

The effectiveness of Parliament

To assess the effectiveness of Parliament, it is important to consider how well it performs its three main functions, which are:

- + its legislative function
- + its representative function
- + its scrutiny function

Tables 6.6–6.8 provide an assessment of these functions.

Table 6.6 An assessment of how well Parliament performs its legislative function

It is effective	It is ineffective
Parliament has a high level of legislative output : the fusion of powers allows the government to dominate Parliament, thus allowing laws to be passed.	Parliament does not produce bills of a sufficient legislative quality : governments with large majorities often rush through legislation without appropriate scrutiny.
The House of Commons provides plenty of ways for backbench MPs to influence decision making, thereby improving the quality of legislation. For example, private members' bills give opportunities to backbenchers to make law. The Abortion Act and the Murder (Abolition of Death Penalty) Act were first introduced as private members' bills.	The government often dominates the legislative agenda, which is demonstrated by the minimal time given to private members' bills. Only around 6% of these bills ever become law.
The House of Lords ensures that legislation is suitably revised and thereby ensures legislative quality. In 2020 the House of Lords tabled amendments to the Agriculture Bill to increase safeguards on food imports.	The House of Lords is limited in its ability to revise laws. The House of Commons can simply defeat amendments proposed by the Lords, which is what happened to amendments attached to the EU Withdrawal Bill 2020.

Legislative output The number of bills that are enacted into law.

Legislative quality Refers to a situation whereby bills have received appropriate scrutiny and have not been rushed through Parliament.

Remember

It is incredibly difficult to even bring a private members' bill to the floor of the Commons. MPs get a chance to draft a bill through a random draw of lots. Parliamentary rules mean it only requires one MP to shout 'object' to a private members' bill to block its progress. In 2018 Conservative MP Christopher Chope shouted 'object' on a bill to ban upskirting and in 2019 on a proposed bill to outlaw female genital mutilation.

Table 6.7 An assessment of how well Parliament performs its representative function

It is effective	It is ineffective
Arguably, Parliament does indeed resemble the people it serves. The number of female MPs has risen from 118 in 2001 to 220 in 2019. The number of black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) MPs has increased from 41 in 2015 to 63 after the 2019 general election.	There is still a great deal of work to be done for both chambers to truly reflect the demographics of the nation. Only 34% of MPs and barely a quarter of peers are women. Less than 10% of MPs are from a BAME background.
Elections to the House of Commons help Parliament to reflect sudden shifts in public opinion. The Conservatives enjoyed a net gain of 47 seats at the 2019 general election, which perhaps reflected a desire among the public to end the gridlock over Brexit.	The first-past-the-post electoral system produces unfair results. The 2015 general election delivered the most disproportional result since the 1920s. UKIP won 3.8 million votes but only one seat. The House of Lords remains unelected.
Multiple parties enjoy representation in Westminster. There are ten parties whose MPs take their seats in Parliament. There are also crossbenchers in the Lords.	The electoral system and the role of the whips hinder multi-party politics. The two main parties control 87% of the seats in the House of Commons. The 2019 general election saw no independent MPs elected to the House of Commons.
Parliamentarians stand up for the people they serve. MPs hold regular surgeries for their constituents. They have been particularly active in helping constituents access help to immigration advice, especially since the vote to leave the EU has created uncertainty for non-UK nationals from the EU.	Parliamentarians are far more likely to consider their own careers above those who elected them. MPs owe their selection as a candidate to their party, not their constituents. The majority of MPs vote in accordance with the wishes of the party leadership.

Making links

When writing about Parliament's representative function, include information on the electoral system (FPTP) used to elect MPs.

