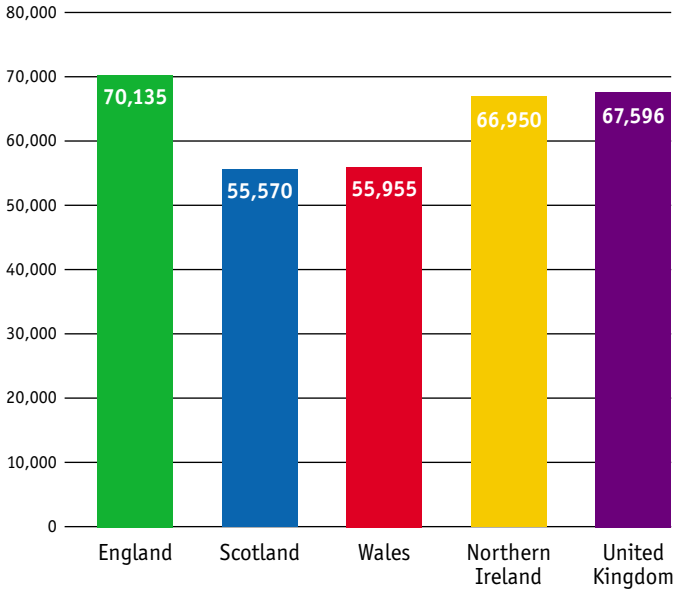
What is a constituency?

The United Kingdom is divided up into areas known as constituencies. You live in a constituency and will register to vote there. Each party contesting a constituency (seat) will select one prospective candidate to be the MP. There may also be independent candidates. You have one vote that you cast for the person who you wish to represent you in Parliament. Through this you also vote for the party which you wish to be in Government.

How many constituencies are there?

There are currently 659 constituencies: 529 in England, 72 in Scotland; 40 in Wales and 18 in Northern Ireland. The average size of a constituency electorate is approximately 67,600. More rural constituencies are known as 'county constituencies' and more urban constituencies are known as 'borough constituencies'.

Average electorate 2001



How are constituencies determined?

Constituency boundaries are determined by a number of factors: geographical features, local government boundaries, area and population. Under the Parliamentary Constituencies Act 1986 constituencies are kept under review by four permanent Boundary Commissions, one each for England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. They make reports at regular intervals recommending any changes necessary due to population change or alterations in local government boundaries. In 2001 the constituency with the largest electorate was the Isle of Wight (104,702), which is an island not easily divided. The constituency with the smallest electorate was the Western Isles of Scotland (21,941), where geographical isolation is a major factor.

The four boundary commissions will be completing their next review of parliamentary constituencies around 2006. Following Scottish Devolution there will be a reduction in the number of constituencies in Scotland, bringing the number of electors per seat closer to the figure for England (see chart).

Election date

How often do we have general elections?

In the United Kingdom we do not have fixed-term Parliaments and there is no minimum length of a Parliament. Under the terms of the Septennial Act 1715 as amended by the Parliament Act 1911 the maximum life of a Parliament, that is the time between general elections, is 5 years. Since 1911 Parliaments have twice been exceptionally extended beyond 5 years, during the two World Wars. There were 8 years between elections at the time of the First World War and 10 years at the time of the Second World War. Within the legal period it is up to the Prime Minister to decide when to call a general election.

What factors will influence the timing of a general election?

Any Prime Minister will hope that his or her party is re-elected at the next general election so will try to choose a time when the party is popular and opinion polls suggest that it will be successful. In the past, Prime Ministers have often looked towards an election after around four years in office, perhaps after some popular legislation has taken effect or favourable taxation changes have been made, but no-one can guarantee a win.

Other factors may force an election on a Prime Minister. It is a convention (established practice) that if a government is defeated in the House of Commons on a vote of confidence, then a general election will follow. On 28 March 1979 the Conservative Opposition defeated the then Labour Government by 311-310 votes on the motion "That this House has no confidence in Her Majesty's Government". Parliament was dissolved on 7 April and the election held on 3 May.

When are general elections usually held?

General elections are usually held 17 days after the dissolution of Parliament, excluding weekends and public holidays. Thursdays are popular general election days, although there is no law that says that this should be so. The last general election to be held on a day other than a Thursday was on Tuesday 27 October 1931.

