



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

How can people get
involved in politics?



Participation

We live in a democracy - this means “rule by the people”. It is therefore important that people should have a say in what happens and what is decided.

Politics is all around us. Decisions people make affect our everyday life from schools to travel to our environment.

So how do people have their say and influence what is decided? There are many ways; some of them include

- Voting,
- Campaigning,
- Signing a petition
- Joining political parties and
- Becoming involved in pressure groups.

Voting

One of the most important ways people can participate is by voting. They do this usually at election time when the whole country is given the opportunity to choose who they want to represent them and become their MSPs. Elections to the Scottish Parliament have taken place every four years or five years from 2011.



Sometimes it is necessary to hold a by-election – this is an election in a constituency where a seat becomes vacant. For example, in 2013, two by-elections were held due to the death of one MSP and the resignation of another. By-elections only take place in constituencies – if a regional MSP dies or resigns, their place is taken by the next available person on the list for that political party.

Campaigning

Campaigning can involve many different methods to persuade MSPs to support a cause. People can become involved in demonstrations, sending letters, emails, petitions, organising visits to MSPs surgeries, or organising media and social media campaigns. Everybody in Scotland has the **right** to campaign, to seek to influence others and decision-makers.



Signing a petition

During the first four sessions of Parliament (1999 - 2016), 1607 petitions were lodged with the Parliament's Public Petitions Committee.

Petitions are often used in campaigns to show the level of support for a particular point of view. They usually contain a statement about the aim of the campaign and the campaigners seek to get as much support as possible by asking people to sign their petition.

Each petition the Parliament receives **must** be looked at by the Public Petitions Committee. They must decide if the petition is within the powers of the Parliament and if it is, they have to investigate the issue and recommend what the next steps could be – for example, a change in the law, asking the Government to change regulations.



The 150th petition asked the Parliament to consider making the Golden Eagle the national bird of Scotland.

Who petitions the Parliament?

Anyone can petition the Parliament. A petition can be submitted by one person, a group of people or an organised pressure group. A petition can be submitted on paper, or through the e-petitioning system.



Mike Burns gives evidence, on behalf of Average Speed Cameras on the A9 are not the Answer, on petition PE1503 calling for a review of A9 speed camera proposals, to the Public Petitions Committee.

In the first 7 years of the Parliament (1999 – 2006) 53% of the petitions were organised by individuals, pressure groups sent 15% and community groups sent 18% (figures taken from The Assessment of the Scottish Parliament's Public Petitions System 1999 – 2006 by Dr. Christopher J. Carman, University of Glasgow).

To see how you can petition the Scottish Parliament, and to see the issues people send petitions about, go to www.parliament.scot and click on the Getting Involved section, then Petitions.

Watch a short video about people's experiences of petitioning the Parliament www.scottish.parliament.uk/newsandmediacentre/60105.aspx

Online Activity

Follow the instructions and answer the questions.

Go to the Petitions Page www.parliament.scot/petitions

Click on the middle heading “What petitioners are doing: view all petitions”.

Find one open petition

- 1) What is the closing date for people to comment on the petition?
- 2) How many comments does it have so far

Find one petition that has been lodged.

- 3) What does this mean will happen next?

Find a closed petition.

- 4) What was the outcome of the petition?

Using the filter, click on Petitioner and tick the Interest Group box, then click the filter button.

- 5) Find three different interest groups that have submitted petitions.

Using the filter, click on Petitioner and untick the Interest Group box and tick the Community Group box, then click the filter button.

- 6) Find three different community groups that have submitted petitions.

- 7) What are the main differences between the interest groups and the community groups?

The screenshot shows the Scottish Parliament Petitions page. At the top, there are controls for 'Petitions Per Page' (set to 10) and 'Sort By' (set to Status - Open). Below this is a table of petitions with columns for Status, Title and Petitioner, Petition No, Signature Closing Date, and Preview Petition. To the right of the table is a filter sidebar with a 'Subject Category' section. Under 'Petitioner', there are checkboxes for Individual, Community Groups, Interest Groups, Charities, Local Authority, Trade Union, Other, and Offline Petitioner. A 'Filter' button is at the bottom of the sidebar.

Status	Title and Petitioner	Petition No	Signature Closing Date	Preview Petition
Open	Aberdeen to Inverness Rail Travel Improvement Lee Wright	PE01509	13/03/2014	Preview
Open	Funding for Additional Support for Learning in ... Alex Orr and Sophie Pilgrim (On behalf of 'Scottish Children's Services Coalition and Kindred')	PE01507	14/02/2014	Preview
Open	Rename Glasgow Prestwick Airport to 'Robert Bur... Alison C Tait (On behalf of 'The Robert Burns World Federation Ltd')	PE01506	21/02/2014	Preview
Open	Awareness of Strep B in Pregnancy and Infants Jackie Watt	PE01505	17/02/2014	Preview
Lodged	ATOS as a sponsor of the 2014 Commonwealth Games Sean Clerkin	PE01508	31/01/2014	Preview
Lodged	Party litigants - Civil Appeals to the Supreme ... Kathie Mclean-Toremor	PE01504	21/12/2013	Preview
Lodged	Review of A9 speed camera proposals Mike Burns (On behalf of 'Average Speed Cameras on the A9 are not the answer')	PE01503	21/12/2013	Preview
Lodged	Save Ecurie Ecosse cars Shonah Gibbon	PE01502	01/12/2013	Preview

Joining a political party

Political parties are organisations that are concerned with a wide variety of issues. They want to be successful at the election and form the government. This allows them to put forward many of the laws they think will be good for the country.

Becoming involved in a political party is a way some people seek to influence politics and decision making. As members of a political party people can shape that party's ideas and policies through, for example, taking part in a debate at a party conference, interviewing and choosing the prospective parliamentary candidate for their area or becoming a candidate themselves. The party members will also work closely with and support their party MSPs.



Becoming involved in a pressure group

Pressure Groups are organisations that want to change policy but **do not** want to become the government. They focus on particular issues or areas of concern.

Pressure groups try to influence policy making by doing some of the following methods:

Organising petitions

Sending letters to people who might be making decisions

Organising demonstrations

Having a social media campaign to show what is happening and how people can get involved

People join pressure groups to show their support for a particular issue and to join with other like-minded people in trying to influence our politicians. Some people feel working in a group like this means they have a louder voice in getting their message across.

Some examples:

Average Speed cameras on the A9 are not the Answer – a local pressure group on one particular issue which affects a particular area of the country.

Friends of the Earth Scotland are a national pressure group

Amnesty International is a large international pressure group

Key Points

- Democracy means 'rule by the people'. People should have a say in what happens and what is decided
- There are many different ways in which people can participate in politics and decision making
- Voting – people use their vote to choose what candidate or party they want to make decisions in the Parliament. Elections to the Scottish Parliament take place every four years to allow the people a regular choice of who they want to represent them
- Campaigning – this involves many different types of activities: demonstrating, sending letters and emails, media campaigns, visiting MSPs, sending petitions.
- Signing petitions – people sign petitions to show how strongly they feel about an issue and to try to influence decision makers.
- Taking part in a political party – Political Parties seek to become the government. Some people join political parties to influence the types of policies the Party will have and to support the Party in becoming the government.
- Becoming involved in a Pressure Group. Pressure groups want to change policy but do not want to become the government. Pressure groups focus on a particular area or areas of concern and seek to influence decision makers.