Table 6.8 An assessment of how well Parliament performs its scrutiny function

It is effective	It is ineffective
Parliamentary questions can help ensure accountability. Urgent questions (UQs) are a particularly useful way of scrutinising government ministers, since they require ministers to attend and answer at short notice. Between the 2017 general election and February 2019, the then Speaker John Bercow allowed 173 UQs to be tabled.	Some forms of parliamentary questions are less useful in holding the government to account. PMQs has been described as a 'Punch and Judy show' by David Cameron. Governments often ask their own backbenchers to ask 'planted' questions, which are easy for the prime minister to answer.
A united opposition can provide effective scrutiny of the government and force changes in government policy. In 2009 the opposition defeated the government on the issue of whether Nepalese Gurkha soldiers should have the right of residence in the UK. It utilised its supply days in order to do so.	The opposition is often quite divided between the various parties that make it up. The official opposition party may also be further divided internally. Labour splits on whether to launch military action against ISIS in 2015 allowed the government to win an easy majority, when 66 Labour MPs voted in favour of airstrikes.
The House of Lords has become more effective at scrutinising the government, due to the absence of a Conservative majority. The crossbenchers hold the balance of power in the chamber. Between 2017 and 2019, the government suffered 69 defeats in the House of Lords.	There are limits to the House of Lords' scrutiny role, including the Parliament Acts, rules of financial privilege and the Salisbury Convention. The fact that ' parliamentary ping-pong ' was curtailed over the EU Withdrawal Act 2020 owed much to the unelected Lords' own awareness that they were challenging a government with a large Commons majority and a fresh mandate to 'get Brexit done'.
A minority government, relying on confidence and supply deals, is likely to face increased scrutiny, as it will find it difficult to win over enough MPs from opposing parties to win a majority in any given vote. The passing of the Benn Act in 2019 required the government to seek an extension to Brexit if no deal on the UK's future relationship with the EU could be reached by the initial deadline to leave on 31 October.	A government with a large majority tends to limit the effectiveness of parliamentary scrutiny. It is harder for the opposition to muster the required votes to defeat the government on any given piece of legislation. Between 1997 and 2004 the Labour government, with its huge parliamentary majority, did not face a single defeat in the House of Commons.

Confidence and supply An arrangement between the governing party and a smaller party in a hung parliament whereby the smaller party agrees to support the government in key votes, such as on the budget and on votes of no confidence. In return, the smaller party usually secures support on a specific policy.

Parliamentary ping-pong Occurs when the two houses cannot agree on the wording of a bill, which is then sent back and forth between the two chambers for amendments.

Remember

The term 'whip' is used in a variety of ways. 'Party whips' are MPs appointed by the party leadership to persuade MPs of the same party to vote in line with party policy. A 'three-line whip' is a strict instruction to vote in accordance with the leadership's wishes and failure to do so may see the 'whip being removed' from an MP, which means that they are effectively expelled from the party and sit as an independent until the whip is restored.

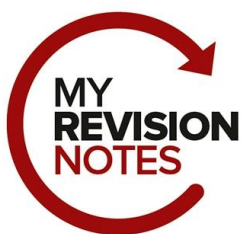
Now test yourself

TESTED

12 Provide a counter-argument to each of the arguments given below.

Argument	Counter-argument
Parliament has a high level of legislative output.	
Parliament is now more socially representative — for instance, there are more women in Parliament than ever before.	
Hung parliaments have resulted in increased scrutiny of government decisions.	

Answers online



HODDER
EDUCATION

MY REVISION NOTES
Pearson Edexcel A-level
UK POLITICS

Pearson Edexcel

A-level

POLITICS:
UK POLITICS
SECOND EDITION

- + Plan and organise your revision
- + Reinforce skills and understanding
- + Practise exam-style questions



Nick de Souza
Neil McNaughton



 **HODDER**
EDUCATION
LEARN MORE

Parliamentary committees

There are several different kinds of parliamentary committee, each of which assists Parliament to perform its function of scrutinising government. The two most important types of committee that sit in the House of Commons are select committees and public bill committees.

Select committees

REVISED

- + Select committees scrutinise the work of each department in terms of efficiency, effectiveness, fairness and value for money.
- + There are 11–15 members on each committee who are chosen by the whole House.
- + The chair, who can be from any political party and who enjoys an increased salary, is elected by a secret ballot.
- + The governing party has a majority on each committee.
- + Select committees publish reports that usually contain a number of recommendations for the government to consider. The government must respond to these reports within 2 months.

Table 6.9 considers the effectiveness of select committees in holding the government to account.

