PARLIAMENT
of
FINLAND
Finland is a republic, in which power is vested in the people. Every four years Finns elect Parliament, which decides on national matters. Parliament enacts legislation and approves the state budget. It also elects the Prime Minister and oversees the Government. In addition, Parliament approves major international agreements that are binding on Finland and influences European Union affairs.

Parliament decides on legislation, the budget, international agreements and confidence in the Government in plenary sessions, which are open to the public.

Every citizen can participate in public affairs by voting. Parliamentary elections are direct, proportional and secret. Every citizen who has reached the age of 18 by election day has the right to vote. Each citizen who is eligible has one vote.

Elections are direct: voters cast their votes for the candidate of their choice. Elections are also secret, which means that only the voter knows which candidate he/she has voted for. To ensure secrecy a citizen must vote in person under the supervision of an election official. The voter fills in a ballot in a voting booth, folds it and drops it in a ballot box anonymously.
The plenary session is the most visible aspect of Parliament’s work. During each term Parliament meets in plenary session four times a week, from Tuesday to Friday. Parliament’s most important task, enacting legislation, takes place in plenary session. Parliament enacts new legislation or amends existing legislation on the basis of a Government proposal or a Member’s motion. 50,000 voters can bring a legislative proposal to the deliberation of Parliament by signing a Citizens’ initiative. Most legislation results from Government proposals, which average about 250 a year.

It generally takes 2–4 months to consider a proposal, but major legislative projects can take years.

The handling of proposed legislation begins with a preliminary debate in plenary session. The purpose of this debate is to provide a basis for work in the committee to which the proposal is referred. After committee handling a proposal returns to the plenary session, where it is given two readings. In the first reading the content of the bill is decided section by section. In the second reading the bill is either approved or rejected. Once it has been ratified by the President of the Republic, an Act is published in the Statutes of Finland.

The plenary session is also an arena for timely political debate. In many people’s opinion the most important plenary session is Question Time on Thursdays, when ministers must answer MPs’ oral questions.

The public is welcome to watch plenary sessions. There are also live webcasts of sessions on Parliament’s website.
Speech and decision-making

Visitors to Parliament often wonder where all the MPs are, when a plenary session is under way and half the seats in the hall are empty. The answer has to do with the different nature of sessions. Although all of them are plenary sessions, in practice some are reserved for decision-making and others for speaking.

When it is time to make decisions everyone is present unless they are unable to attend because of a work-related trip, illness or some other valid reason.

Speaking sessions are an essential part of democracy, since MPs have been elected to represent the people and its opinions. In Finland MPs have the right to speak about a matter that is being discussed for as long and as many times as they wish. Another part of democracy is that MPs are not obliged to sit and listen to everyone else’s opinions.

All the speeches that are given in plenary session along with the results of all votes are included in the records of plenary sessions. These are available on Parliament’s website about two hours after the end of each plenary session.
Committees prepare decisions

A committee is the most important place where an MP can influence matters, since all parliamentary decisions are prepared by committees. After the preliminary debate in plenary session, a Government proposal is referred to the appropriate committee. For example, legislation concerning schools is referred to the Education and Culture Committee and tax laws to the Finance Committee. A committee can also issue a statement to another committee.

In committees MPs hear experts’ views concerning what impacts legislation is likely to have. Experts can be civil servants at ministries or agencies, university researchers or representatives of non-governmental organizations or interest groups, for example.

By asking questions MPs can get a thorough understanding of the content of legislation. Most MPs work in two different committees.

On the basis of expert hearings and debate a committee forms an opinion on a Government proposal. In its report the committee can recommend the approval of a proposal as it is, amendments to the proposal or its rejection.

After the committee stage a proposal goes back to the plenary session. MPs can propose amendments, but most often the committee report is adopted as Parliament’s decision.

Parliament has 15 permanent special committees plus the Grand Committee, which focuses on EU matters. The composition of a committee reflects the expertise and responsibilities of the MPs involved.