General elections are frequently held in either spring or autumn: if the weather is bad, voters are less inclined to vote so winter is usually avoided whilst many people are on holiday in the summer and may not bother to organise a postal vote.

Election campaigns

What happens when the Prime Minister decides to call a general election?

Once the Prime Minister decides to call a general election – usually after discussions with his Cabinet colleagues – or circumstances dictate that an election is called – then he or she will go to see the Monarch to request that Parliament is dissolved. If the Monarch agrees (there would have to be very strong constitutional reasons why he/she would refuse) then a Royal Proclamation is issued which officially allows the dissolution (bringing to an end) of the Parliament. It is customary for the Prime Minister to make a statement announcing the date of the dissolution and the reason for calling a general election.

How long is an election campaign?

A general election campaign usually lasts for about three weeks. In 2001 Parliament was dissolved on 14 May and the general election took place on 7 June.

What happens to MPs once Parliament has been dissolved?

Once Parliament has been formally dissolved, the Clerk of the Crown in Chancery issues Writs of Election for each constituency and the election timetable commences. Although the Government continues in office there cease to be any MPs. Those who have been MPs and who are standing for re-election return to their former constituencies as prospective candidates. They fight the election campaign on the same basis as all other prospective candidates.

What happens during the election campaign?

Before 1867 all election campaigns were organised on a local basis. Now they are national events using all aspects of the media to publicise party policies and personalities. All the main political parties produce a wide range of publicity material, although publication increases dramatically during the election campaign. Manifestos will be published setting out a party's policies on each major issue. The national headquarters of each party is responsible for preparing party election advertising material and broadcasts for television and radio.

How much can parties spend on the election?

Each party which contests a general election has a national expenditure limit, broadly based on the number of candidates it puts up. The limit is overseen by the Electoral Commission, which issues guidance about the type of expenditure which counts towards the limit. The limit is in force for one year before a general election. The current limit would be £19.77 million for a political party that contested all the seats in the United Kingdom for election to the House of Commons. The limit for parties contesting all seats in Great Britain only would be £19.23 million.

Paying for political advertising on radio and television is not permitted, but political advertising is allowed in the press and on billboards. Posters will appear in prominent places. Television and radio coverage of elections is required to be impartial. Party election broadcasts are permitted and their number depends broadly on the number of candidates the party has in the election. The broadcasting authorities may refuse to allow material that they consider offensive. Party leaders and senior figures will tour the country supporting local candidates and making speeches.

What happens locally?

In individual constituencies prospective candidates have to appoint an election agent, often a paid party official, who will organise their local campaign and account for their expenses. Maximum limits for each constituency are fixed by Parliament and local campaign expenditure is currently limited as follows:

a) for a candidate at a general election in a borough constituency £5,483 + 4.6p for every name on the electoral register for the constituency.

b) for a candidate at a general election in a county constituency £5,483 + 6.2p for every name on the electoral register.

Candidates may post one communication relating to the election to each household in a constituency free of charge, providing it weighs no more than 57 grammes. This is usually the election address that contains a picture and information, together with a request to vote for the candidate. Schools and other public buildings can be used for meetings. Candidates and their supporters will be out and about meeting as many people as possible in places such as shopping centres and by knocking on doors in order to canvass support.

In a marginal constituency (one where the result is likely to be close) senior party figures will visit in order to support their candidate. Canvassing will not be so apparent in a safe seat where one party has a large majority and so is likely to win again.

What influence does an election campaign have?

Despite the millions of pounds spent on campaigning, evidence suggests that the majority of voters have decided how they are going to vote before the election campaign begins and few people are influenced by what they read or hear.

If this is the case, why do parties bother?

An active election campaign helps to spread political knowledge and to keep issues under debate. It keeps up the morale and enthusiasm of party workers and brings politicians into wide-scale contact with the people. Voters can hardly fail to be aware of the election date and consequently turnout may be increased. In some areas the results will be very close – in the 2001 election, one candidate was elected with a majority of 33 and another with a majority of 48. If only a few undecided voters are persuaded by the election campaign then this can have a decisive result in some constituencies.

Polling day

What happens on polling day?

Each constituency is divided into a number of polling districts, each of which has a polling station. Most polling stations are in public buildings such as schools, town halls or council offices, but other buildings can be used on request. Voting takes place on election day from 07.00 – 22.00 in each constituency. Voters are sent a polling card in advance, but it is not compulsory to take this to the polling station. Only those voters whose names appear on the electoral register are eligible to vote.