Table 6.9 The effectiveness of select committees

They are effective	They are ineffective
Select committee reports are taken seriously by government. The government accepts an estimated 40% of select committee recommendations.	They can only <i>advise</i> the government by making recommendations, which are non-binding and usually only concern minor changes in policy.
They have the power to gather written and oral evidence and to summon witnesses, including ministers, civil servants, experts and members of the public with a relevant interest.	Select committees' powers to compel witnesses to appear and to tell the truth seem weak and undefined. In 2013 as home secretary, Theresa May blocked the Home Affairs Select Committee from interviewing the head of MI5, Andrew Parker.
Select committees enjoy a good deal of freedom from government interference. Government ministers, opposition frontbenchers and party whips do not serve in select committees, meaning that such committees give voice to backbench concerns.	The governing party has a majority of seats on every committee and chairs may not always be independent from the departments they are supposed to scrutinise. Former health secretary Jeremy Hunt's election as chair of the Health Select Committee in 2020 raised doubts about how well he would want to hold his former department to account given that he introduced most of that department's policies in the previous years.
The work carried out by committees is consensual rather than combative in nature; MPs are generally not concerned with political point-scoring.	Not all committees work by consensus. The Exiting the EU Committee lacked cross-party cohesion. In May 2018 Conservative committee members publicly criticised it for being too pro-Remain. These divides allowed the government to ignore many of the recommendations made by the committee.
Chairing a select committee has become a viable alternative career to that of becoming a minister. Yvette Cooper, chair of the Home Affairs Select Committee, seemingly gave up a career on the Labour front bench and opted instead for a role that involves intricate scrutiny of government policy.	The prospect of promotion to the government could potentially still get in the way of effective scrutiny. The former chair of the Home Affairs Select Committee, Rory Stewart, became a prisons minister in Theresa May's government. This example shows that the lure of a government payroll job can still outweigh the status of a committee assignment.

Remember

The Public Accounts Committee (PAC) is perhaps the most important select committee. It scrutinises value for money of public spending and generally holds the government and its civil servants to account for the delivery of public services. Its reports are often unanimous in their conclusions, so it stands above party politics.

Public bill committees

REVISED

- These committees are temporary and are established to examine a bill, providing line-by-line scrutiny.
- Their membership is heavily influenced by the whips.
- These committees are established after the second reading, and therefore after there has been a vote to proceed with the bill's passage through Parliament.

Table 6.10 considers the effectiveness of public bill committees in holding the government to account.

Table 6.10 The effectiveness of public bill committees

They are effective	They are not effective
They provide detailed, line-by-line examination of a bill and can propose amendments. This task allows the committees to consider problems with the legislation that were not picked up in the earlier readings.	Government whips can completely dominate proceedings, with the committee majority accepting only government amendments. Around 99% of ministerial amendments succeed, while the success rate for non-government amendments is below 1%.
The ministers attending come from the department involved and are matched by the shadow cabinet frontbenchers who parallel them, and this brings a certain degree of different expertise to each discussion.	Bill committees are involved at the latter stages of the legislative process, once there has already been a Commons vote at the second reading. The legislation is therefore already considered a 'done deal'.
	Bill committees may lack expertise because their membership is heavily controlled by party whips. In 2011 Sarah Wollaston, a Conservative backbench MP who had worked for 24 years as a doctor, was prevented from sitting on the public bill committee scrutinising changes to the NHS. It was claimed that she would be too critical of government policy.

Other Commons committees

REVISED

Other notable committees in the House of Commons are the following:

- The Liaison Committee is made up of all the chairs of the departmental select committees. Twice a year this committee questions the prime minister extensively and sometimes quite aggressively over key aspects of government policy.
- The Backbench Business Committee determines the business of the House for more than 20 days a year. It decides what backbenchers will debate on those days.
- The Petitions Committee looks at e-petitions and considers how to respond to them. It can put forward a petition for debate in the House of Commons or press the government for action.

Remember

Be careful not to confuse select committees with public bill committees. Legislative committees exclusively consider amendments to proposed legislation, while select committees call government to account. Critics of committees argue that to have more influence, the roles of both committees should be merged.

Now test yourself

TESTED

- 13** Complete the table by listing which parliamentary committee performs the function stated.

Function	Committee
Questions the prime minister extensively on two occasions per year	
Considers which e-petitions ought to be considered for debate in the House of Commons	
Provides detailed, line-by-line examination of a bill and can propose amendments	
Shadows the work of government departments	

Answers online