Every MP deals with EU affairs

Compared with many other member states, in Finland Parliament plays a strong role in deciding on European Union affairs. The Grand Committee serves as Parliament’s EU committee. Its most important task is to ensure Parliament’s influence and parliamentary oversight in EU decision-making.

In the case of the European Union’s common foreign and security policy, Parliament’s views are expressed by the Foreign Affairs Committee.

The special committees consider EU affairs that fall within their task area and issue statements on them to the Grand Committee. Every MP deals with EU affairs through committee work.

Each MP is member of two committees, on average. The Speaker, deputy speakers and MPs who act as government ministers are not appointed committee members.

Here are pictures from the Committee for the Future (right) and the Audit Committee meeting (below).
relative strengths of different parliamentary groups. MPs from parliamentary groups representing both government and opposition work together in committees.

Most parliamentary committees have 17 members and 9 deputy members. Exceptions are the Finance Committee with 21 members and 19 deputy members, the Audit Committee with 11 members and 6 deputy members, and the Grand Committee with 25 members and 13 deputy members.

Committee agendas and records of committee meetings are available on Parliament’s website and can be used to follow the handling of matters.

Committees’ task areas:

**Grand Committee**
Formulation of national policy associated with membership of the European Union, with the exception of foreign and security policy. In dealing with EU affairs MPs from the Åland electoral district have the right to be present and to speak. The Grand Committee also considers any legislative proposals that are referred to it by the plenary session.

**Constitutional Law Committee**
Deals with all matters pertaining to the constitution and any legislation which has a bearing on international human rights, the autonomy of Åland, elections, citizenship, language and defence.

**Foreign Affairs Committee**
Changing or repealing major international agreements or other international obligations requiring Parliament’s approval, the management of foreign affairs, general security policy, peacekeeping policy, foreign trade policy, development cooperation and international organizations.

**Finance Committee**
State budget proposal and other Government proposals and motions regarding finance, legislation pertaining to taxes and similar charges as well as state borrowing.

**Audit Committee**
Oversight of the management of government finances and compliance with the budget.

**Administration Committee**
General organization of state administration, state administration at the regional and municipal levels, administrative procedures, state personnel policy, general regional and structural policy, public order and safety, rescue services, the Frontier Guard, immigration matters, municipal affairs and church matters.

**Legal Affairs Committee**
Matters involving family, estate, corporate, contract, property, criminal and procedural law as well as courts and tribunals.

**Transport and Communications Committee**
Road, rail, air and inland water traffic, navigation and communications.

**Agriculture and Forestry Committee**
Agriculture and forestry, veterinary medicine, hunting, fishing, reindeer husbandry and animal protection.

**Defence Committee**
Military service, the Defence Forces and legislation pertaining to emergencies.

**Education and Culture Committee**
Education, training, science, the arts, culture, sports, youth work and student aid.

**Social Affairs and Health Committee**
Social and health care, social security, social insurance and pension legislation.

**Commerce Committee**
Commerce, industry, business, consumer protection, competition, private insurance, energy, and finance and securities markets legislation.

**Committee for the Future**
Matters involving future development factors and development models, research regarding the future and evaluation of the consequences of technological development on society.

**Employment and Equality Committee**
Work environment, labour and employment, equality and non-military national service.

**Environment Committee**
Housing, land-use and building legislation, waste management, environmental protection and nature conservation.

It generally takes a month or two for a committee to handle a matter, but urgent business can be dealt with in a few days if necessary. Major legislative projects can take many months or even years. The picture is from a Agriculture and Forestry Committee meeting.
Parliamentary Groups Facilitate Decision-Making

Members form parliamentary groups according to political party, and these play a key role in parliamentary work on a practical level. Each parliamentary group elects its own chairpersons and possibly other organs.

There is no legal obligation to join a parliamentary group, but Members usually belong to their own party’s group, of which there are currently eight.

Members discuss timely political issues at parliamentary group meetings and decide what stance to take on matters being considered by Parliament. Group meetings are prepared by a working committee or the chairpersons.

Discussions in a parliamentary group are usually conducted on the basis of the chairperson’s proposal. If agreement cannot be reached on a matter, decisions may be put to a vote. Groups generally strive to reach a consensus, however. The parliamentary groups normally meet on Thursdays.

