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UK politics

The UK Parliament website

Alex Alcoe explores some opportunities for wider learning about politics.

We all have the right to enter Parliament and watch our representatives debate, but that doesn't mean we can necessarily access that right. What if you live too far away? A lesser-known but excellent resource is the UK Parliament Learning website (<https://learning.parliament.uk/en/>), which is designed with students and teachers in mind. In some instances, it will even send free resources to schools, such as for mock elections.

Visiting Parliament, in person or virtually

Entering Parliament for the first time is daunting and impressive for everyone, not just newly-elected MPs. The weight of historical and political significance sticks with most politics students – if they are lucky enough to go on such a school trip, that is. There is nothing like witnessing the claustrophobic nature of the Commons chamber with your own eyes or walking past the despatch boxes where prime ministers have clashed with the Opposition at PMQs.

If visiting in person is not an option, the 360 degree virtual tours from the wider website may fill the gap (<https://virtualtour.parliament.uk/palaceofwestminster>). Exploring the Royal Robing room, the dazzling House of Lords and the Commons lobby (which you will have seen on the news) gives more than just a sense of place; it uncovers the roles and functions of staff, including MPs and Lords, all without leaving your living room.

In addition, there are outreach teams that can bring Parliament directly to your school. These teams run a variety of workshops on key concepts such as representation, participation and law making. These are for students of all ages and might replace the need for a trip. However, it is worth knowing that Parliament offers subsidies for travel costs for school visits.

Representation and scrutiny

A frequent complaint is that young people do not feel represented. This is unsurprising, as under-18s cannot vote (at the time of writing). The website offers opportunities to share your views on a bill, to object to a bill or weigh into committee business with your experiences, such as over the lack of available driving tests.

As Parliament derives its power from the people, one exciting area is being able to start or sign a petition. If there are more than 10,000 signatures, the government will comment on it, and if there are more than 100,000 signatures it will be considered for debate in Westminster Hall. Anyone can create a petition, including young people who cannot vote, but it must follow procedural rules. Several such petitions have been successful and turned into laws, particularly those concerning animal welfare. Many students have appeared and taken part in committees as witnesses and in debates themselves.

People in power need to be scrutinised to make sure they don't overstep the mark. Therefore, the 'business' section of the website (<https://www.parliament.uk/business/>) aims to maximise transparency by keeping track on the progress of bills, how MPs have voted and how committees are watching over government departments. Transcripts of the debates and speeches in both houses are also accessible through the online edition of Hansard (<https://hansard.parliament.uk/>), which is edited and produced every day. This is a valuable record of what was actually said in Parliament and allows students to follow their MP's actions. You can look up your MP's own contributions and contact them about it.

Independent learning

The UK Parliament learning website is a significant tool for independent learning. Throughout the year, online videocasts, debates and tours take place. Some are live, such as speaking with actual Lords or with the Speaker of the House of Commons – this is an excellent way to learn about their roles. Other events occur in Parliament week (in November) and to improve diversity – such as question time for Black and Women's History Month as well as for the LGBTQ+ community, with interactive participation an option.

Accessible and engaging features are available for individuals, because not every school can timetable such events. The 'MP for a week' game is popular for A-level politics students (<https://learning.parliament.uk/mp-for-a-week-app/>), and there are many other games, including the historical figure of Guy Fawkes and his attempt to blow up Parliament. Lord Speaker's Corner (<https://www.parliament.uk/business/lords/house-of-lords-podcast/>) is a podcast interview with a Lord; a recent episode was with Michael Gove, a figure who has loomed large in politics over the recent decade.

Over to you

If you wish to improve your political knowledge, the Parliament website will prove invaluable, and in addition it can contribute to your evolution as a more proactive citizen, helping to shape the politics that make this country.

Activities

- 1 Research your MP. What areas and activities are they interested in? Contact them about an issue important to you and other constituents.
- 2 Explore with others in your class the idea of launching a petition, and research how to achieve this using the Parliament website.
- 3 Access one of the interactive activities on the Parliament learning section or go on a virtual tour.

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This resource is part of POLITICS REVIEW, a magazine written for A-level students by subject experts. To subscribe to the full magazine go to: www.hachettelearning.com/politicsreview