Voting is by secret ballot, and the only people allowed in the polling station are the presiding officer (who is in charge), the polling clerks, the duty police officers, the candidates, their election agents and polling agents and the voters. Just before the poll opens, the presiding officer shows the ballot boxes to those at the polling station to prove that they are empty. The boxes are then locked and sealed. In the polling station voters are directed to the presiding officer or poll clerk, who asks the voter his or her name, checks that it is on the register, and places a mark against the register entry. This records that the voter has received a ballot paper but does not show which one. The ballot papers are printed in books with counterfoils; serial numbers are printed on the back of each paper and each counterfoil. The officer or clerk also writes the voter's number on the counterfoil of the ballot paper and gives it an official mark before handing the paper to the voter. The official mark is intended to show that the papers placed in the ballot box are genuine.

The ballot paper lists the names of the candidates in alphabetical order. Candidates of registered political parties may include their party name and emblem but other candidates can only be described as independent. Voting takes place in a booth, which is screened to maintain secrecy. The voter marks the ballot paper with a cross in the box opposite the name of the candidate of his or her choice, and folds the paper to conceal the vote before placing it in the ballot box.

A paper that is spoiled by mistake must be returned to the presiding officer. If the presiding officer is satisfied that the spoiling was accidental, another paper is provided and the first cancelled. At the end of the voting the presiding officer delivers those spoilt papers to the returning officer. The ballot boxes are then sealed and delivered to the central point, usually a public building such as a town hall, where the count is to take place.

What happens if I am incapacitated in any way?

Most parties will try to identify elderly and other supporters who may have difficulty in making their own way to the polling station and who prefer to vote in person rather than apply for a postal vote. On polling day their supporters will transport potential voters to and from the polling station. Election officials are required to take into account the requirements of voters with disabilities. They must, for example, try to choose as polling stations only places that meet accessibility standards. People who are unable to read, or who are physically incapacitated, may have their ballot paper marked for them by a presiding officer. A blind person may also be assisted by a companion or use a special device to help them vote.

What happens if I have had a postal vote?

It is the duty of the electoral registration officer to keep a list of the names and addresses of those persons whose applications to vote by post or by proxy have been granted. Postal ballot papers, together with a declaration of identity, ballot paper envelopes and return postal envelopes are sent to people entitled to vote by post. Votes must reach the returning officer by the close of the poll. Special postal ballot boxes are provided for the returned postal envelopes, which should contain the declaration of identity and the sealed ballot paper envelope enclosing the ballot paper. The boxes are locked and sealed by the returning officer and agents who wish to affix their seal.

On the day of the election these ballot boxes are opened in the presence of the election agents. The outer envelopes are opened and the declarations of identity checked against the ballot paper envelopes. Special procedures are followed to prevent abuse of the system. The ballot paper envelopes are then opened and the postal ballot papers are placed in a locked and sealed ballot box, which is treated as an ordinary box in the count. The papers are mixed with ordinary ballot papers and, apart from a different perforation mark, are identical to them.

What happens at the count?

All ballot boxes are taken to a central place in each constituency such as a town hall where counting takes place. Each ballot box is emptied, the papers mixed up and the votes counted by teams of helpers. This is done in the presence of the candidates. When all the votes have been counted the results are announced by the Returning Officer. Depending on the time it takes to bring all of the ballot boxes to the count – this will take longer in rural areas – and the result of the count, the final result may be announced before midnight. Most results will come in during the early hours of the morning, but some will not be known until well into the next day.

What happens if two candidates have the same number of votes?

If the result is close then either candidate can demand a recount. The Returning Officer will advise the candidates of the figures and sanction a recount. Recounts can continue until both candidates and the Returning Officer are satisfied with the result. The largest number of recounts ever held is seven, recorded on several occasions.

If, after recounts, both candidates have exactly the same number of votes, then the result is decided by lot. This is done by the Returning Officer. Since universal suffrage in 1918 this has not been necessary: the smallest majority recorded is 2 votes, gained by the then Labour candidate for Ilkeston, A J Flint, in 1931, and again by the Liberal Democrat MP for Winchester, Mark Oaten, in May 1997.

