

How are governments formed?

Once the election is over, we have 650 new MPs, who form the House of Commons. The Queen then appoints a Prime Minister and asks him or her to form a government.

So who gets the ride in the bullet proof Jaguar to Buckingham Palace for the job offer? The leader of the party which can 'command the support' of the House of Commons. This means that their party can be sure of winning a vote in the House of Commons. To do that they will need the support of a majority of MPs. If one party has an **overall majority**, that is, they have more MPs than all the other parties combined, it is easy for the Queen to choose. For most of the twentieth century, elections were 'won' by just one party getting an overall majority. Recently, however, that has not always been the case. When no party has an overall majority, the result is known as a **hung parliament**. Most recently, the 2017 General Election created a hung parliament; the Conservatives were the largest party, but did not have an overall majority, so they had to do a deal with a small party from Northern Ireland, the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) in order to form a government. In a hung parliament, small parties, and even individual MPs, have much more power, as they can get concessions from the government by threatening not to support them in a vote in parliament.

Who is the government?

The **government** is made up of **ministers**, each of whom has responsibility for a particular area, e.g. health, education, defence etc. They make decisions about how the health service, schools, the armed forces etc. are run. The head of the government is the **Prime Minister**. 'Prime' means first or most important. In theory, ministers are appointed by the Queen (they are called 'ministers of the crown'); in practice, they are appointed (and can be dismissed) by the Prime Minister. The leading ministers (about 20) form the **Cabinet**, chaired by the Prime Minister. The Cabinet makes decisions jointly about matters that affect the whole government. While they may debate these decisions vigorously in their meetings, once a decision is made, ministers are expected to support it. If they feel they cannot support it, they are expected to resign. Discussions in Cabinet meetings are supposed to be private, so that everyone can speak their mind freely.

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How are laws passed?

For a new law to be passed, a bill to enact it has to win a majority in a vote in the **House of Commons**. It then goes on to the **House of Lords**, which is made up mostly of quite a lot of people who have not been elected, but were chosen by leaders of the political parties, usually for long service. There are also a few members of the House of Lords who are hereditary, that is they only have the job because they inherited it from their fathers (never their mothers). The House of Lords debate all bills, and may make small changes to them, but in practice it is unusual for them to vote against the House of Commons. Their job (in theory) is to provide wise guidance and advice. Once a law has been passed by both the House of Commons and the House of Lords, the Queen signs the bill (this is called the Royal Assent) and it becomes law.

What about referendums?

Supporters of referendums say that they are much more directly democratic than parliamentary democracy. Critics say that they create division in a country because they reduce complicated issues to a simple, binary choice with no possibility of compromise or negotiation. In the 2016 referendum on the European Union, 52% voted Leave. This was presented by supporters of Brexit as proving that the 'will of the people' was that we should leave the EU. However, the fact is that unlike in some other countries (e.g. Switzerland), referendums have no official place in the British constitution.

Britain is a **parliamentary democracy**. This means that the will of the people is expressed not by referendums, still less by opinion polls, but by parliament, made up of MPs elected by the people. The 2016 referendum on EU membership was merely 'advisory', and had no force in law; that is, the government would have been quite entitled, under the British constitution, to say, 'Oh, so 52% of people want to leave the EU, do they? That's interesting. We still think on balance, though, that it would be better for the country to stay in the EU.' However, this would have been politically impossible.

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