

What is the point of the monarchy?

The monarch - at the time of writing Queen Elizabeth II - is the **head of state**. In theory, she is in charge of everything. Her head is on bank notes and coins, issued by Her Majesty's Treasury, and on postage stamps, issued by the Royal Mail. She is Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces. When someone is put on trial, they are prosecuted in her name; all criminal cases are 'Regina (Latin for the Queen) vs [name of the defendant]'. We pay taxes to Her Majesty's Revenues and Customs. The government is Her Majesty's Government. The government's programme is announced in the Queen's Speech, given by her, in which every paragraph begins 'My government will ...' Prime Ministers and ministers are appointed by her, and can be dismissed by her. No laws can be passed until she has signed them.

In practice, she has no power at all. Her role is purely symbolic. She is a figurehead, representing the UK at big national events, such as the opening of the 2012 Olympics in London, or commemorations of major anniversaries, or visiting the victims of terrorist attacks or natural disasters.

However, she does have a role in the government of the UK. We will see how as we learn about elections and how governments are formed. If you find yourself taking part in a debate about abolishing the monarchy, remember to focus on this constitutional role, and whether it is best performed by an unelected monarch (who belongs to everyone and is attached to no party) or an elected head of state (who has been chosen by the people). Don't get sidetracked into whether or not the Queen is a nice person, or that rude thing the Duke of Edinburgh said to someone once. This is the *ad hominem* argument (see Chapter 7, Big Fat Fallacies).

How do elections work?

A **General Election** is called when the Queen, on the advice of the Prime Minister, dissolves parliament. Dissolving parliament means that all the Members of Parliament (MPs) are out of a job, and new ones have to be appointed. If existing MPs want to continue being MPs, they are effectively reapplying for their jobs by standing for election.

Under the terms of the Fixed Terms Parliament Act, passed in 2010, this should only happen once every five years. The only way in which an election can happen earlier is when either:

- Two thirds of MPs vote in favour of an early dissolution of parliament (this happened in 2017 and 2019).

The
Queen
has no
power
at all

or

- The government loses a vote in parliament on the motion 'This house has no confidence in Her Majesty's Government' (often known as a 'confidence motion'). When this happens, 14 days are allowed to see if the leader of a different party in parliament from the one which was governing can form a government. If this does not happen, a General Election is called.

MPs each represent a **constituency**. Britain is divided into 650 constituencies, each with around 70,000 voters in them. In densely populated cities constituencies cover quite a small area; in sparsely populated rural areas they will be much larger. Citizens of the UK and the Commonwealth (the Commonwealth is made up mostly of countries that used to be in the British Empire) who are over the age of 18 and are resident in the UK are allowed to vote in General Elections, though it is not compulsory. Anyone can stand for election in any constituency provided they get the support of at least ten people and put down some money, called a deposit, which they don't get back if they get below a certain percentage of the vote. In practice, most candidates in elections are representing one of the main parties, and most people think in terms of voting for that party or its leader rather than the individual candidate; they say 'I've always been Labour' or 'I'm voting for Boris'.

Whoever gets the most votes in each constituency is elected MP for that constituency. This system is called **first past the post**. Critics of first past the post point to its problems. One problem is that if the number of MPs in Parliament can be very different from the total number of votes cast for their party. For example, in the 2015 General Election, UKIP (the UK Independence Party) got nearly 4 million votes (12.6% of the votes cast) but only one MP (0.2% of the MPs) because their votes were spread across many constituencies. Another problem is that in certain areas, certain parties win almost all the time. This can make voters in those areas feel that there is not much point in voting as the result is always the same. Supporters of first past the post say that it gives a clear, simple result, and also that it gives everyone their own named MP to represent their area, to whom they can bring their local problems, whether they voted for him or her or not. They also say it is more likely to deliver an overall majority in parliament for one party, ensuring stable government (see below for an explanation of how this works). The alternative to first past the post is **proportional representation**, a system already used in many countries, whereby the number of MPs more nearly reflects the number of votes cast.

Anyone
can
stand for
election