The electoral system

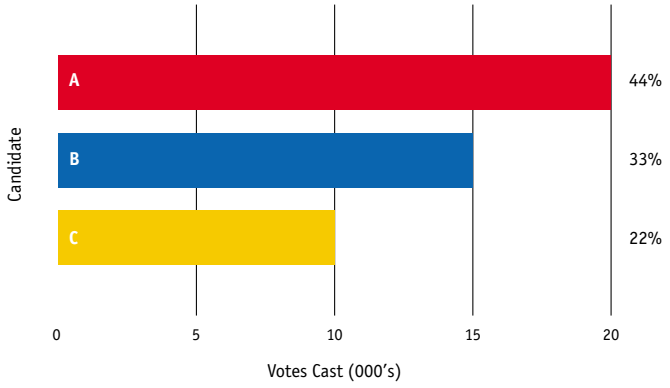
Which electoral system do we use?

The electoral system used in the United Kingdom for elections to the House of Commons is the single member constituency with simple majority, also known as the first-past-the-post system.

What does this actually mean?

As has been explained, the country is divided up into single constituencies. Each party wishing to contest the constituency (seat) offers one candidate or representative. Each voter has one vote that he or she casts for the party or representative of his or her choice. The candidate with the largest number of votes is elected to be the Member of Parliament for that constituency. So, for example, in the example below Candidate A, who received 20,000 votes, would be elected. The party which gains the most seats in the House of Commons usually then forms the Government.

Example



Thus in the example above Candidate A would be elected with 20,000 votes even though 25,000 votes (56% of the total) went against him/her.

What are the advantages of this system?

The first-past-the-post system is relatively simple and easy to understand. It is inexpensive to operate and produces a result fairly quickly. Each constituency elects one representative who can identify with his or her area. Constituents know whom to approach when they have a problem. One party generally gains a majority in the House of Commons so voters know what to expect and which policies will be carried out.

Are there any disadvantages to this system?

1) Since the candidate who wins has only to secure a simple majority – more votes than his or her nearest rival – more people in total may have voted for other candidates than for him or her.
2) A party which comes consistently second or third in constituencies but wins very few outright can obtain a sizeable proportion of the votes, but few seats. This is a problem faced particularly by the Liberal Democrats. For example, in 1992 they received 17.8% of the votes cast, but won only 3.1% of the seats.
3) It is possible for the party that forms the Government to have received fewer votes than its nearest rival.
4) The total electorate of constituencies varies for a number of reasons including geographical considerations – thus the winner in a smaller constituency can have fewer votes than the runner-up in a larger constituency.
5) A number of seats are considered 'safe' – one party generally wins. Voters who do not support this party may feel that there is no point in voting at all.

Are there any alternative systems?

There are a number of possible alternatives to the first-past-the-post system. Most of these are designed to make the result, in terms of seats won, more proportional to the distribution of votes cast. For example, the Additional Member System is used for elections to the Scottish Parliament, the National Assembly for Wales, and the Greater London Assembly. Each elector has two votes, the first for a constituency member and the second for a party list. The allocation of additional members from the list serves to correct the disproportionality arising from the election of constituency members. The Single Transferable Vote is used for elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly. Voters are able to rank as many candidates as they wish in order of preference, and those candidates who reach a certain quota are deemed to have been elected. The surplus votes of candidates are distributed on the basis of preferences to the remaining candidates. The European Parliament is elected on the basis of a list system. The UK is divided into regions and the elector selects the party that he or she wishes to represent that region; the party creates a list of candidates for the region and fills the seats it wins from that list. There is no opportunity for the ordinary elector to express a preference for an individual candidate.

The candidate for whom I voted was not elected, so who will represent me?

Once elected, your Member of Parliament is the representative of everyone in his or her constituency, regardless of whether they voted or not. Your MP will not ask, nor expect to be told, which way you voted and will seek to help all constituents in the same way.

How can I communicate with my Member of Parliament?

If you want your MP to represent your views then it is important that you communicate with him or her. You may see your MP in your constituency at local functions, openings, etc. He or she will probably visit places such as schools and factories and may even meet people in busy places such as shopping centres.

You can write to your MP either in your constituency or at the House of Commons, London SW1A 0AA.

You can lobby your MP in Westminster at any time when the House of Commons is in session. It is always sensible to make an appointment first, as your MP may be too busy to see you or may be elsewhere.