Stronger position for the parliamentary groups

Parliamentary work is directed by the Speaker and Deputy Speakers, who are responsible for negotiating with other parliamentary groups on a group’s position, among other things. The nature of a parliamentary group’s work depends largely on whether a party is in the Government or the opposition.

MPs belonging to government party groups generally support government proposals, but do suggest amendments to these during committee deliberations.

Opposition groups have an important role in a democracy. They criticize government decisions, present alternatives and demand that government ministers justify their decisions.

The parliamentary groups facilitate decision-making in Parliament, and their position has been strengthened in recent years. The parliamentary groups have been active since the early days of the unicameral Parliament, but their role as a political actor was only given full recognition in the Constitution that was approved in 2000.
Almost anyone can become an MP. Candidates must be at least 18 years of age and Finnish citizens. Parliamentary elections are held every four years, at which time MPs are elected in direct, proportional and secret ballots. Each citizen who is eligible has one vote.

An MP is a legislator, a wielder of social influence, a representative of an electoral district and an international actor. Although a large part of an MP’s week is spent in committees and plenary sessions, Parliament is not the only place where an MP works.

In addition to a political party an MP represents an electoral district and is expected to keep up with regional matters. Electoral districts are drawn so as to ensure that sparsely populated areas are also represented in Parliament.

Nearly every MP has tasks that require work-related trips abroad.

As a voter you can follow your MP at work in many different ways. For instance, all of MPS’ speeches in the Plenary Hall are recorded in webcasts as well as the record of plenary sessions. Moreover, practically all MPs have their own website or on social media, where they provide information on timely parliamentary work.

Who can become an MP?

Seats in the Parliament in May 2018
(200 seats total)

- Centre Party Parliamentary Group, 49 MPs
- National Coalition Party Parliamentary Group, 38 MPs
- Social Democratic Parliamentary Group, 35 MPs
- Blue Reform Parliamentary Group, 19 MPs
- Finns Party Parliamentary Group, 17 MPs
- Green Parliamentary Group, 15 MPs
- Left Alliance Parliamentary Group, 12 MPs
- Swedish Parliamentary Group, 10 MPs
- Christian Democratic Parliamentary Group, 5 MPs
- Liike Nyt-Movement’s Parliamentary Group, 1 MP
Finns have elected MPs in direct elections for over a hundred years. Along with the right to vote we received the right to stand for election.

The Parliament Act that came into force in 1906 was a monumental reform. The Old Diet of Estates was replaced by a unicameral Parliament and universal and equal suffrage was introduced. No longer was the right to vote dependent on social status or sex. The reform increased the electorate tenfold. In 1907 the world’s first 19 women MPs were elected.

Parliament met in temporary facilities until 1931, when the Parliament Building was completed. Designed by Johan Sigfrid Sireń, the Parliament Building is the most important symbol of Finland’s independence and democracy. The Parliament Building belongs to the Finnish people and is open to the public. It receives over 100,000 visitors a year.

The new Constitution that entered into force on 1 March 2000 strengthened Parliament’s position as Finland’s supreme organ of state. Parliament elects the Prime Minister, for example.
Parliament’s online services
Parliament’s website www.eduskunta.fi provides information on Parliament and legislative work. It includes pages on plenary sessions, committees, MPs and legislative matters.

Watch Parliament in session!
The public is welcome to observe plenary sessions of Parliament. The doors to the public gallery open 15 minutes before each session. The session hall is accessible for persons with disabilities.
Address: Mannerheimintie 30.
You may also follow webcasts from the session: www.eduskunta.fi

Additional information about Parliament

Visitors’ Centre
The Visitors’ Centre is located in the Little Parliament building. The Visitors’ Centre is also a popular venue for seminars on timely issues.
Address: Arkadiankatu 3.

Library of Parliament
The Library of Parliament is open to all. In addition to Parliament it serves anyone who needs information about Parliament, the law or society.
Address: Aurorankatu 6.

The first post-renovation Open House was arranged in Parliament House in October 2017.
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