

DEMOCRACY INSIGHT

Democracy Insight

National and Local Government Explained



FREE DEMOCRACY INSIGHT EXPLAINER

Democracy Without the Jargon

20 Political Terms Every Citizen Should Understand

In one sentence: Politics becomes easier to follow when you understand the words being used, and what people often mean by them in practice.

Why this matters

Politics is full of words that sound familiar but are often used loosely. Some are technical. Some are shorthand. Some are used by politicians to make a decision sound more impressive, more democratic or less controversial than it really is.

This guide explains 20 common political terms in plain English. The aim is not to make you an expert in constitutional law. It is to help you follow debates, spot vague claims and ask better questions when decisions are being made in your name.

1. Parliament

Parliament is the institution that makes laws, debates national issues and holds the Government to account. In the UK, it is made up of the House of Commons, the House of Lords and the Monarch. When people say “Parliament should decide”, they usually mean MPs and peers should be able to debate and vote, rather than ministers acting alone.

2. Government

Government is the group of ministers who run the country day to day. It is led by the Prime Minister and supported by government departments. Parliament and Government are not the same thing. Government proposes and runs policy. Parliament scrutinises it and passes laws.

3. Cabinet

The Cabinet is the senior team of ministers chosen by the Prime Minister. Cabinet ministers normally lead major departments, such as health, education, defence or the Treasury. In theory, Cabinet is where big decisions are collectively discussed. In practice, the Prime Minister and a smaller group of senior figures can be highly influential.

4. Minister

A minister is a politician appointed to help run a government department or lead a policy area. Ministers make political decisions, answer questions in Parliament and are accountable for their department. Civil servants advise and deliver, but ministers are meant to take responsibility for the choices made.

5. Civil servant

Civil servants are politically neutral officials who support the Government of the day. They provide advice, develop policy options and help deliver public services. They do not decide the political direction. Their job is to serve elected ministers, while giving honest and professional advice.

6. Legislation

Legislation means law. Primary legislation is usually an Act of Parliament, passed after a Bill goes through Parliament. Secondary legislation is law made using powers that already exist in an Act. The distinction matters because secondary legislation usually receives less scrutiny.

7. Bill

A Bill is a proposed law. It only becomes an Act once it has passed through the required parliamentary stages and received Royal Assent. During the process, MPs and peers can debate it, examine the detail and suggest amendments.

8. Amendment

An amendment is a proposed change to the wording of a Bill, motion or official document. Amendments matter because they can alter the effect of a law. Sometimes a small wording change can make a major practical difference.

9. Manifesto

A manifesto is a party's published programme before an election. It sets out what the party says it wants to do if it wins power. Manifestos are politically important because they give voters something to judge. They are not detailed delivery plans, and not every promise survives contact with money, law and implementation.

10. Mandate

A mandate is the authority a politician or party claims from winning an election. A government may say it has a mandate to deliver its manifesto. That claim carries weight, but it does not remove the need for scrutiny, evidence or proper law-making.

11. Constituency

A constituency is a geographical area represented by one MP in the House of Commons. Voters in that area choose their MP at a general election. Constituency work is a major part of an MP's role, even though national debates often receive more attention.

12. Backbencher

A backbencher is an MP or peer who is not a government minister or senior opposition spokesperson. Backbenchers can still be influential. They may campaign on issues, sit on committees, challenge their own party and raise local concerns in Parliament.

13. Whip

A whip is both a person and a system. Party whips organise MPs, encourage them to attend votes and push them to support the party line. When people say an MP has "defied the whip", they mean the MP voted against their party's instruction.

14. Select committee

A select committee is a group of MPs, or sometimes peers, that investigates a particular department or subject. Committees take evidence, question witnesses and publish reports. They cannot usually force policy change on their own, but they can expose weaknesses and increase pressure.

15. Scrutiny

Scrutiny means examining decisions, plans and performance. It is not the same as opposition for its own sake. Good scrutiny asks whether a decision is legal, affordable, fair, deliverable and backed by evidence.

16. Devolution

Devolution means power being transferred from the UK Parliament to institutions in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and in some cases to mayors and combined authorities in England. Devolution does not mean independence. It means some decisions are made closer to the places affected.

17. Local authority

A local authority is a council responsible for services in a local area. Depending on the type of council, this can include planning, housing, social care, waste, licensing, transport, environmental health and local economic development. Councils are not simply local branches of central government, although national funding and law strongly shape what they can do.

18. Consultation

A consultation is a formal process for seeking views before a decision is finalised. A good consultation should be clear, open and meaningful. A poor one can feel like a box-ticking exercise. The key question is whether the decision-maker is genuinely willing to consider the responses.

19. Accountability

Accountability means decision-makers can be questioned, challenged and judged for their actions. Elections are one form of accountability, but not the only one. Parliament, councils, regulators, courts, auditors, the media and the public all play a role.

20. Public interest

The public interest means what is judged to benefit the wider public, rather than a private individual, party or organisation. It is a powerful phrase, but it can be vague. When someone claims a decision is in the public interest, ask who benefits, who pays, who loses and what evidence supports the claim.

Key takeaway

Political language is not just vocabulary. It shapes how decisions are explained and defended. Once you understand the terms, it becomes much easier to ask whether power is being used properly.

Sources and further reading

- [UK Parliament: How Parliament works](#)
- [UK Parliament: How laws are made](#)
- [GOV.UK: How government works](#)
- [Institute for Government: Explainers](#)
- [Local Government Association: What councils do](#)

This explainer is for general civic education. It gives plain English summaries of common terms and does not cover every legal detail or special procedure.