

Words you might be unsure about

You will hear lots of words during the Citizens' Assembly relating to democracy and different parts of the democratic system. Some of these might be unfamiliar to you. Or you might have heard them, but be unsure exactly what they mean.

That's no problem! We hope that this list will give you some helpful pointers. If you're still unsure, remember that you're always welcome to ask.

If you hear words that you think should be added to this list, please let us know. You can mention it to your group facilitator, or drop a note to the Assembly email address (cademocracyuk@involve.org.uk).

Key terms

Democracy – Democracy basically means rule by the citizens themselves. It can take many different forms, as we will explore during the Citizens' Assembly.

United Kingdom – The United Kingdom (UK) of Great Britain and Northern Ireland is made up of four parts. These are England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Great Britain refers to England, Wales and Scotland.

Parts of the democratic system

Government – The government is the group of people in charge of running the country. It is also known as the executive. The United Kingdom's government contains the Prime Minister, ministers and the civil service.

Prime Minister – The Prime Minister is the head of the government of the United Kingdom. They are normally the leader of their political party. Boris Johnson is the current Prime Minister, and leader of the Conservative Party.

Each of the devolved governments (see below) also has a head. Wales and Scotland each have a First Minister. Northern Ireland has a First Minister and deputy First Minister, who share the responsibility of running their executive.

Minister – A minister is a politician with responsibility for an area of government policy, such as Health or Education or Transport. Ministers for the United Kingdom are chosen by the Prime Minister and come from either the House of Commons or the House of Lords (see below).

Cabinet – The Cabinet is the team of the most senior ministers in the government.

Civil Service – The Civil Service is the group of administrators who help the government develop and implement its policies. Members of the Civil Service are called civil servants. They are neutral – they don't take sides in political debates.

Legislature – A legislature is a body with the authority to make or change laws. It also holds debates and scrutinises the work of the executive.

Parliament – 'Parliament' is another word for 'legislature'. The Westminster Parliament is the legislature of the United Kingdom as a whole. It is based in London and has two 'chambers': the House of Commons and the House of Lords.

House of Commons – The House of Commons is the main, or 'first', chamber of the Westminster Parliament. The government of the day needs the support (or 'confidence') of the House of Commons to stay in power. The House of Commons has 650 elected Members of Parliament (MPs), each representing a part of the country (known as a 'constituency'). Most MPs are members of a political party.

House of Lords – The House of Lords is the second chamber of the Westminster Parliament. It is made up of around 800 unelected peers. Its powers are somewhat weaker than those of the House of Commons. Its members rarely try to block something that the majority in the elected House of Commons want.

Members of Parliament – Members of Parliament, or MPs, are elected representatives who represent their constituency in the House of Commons. They are normally elected in general elections (see below).

Peers – Members of the House of Lords are called peers. While peers are not elected, there are three ways in which someone can become a peer. Most (currently almost 700) are appointed for life, on the recommendation of the Prime Minister. Some (up to 92) have an inherited title. A smaller number (up to 26) are bishops in the Church of England.

Devolved administrations – Decision-making on many matters is 'devolved' in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. That means that decisions about, say, the health service or schools in Scotland are made in Scotland.

Scotland has the Scottish Parliament and Scottish government. Wales has the Welsh Parliament, or Senedd, and the Welsh government. Northern Ireland has the Northern Ireland Assembly and the Northern Ireland Executive.

In England, such matters are decided by the UK Parliament and government.

Local government – Local government is made up of councils with responsibility for providing a range of services in local areas. It takes different forms in different parts of the country, and some places also have regional mayors. Local government is largely run by elected councillors.

Political party – A political party is a group of people who share a common ideology or set of political goals. Political parties compete between each other to win votes and seats in elections, in order to advance their political aims.

Judiciary – The judiciary is often called the ‘third branch’ of the state, along with the executive (government) and legislature (parliament). It is made up of courts, overseen by judges. It is responsible for determining whether the law has been followed or broken in particular cases, and what should happen if it has been broken. There are three separate legal systems in the United Kingdom: England and Wales; Scotland; and Northern Ireland.

Supreme Court – The Supreme Court is the highest court in the United Kingdom. It can hear appeals of specific cases from lower courts in any of the United Kingdom’s three legal systems.

Taking part in democracy

Representative democracy – Representative democracy is a form of democracy in which decisions are made by representatives who have been elected.

General election – At a general election, all of the seats in parliament are up for election. There are general elections in the UK for the UK Parliament (the House of Commons), the Scottish Parliament, the Senedd, and the Northern Ireland Assembly. General elections for each body usually take place every five years – though general elections for the House of Commons sometimes happen sooner.

Direct democracy – Direct democracy is a form of democracy in which citizens – rather than representatives – decide issues, by directly voting on them.

Referendum – At a referendum, citizens vote directly on an issue. Recent examples in the United Kingdom include the 2011 referendum on the voting system, the 2014 Scottish independence referendum, and the 2016 European Union referendum.

Deliberative democracy – Deliberative democracy is a form of democracy in which decisions are only taken after they have been discussed, or ‘deliberated’, in detail.

Citizens’ assembly – A citizens’ assembly is a fairly new democratic tool that is increasingly being used around the world. It aims to bring together a group of people who broadly represent the whole community. The people who attend learn about issues, discuss them with one another, and then make recommendations about what should happen.

Other words that you might hear

Constitution – A constitution is a summary of the key principles and rules by which a country should be organised and governed. Unlike most countries, the United Kingdom does not have its constitution written down in a single document.

Rights – Rights are basic entitlements that each citizen possesses. Examples of widely accepted rights are freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, the right to a fair trial and freedom from torture.

Norms – Norms are standards of behaviour and actions that are widely accepted and considered desirable.

Conventions – Conventions are unwritten understandings about how something should be done. Although conventions can't be enforced legally, they are almost always followed.

Manifesto – A manifesto is a document published by a political party before an election. It contains that party's proposed policies and spending plans.

Coalition – A coalition occurs when two or more parties decide to form a government together. This is usually because no party has enough seats in parliament to govern on its own.

Scrutiny – Scrutiny is the close examination and investigation of government policies, actions and spending.

Lobbying – Lobbying is an attempt to convince politicians or officials to support a certain policy. Lobbying can be done by individual citizens, but it is also done by organised pressure groups.

Accountability – Accountability is the process through which people with responsibilities are required to explain and justify the decisions they have made, and, if necessary, face consequences. For example, parliaments hold government ministers to account. And voters can hold their elected representatives to account.