What is Voting?
Voting is a method for a group of people to make a decision or express an opinion on action to be taken: this usually follows discussions, debates, or election campaigns. Democracies such as the UK elect holders of high office by voting and it is an important that a UK citizen uses the right to vote and influence who those people are because decisions that they take will affect your life. This information sheet outlines the process of voting, how you can vote and the different UK elections you can vote in.

Voting at meetings and gatherings
Whenever several people, who do not all agree, need to make a decision; voting is a very common way of reaching a decision peacefully. The right to vote is usually restricted to certain people:

- Members of a society or club, or shareholders of a company (but not outsiders); may elect its officers, or adopt or change its rules, by voting;
- A panel of judges, either formal judicial authorities or judges of a competition, may make decisions by voting;
- A group of friends or family members may decide which film to see by voting.

The method of voting can range from formal submission of written votes, through show of hands, voice voting or audience response systems, to informal noting which outcome seems to be preferred by more people.

Voting in Politics
In a democracy, a government is chosen by voting in an election (which is a way for the population to elect, i.e. choose, among several candidates for rule). In a representative democracy voting is the method by which the electorate appoints its representatives in its government. In a direct democracy, voting is the method by which the electorate directly makes decisions, turn bills into laws, etc.

A vote is a formal expression of an individual's choice for or against some motion (for example, a proposed resolution), for or against some ballot question, for a certain candidate, a selection of candidates, or a political party. In practice it is preferred to conduct votes in secret (a secret ballot) to prevent voters being intimidated and protect their right to choose.

Voting in an election usually takes place at a polling station though increasingly other ways are being introduced including voting by post. It is voluntary in some countries (including the UK), but compulsory in others, such as Australia.

Voting and Religious Views
Whilst each person has the right to exercise their democratic right and vote in elections, it is important to understand that some religions and cultures reject politics as artificial, divisionary or corrupt; and seek to keep separate the worlds of God or nature from that which is determined by "man". Strict followers of this philosophy are found in many religions, including Christianity, Islam, Taoism, Hinduism, and Buddhism: Jehovah’s Witnesses,
Quakers, Rastafarians and those of the Baha’i faith are amongst those who will not vote. Consequently their active involvement or engagement in wider community issues has to be secured in other ways.

Understanding what it is you are voting for
Each level of government (local, regional, national) has different powers so is involved in decisions which have effect on our lives in different ways: those taken locally are most likely to affect our everyday lives and be most obvious to us. Before you vote you need to ensure that you are clear what it is that you are voting for and why voting in that process is important to you:

- **National UK Government**: responsible for setting and collecting all taxes, except council tax; the National Health Service; unemployment benefit, tax credits and state pensions; making and reviewing UK law; and the Country’s security.
- **Regional London Government (the Greater London Authority, or GLA)**: responsible for Fire Service; Highways (major routes); Housing; Passenger Transport and Transport Planning; and Strategic Planning in London. The GLA is made up of two parts:
  - A directly elected executive **Mayor of London** who proposes policy and the GLA's budget, and makes appointments to the capital's strategic executive such as Transport for London.
  - An elected 25-member **London Assembly** with powers to hold the Mayor of London to account by scrutiny of his or her actions and decisions. The Assembly also accepts or amends the Mayor's budget on an annual basis.
- **Local Government (boroughs such as Southwark)**: responsible for Education; Environmental Health; Highways (Local); Housing; Leisure and Recreation; Libraries; Planning Applications; Revenue Collection (Council Tax, etc.); Social Services; Local Strategic and Transport Planning; Waste Collection and Disposal.
- **European Union**: makes and reviews law that applies to all member states which come in three forms (Regulations, Directives and Decisions). Regulations override domestic law in each member state; Directives require a specific result but leave member states to decide how to do it; Decisions only usually apply to a specific state or company and most often used in competition law.

Demystifying London’s complex voting systems
To complicate voting more, each of the 4 levels of government employs different types of democratic voting system, and the Greater London Authority has two of its own:

- **National UK elections**: a voting system is used which does not require the winner to achieve a simple majority (i.e. more than 50% the total votes cast). The country is divided into 650 areas (constituencies) with each voter given a single vote in their local constituency to choose from many candidates. The candidate with the highest number of votes wins. Consequently the winner will often have less than 50% of the vote locally. This method has a tendency to produce a two-party system.
- **European Union elections**: A similar system is used for these elections, though the wide range of political parties across member states tends not to result in the same vote splitting effect, and instead promotes a need for elected politicians to work in partnership.
- **London local council elections**: Voters can vote for up to three candidates for their area (ward) which provides the opportunity to vote for candidates from different political viewpoints and parties. A wider range of councilors (including independents) are elected, although there is a tendency towards organised political parties.
**London Mayoral elections** use a preferential voting system where voters rank each candidate in order of preference (1, 2, 3 etc.). If no single candidate has 50% or more votes, the candidate with the least votes is excluded and their votes redistributed according to the voters nominated order of preference, and the process is repeated until a candidate has 50% or more votes.

**London Assembly elections** a multiple vote system is used as well as voting for a specific Assembly member for your area, the voter selects a political party preference. A proportional representation approach then results in a number of candidates from a party’s ranked list being elected in proportion to their party’s votes.

### Registering to vote

To vote in an election or referendum, you must be on the electoral register. People eligible to register are:

- Anyone aged 16 or over (but you cannot vote until you are 18).
- British or qualifying Commonwealth citizens. This means Commonwealth citizens who have leave to remain in the UK or do not require such leave.
- Citizens of the Republic of Ireland or other European Union (EU) member states.

If you have not previously registered you can do so online at [gov.uk/register-to-vote](https://www.gov.uk/register-to-vote). If you are not sure if you are already registered, contact your [local electoral registration office](https://www.gov.uk/register-to-vote).

### Further information and resources:

For general information on voting in the UK, visit: [https://www.gov.uk/voting-in-the-uk/overview](https://www.gov.uk/voting-in-the-uk/overview).

The “About My Vote” website outlines all of the different types of elections across the whole of the UK (including different arrangements for local and regional government outside of London) - [https://www.aboutmyvote.co.uk/](https://www.aboutmyvote.co.uk/).

To learn more about what Democracy is, its history, and its many forms; read more here: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Democracy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Democracy).

For more in depth information and background to the government bodies referred to in this factsheet, try these Wikipedia pages:


For further support or information on Voting and Democracy contact the **Volunteering and Engagement Team** at Community Southwark on 020 7358 7020 or email [engage@communitysouthwark.org.uk](mailto:engage@communitysouthwark.org.uk)