Most MPs hold constituency surgeries or advice bureaux where constituents can express their views or discuss their problems. Details of when and where your MP will be holding surgeries are usually published in local papers and in such places as public libraries. Sometimes appointments need to be made, but there are often times when you can turn up and wait.

The House of Commons

What happens when all of the results are known?

When all of the results are known the Queen will usually invite the leader of the party winning the most seats in the House of Commons to be Prime Minister and to form a Government. The Prime Minister will appoint approximately 115 members of his party from both Houses to become cabinet or more junior ministers to form the Government. The second largest party becomes the Official Opposition with a small group of its MPs being chosen to form the Shadow Cabinet. Its leader is known as the Leader of the Opposition. Smaller parties are collectively known as the Opposition, even though some may support the Government (for further information on Parliament & Government see Parliament Explained booklet No 3).

A few days after the general election the House of Commons will assemble in preparation for the new Parliament to begin. All MPs must be sworn in by taking an oath of allegiance or making an affirmation, and must sign the official register. The Speaker is customarily re-elected or, if the previous Speaker has stood down, a new Speaker must be elected. Soon afterwards the State Opening of Parliament will take place when the Monarch will officially open the new Parliament and the business of government can begin in earnest again (for further information on the House of Commons see Parliament Explained booklet No 2).

The House of Lords

What happens to the House of Lords during this time?

The House of Lords is an unelected Chamber so is not involved in the electoral process. It closes when Parliament dissolves and formally re-assembles for the State Opening of Parliament. If there has been a change in Government then the two main parties will change sides – the governing party always sit on the right of the Lord Chancellor – and any positions in the Lords which are party political appointments, for example the Lord Chancellor, will change (for further information on the House of Lords see Parliament Explained booklet No 6).

By-Elections

A by-election occurs when a Member dies, retires or is disqualified from membership of the House of Commons. Voting takes place only in the constituency without a Member. If there are several vacant seats then a number of by-elections can be held on the same day. If a vacancy occurs when the House is in session then the Motion for a new Writ of election is customarily moved by the Chief Whip of the party that formerly held the seat. There is no time limit within which a new Writ has to be issued following the vacancy occurring, although by convention it is usually done within three months. The sitting party will obviously hope to choose a time when they hope to win. There have been instances of seats remaining vacant longer than six months before a by-election and seats are sometimes left vacant towards the end of a Parliament, to be filled by the subsequent general election.

How often do by-elections take place?

It is impossible to predict when a by-election will occur. There were a total 31 by-elections in the 1983-87 Parliament with 15 being held on 23 January 1986 after the resignation on 17 December 1985 of all 15 MPs representing constituencies in Northern Ireland. Only 15 by-elections occurred in the 1997-2001 Parliament.

What happens in the time before a by-election when there is no MP?

While a vacancy exists, constituency matters are handled by a Member of the same party in a neighbouring constituency. When a new Member has been elected all outstanding matters are handled by him or her.

Find Out More

Archives

Archives from 1497, including original Acts of Parliament, are kept in the House of Lords' Record Office (The Parliamentary Archives) which is open to the public, to view records on request tel: 020 7219 3074.

Hansard

The day's proceedings are printed in the Official Report, (separate volumes are produced for the Commons and Lords) referred to as Hansard after its original printer. It is also available at **www.parliament.uk** by 9.00 the following morning.

Television

The televising of Parliament was pioneered by the House of Lords in 1985, followed by the House of Commons in 1989. The proceedings of both Houses can be seen on the BBC's parliamentary channel when the House is sitting.

Website

AGo to **www.parliament.uk** for general information on the role and function of both Houses, or details of membership, future business, legislation and Select Committee activity. For an experimental period it is possible to view a live **webcast** of House proceedings at the same address.

A website for young people can be found at **www.explore.parliament.uk**

Education enquiries

Applications for Gallery tickets for students and educational groups and further information about the work of Parliament can be obtained from:

Parliamentary Education Unit
Room 604
Norman Shaw Building (North)
London SW1A 2TT

Tel: 020 7219 2105
Fax: 020 7219 0818
E-mail: edunit@parliament.uk

Other titles in this series:

2 House of Commons

3 Parliament & Government

4 Making a Law

5 Debates in Parliament

6 House of Lords

Chris Weeds
Education Officer

March 2002

ISSN 0261-2658