

The General Election!

Have you noticed? There's a **general election** coming up! This is when everyone votes to decide who they want to be in charge of the country. Read on to find out how voting works and what happens in the Houses of Parliament...

Our country is a **democracy**, which means everyone who lives here gets a say in how the place is run. You can do this by **voting in a general election**, which usually happens every five years. To be able to vote, you have to be 18 years old (sorry, kids!) and be a UK citizen, or a Commonwealth or European Union citizen who is living in the UK. Most importantly – you have to **register to vote**. So how does voting work? Go to 'Start' to find out...

650 CONSTITUENCIES

Start!

The UK is divided up into **650** different areas, known as **constituencies**. The people who live in a constituency (called **constituents**) vote for a **Member of Parliament** – or MP – to represent them at **Parliament**, where the laws of this country are made. Most MPs belong to a **political party**, and each party has different ideas about the best way to run things. Because the party with the most MPs usually gets to form the next **government**, by voting you don't just elect your MP – you also have your say about which **party** you want in charge.

YOU SHOULD TOTES VOTE FOR ME!



Politicians will appear all over the media around this time. The leaders of the main political parties may take part in televised **debates** (which can get pretty shouty!), and often appear on TV urging viewers to vote for their party's candidates.

'YOUR POLICIES ARE PANTS!'

'OH DO PIPE DOWN, BARRY!'

In the run up to the election, **candidates** try to encourage local people to vote for them, so they can get a **seat** in Parliament. Political parties also publish **manifestos** – big lists detailing what they plan to do if they're voted into power.

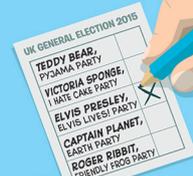
There are over 1,000 rooms, 100 staircases and nearly 5km of corridors inside!

Big Ben is NOT the name of the clock – it's the name of its biggest bell!



Shortly before the election, every registered voter will get a **polling card** through the post, telling them where their nearest **polling station** is. This is the place where voting happens – it could be in a sports centre, village hall or even your school!

This year, on 8th June, it'll be **ELECTION DAY!** Voters head to their polling station between 7am and 10pm. It's open from dawn to dusk so everyone has time to go. There, they have their name crossed off a list to make sure they only vote once (very important!), and they'll be given a **ballot paper** – a list of all the candidates in their area, and the party they belong to. Voters put a cross next to the name of the candidate they want to **elect**.



If a voter can't make it on the day, they can organise another way to vote in advance.

ALL 650 elected MPs meet up in the **Houses of Parliament**, a grand old palace next to the River Thames in London. Here, they decide on laws, make decisions that affect our country, question the Cabinet ministers and **debate** the issues of the day. They also make sure the government is running the country properly!

HOUSES OF PARLIAMENT!



Although she is our **Head of State**, the Queen doesn't have any **real** political power. Her role is mainly **ceremonial**, but she does have a chat with the Prime Minister every week, so she's kept up to date!



Whichever party is voted into power at the election on 8th June, their leader will be invited by the Queen to become **Prime Minister** and form the **government**. After moving to **10 Downing Street**, the PM's first job is to pick MPs from their party to be the **Cabinet ministers** who will be in charge of different decision-making departments, such as education, transport and the environment.

The **Prime Minister** is chosen by their party, NOT by the public. This is different to the USA, where the public vote for **President**.

As the night goes on, the winning MPs in each constituency are revealed. Results are shown live on the news and internet. Eventually **all** the votes will be counted (this could take many hours). The political party that wins the most MPs will usually form the government. However, if one party doesn't fill more than half of the **seats** in Parliament with their MPs (at least 326 out of 650), then it is called a **hung Parliament**. This is what happened in the 2010 election, so the Conservative Party joined up with the Liberal Democratic party to form a **coalition**, to govern the country **together**. This time around, no one knows what's going to happen!



Next, voters push their **ballot paper** into the **ballot box**. You don't have to tell anyone who you voted for – it's secret and anonymous. This is so that people cannot be judged on who they voted for, or be pressured into voting for someone they don't really support.

Once the polling stations are closed, the ballots are counted through the night to find out which candidate has come out on top in each area. The winners will represent their **constituents** at Parliament. This voting system is called **first past the post**.

POLITICS GLOSSARY!

- Candidates** – People who want to win an election
- Coalition** – When two or more political parties work together
- Debates** – Formal discussions about a particular issue, where all sides get the chance to speak
- Government** – The government runs the country. It is usually formed by the political party that has the most MPs elected at a general election. The government is made up of different departments run by ministers, selected by the Prime Minister.
- Member of Parliament (MP)** – Someone who represents their constituency (local area) in Parliament
- Political party** – A group who share ideas and beliefs about the way the country should be run.
- Policies** – Plans or proposed actions

Illustrations: Marek Jagoda. With thanks to Leo Trickett and Geoff Brown.