

GENERAL ELECTIONS IN GREAT BRITAIN

Candidates across the country compete for a seat in the House of Commons. Political parties compete for a chance to run the country.

Elections give people a chance to make decisions about how their country is run. Holding free and fair elections is the most important ingredient in making any country a democracy. In the UK, general elections take place in May once every five years, unless Parliament votes to hold an election sooner.

General elections in Britain are made up of 650 individual elections that take place on a single day, across England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. A similar number of voters live in each area of the country marked out as one of the UK's 650 'constituencies'. Every eligible resident gets to go out and vote for one of the would-be representatives, called candidates. The candidate with the most votes in each area wins a place, or 'seat', in the House of Commons.

Voting for political parties

To get votes, candidates campaign in their constituency. They announce a set of policies they say will guide them when making decisions if they are elected. Usually, they join together with other people who share the same ideas as part of a political party. A vote for a political party is also a vote for that party's guiding principles.

Britain's three biggest political parties are the Conservative Party, the Labour Party and the Liberal Democrats. Normally these parties will support a candidate in most constituencies across the country. There are several smaller political parties too. Candidates who don't belong to a political party are called 'independents'.

Counting the votes

Candidates and parties campaign until polling day. Then it's up to citizens to make up their minds. Every eligible resident gets to cast one vote for a candidate in their local constituency. The candidate with the most votes becomes the local Member of Parliament, or MP, for that area. He or she will represent everyone in the constituency in the House of Commons.

Under this system of electing representatives every citizen gets one vote, and the candidate with the most votes wins. The system is known as 'first-past-the-post'.

The big prize: government

While candidates compete with each other, the political parties are also chasing a big prize: a chance to form the government. The government is responsible for running the country. Political parties aim to win the general election so they can put their ideas and election promises into action.

Under the UK's system of government, political parties strive to win as many constituency elections as possible. If one party is able to win more than half the seats in the House of Commons (326) then its leader gets to become prime minister and form a government. All other parties become the 'opposition'. The party that wins the second largest number of seats becomes the main opposition party. Its leader becomes the 'leader of the opposition'.

For a government to put its election promises into action it needs the approval of a majority of MPs in the House of Commons. By winning a majority of the seats in the Commons, a political party can be confident it will have enough support for its ideas and plans during votes.

No overall majority = hung parliament

In the 2010 general election, however, no single party won more than half the seats in the House of Commons. The Conservative Party, led by David Cameron, won the most with 306. The Labour Party, led by Gordon Brown, came second with 258 seats. The Liberal Democrats came third with 57 seats. This election result is known as a hung parliament, where no single party is able to claim more than half the seats in the Commons.

So what happens in the case of a hung parliament? There are two main possibilities:

Two or more parties can agree to work together to govern the country.

The party with the most seats can also try to govern with a minority of seats in the Commons. If the party can't get enough support on an important vote, however, it risks defeat, which may force a general election. In the 2010 election, after several days of negotiations, Liberal Democrat leader Nick Clegg and David Cameron agreed their parties would work together.

By joining forces the two parties combined have a majority of seats in the House of Commons, enough to form a government. This is called a coalition government.

Bibliografia

General elections in Britain

I. Answer the following questions:

1. What do political parties compete for?
2. What chance do elections give to people?
3. What is the most important ingredient in making a country a democracy?
4. When do elections in Great Britain take place?
5. What are general elections made up of?
6. Who votes for one of candidates?
7. What do candidates announce in their constituency?
8. What is a vote for a political party?
9. Which parties will support candidates in most constituencies?
10. How long do candidates and parties campaign?
11. Where can a voter cast a vote for a candidate?
12. Who becomes MP for the local area?
13. What big prize are the political parties chasing?

14. What is the government responsible for?
15. What do political parties aim to?
16. When does a party leader become prime minister?
17. What does a government need to put its election promises into action?
18. When can a party be confident it will have enough support for its plans?
19. When do two or more parties agree to work together?
20. What happens when a party cannot get enough support on an important vote?

II. Match the following words with the given definitions:

a voter, an election, opposition party, polling day, a seat, a candidate, a coalition government, a constituency, hung parliament, independent candidates

- a place in the House of Commons =
- an area of the country that elects a representative =
- a person competing in an election =
- the two parties combined have a majority of seats in the Commons enough to form a government =
- the day on which people vote =
- this party did not win an overall majority of seats in the House of Commons =
- candidates who do not belong to any party =
- every eligible British resident =
- voting for candidates in constituencies =
- no single party is able to claim more than half the seats in the Commons =

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