



UK Politics and Government – Democracy and Participation

Politics Edexcel and AQA – revision notes – based on Hodder Education revision guides

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Democracy

What is democracy?

Abraham Lincoln's closing remarks of his short yet famous Gettysburg Address of November 19, 1863:

“Government of the people, by the people and for the people, shall not perish from the Earth”.

“The Gettysburg Address is a speech that U.S. President Abraham Lincoln delivered during the American Civil War at the dedication of the Soldiers' National Cemetery, now known as Gettysburg National Cemetery, in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania on the afternoon of November 19, 1863, four and a half months after the Union armies defeated Confederate forces in the Battle of Gettysburg, the Civil War's deadliest battle. The speech is widely considered one of the most notable and famous delivered in American history.”

- **Demos = of the people, Kratia = power/rule.**
- People have **influence**, directly (direct democracy) or indirectly (representative democracy), over political decisions.
- Government and elected bodies are **accountable** to the people.
- Government should operate within **the rule of law**, everyone is equal under the laws, and the same laws apply to the government.
- **Elections** – regular, free and fair, with universal adult suffrage.
- People are free **to form political parties and other associations**, and to stand for **elective office**.
- **Peaceful transition of power** from one government to the next (legitimacy).
- **Legitimacy** = the outcome of the elections is accepted, and the authority of the government is therefore recognised.
- People have access to **independent information** and opinions; no governmental control of the media.
- The **rights and freedoms** of the people should be respected by government.
- **Power in divided** and not concentrated.

Direct democracy

- The people make decisions for themselves, directly, or via a referendum.
- Classical Greece, even then it excluded slaves, freed slaves, children, women and metics (free foreign-born residents without citizenship in Athens) = a significant part of the population is nevertheless excluded!
- Modern representative democracies resort to referendums, occasionally, especially to resolve deeply divisive/constitutional issues. Needless to say, it has its own advantages and disadvantages.

Advantages

- Purest form of democracy.
- Everyone gets a say. People make their own decisions, directly, freedom.

In the 2016 EU referendum, more than 33 million people votes: 72% of eligible voters. But the political stability and legitimacy was threatened because of the divisive nature of the choice at stake, 'leave' or 'remain'.

- Equal weight to all votes.

In a referendum, all votes are counted and the side with most of the votes wins, hence, it is a form of back to direct democracy.

- Greater legitimacy.

But, can be the tyranny of the majority = J.S. Mill. A majority of voters in England voted for Brexit, while a majority in Scotland voted to remain, and Scotland, that is part of the UK has left the EU. The relationship between Scotland and the EU is now determined by agreements reached between the UK government and the EU = the Withdrawal Agreement, WA, and the Trade and Cooperations Agreement, TCA.

- Encourages participation.

Turnout for important referendums often exceeds turnout of general elections. But, voting is a parochial act of participation. The Scottish independence referendum in 2014, 85% turnout compared with 67% in the general elections of 2019.

- Encourages debate and political discussions.
- Popular consent and legitimacy.

Sometimes a referendum can expose deep divisions or encourage them such as with the EU referendum. Alternatively, it can contribute to a sense of community and consensus, such as the Good Friday referendum in Northern Ireland; it facilitated the way for Catholics and Protestants to share power.

Disadvantages

- Tyranny of the majority, the majority ignores the minority, concentrated power.

- Minority views are ignored/unrepresented. It can influence legitimacy.
- Some views are too complex for ordinary citizen – Brexit, and the public can be more influenced by rhetoric, emotions, charisma, and myopic considerations.
- Lack of pluralism.
- The view of the majority is not always right, moral or legal.

Representative democracy

- Indirect democracy: the people vote for representatives who make decisions (policy choices, outputs) on their behalf and are accountable to them – the MPs are elected to the House of Commons.
- Regular elections. Regular and free, fair, and more than one party!
- A government is elected to make key proposals and implement them.
- Government and elected representatives are accountable to the people, thus checks and balances.
- Parties, free campaign.
- Pressure groups = representing various segments of society, outside the political system, attempting to influence policy choices and implementations.

Advantages

- Pluralism and representation of different views, protection of minority opinions. Parliament passed various laws that are aimed to protect minorities, such as the Human Rights Acts and Freedom of Information Act.

- People with time and/or expertise make the decisions, representatives with expert knowledge and experience. It could be seen to promote the legitimacy of political decisions.
- Decisions makers are accountable to the people: can be voted out.

Many Liberal Democrats lost their seats in 2015 – they lost trust following the controversy over tuition fees. Following the 2010 coalition government with the Conservatives, David Cameron with Nick Clegg.

- Citizens have local representatives to whom they can address concerns.
- Practical for complex issues, the Covid-19 pandemic required MPs to be educated about various aspects of all the challenges involved.
- Preparing and training future leaders.

Disadvantages

- Elitism = the power in the hands of a political class.

Some groups possess more powers and influence than others, thus, they have an unfair advantage over less powerful groups.

- Minority groups may find their concerns are bypassed or lost within the salience of interests of majority groups.
- Less political participation, especially during the period between elections. It relates to political apathy, mistrust and alienation.
- Party politics at the expense of representing interests or acting on behalf of the national interest.
- The UK electoral system can produce highly unrepresentative results = FPTP results in smaller parties being under-represented.

Apathy, cynicism, distrust, lack of political efficacy, alienation = low turnout to elections and low/avoidance of participation, higher protest including violence = all can erode legitimacy.

Legitimacy

- The idea that the government has the right to govern, and it enjoys the **consent** of the people.
- Democracy can be seen to provide legitimacy to the elected representatives, rendering the government with a mandate or the authority to govern = especially with respect to conflictual decisions, or ones that certain groups disagree with; they nevertheless must obey and can continue through participation to try to influence decisions, and/or change existing policies.

Models of representative democracy

1 – Delegate model = the representative is given direct instructions how to vote in specific issues. For example, some MPs voted to trigger Article 50 to leave or stay in the EU in alliance with how their constituents voted in the Brexit referendum, rather than their own personal view.

Representatives act solely on behalf of those who elect them.

2 – Trustee Model = based on Edmund Burke, this is the actual basis for the House of Commons.

- Constituents elect representatives as 'trustees' for their constituency.
- Representatives use their own knowledge, judgment, and expertise to make decisions.

Similarities between direct and representative democracy

- Popular consent is vital.
- Citizens play an active role.
- Government and decisions' makers are accountable.
- The public must be informed about and be engaged in the political process.
- The rule of law, constitution.

Differences between direct and representative democracy

- Decisions that are achieved directly versus via representatives.
- Decisions in direct are via a referendum, and in a representative via elected bodies.
- In direct, people decide over a single issue, in representative, over a comprehensive 'package' of issues, the role of ideology.

Pluralist democracy

A political system/society wherein there is widespread acceptance and tolerance of different groups and opinions, with the protection of freedom of expression and association; characterised by multiple parties and pressure groups to represent diversity and pluralist interests.

- The power is spread out among numerous groups in society, rather than being held in the political centre or be concentrated in the hands of a dominant group.
- Features = political parties and pressure groups.
- Tolerance, legal and sociocultural; freedom of expression, protection of minorities.
- Range of independent sources of information without interference and control by the state. It is however threatened by the consolidated ownership and control of media conglomerates.
- Sociological attributes across various minority groups: ethnicity, class, gender = having a 'voice' and the channels to express it.

Features of UK democracy

- Pluralist.

Power lies in different bodies. The 2017 Article 50 decision on Britain leaving the EU involved several institutions and not just the PM. Parliament had to vote, judges ruled on it, and the people expressed their view in a referendum.

However, some argue that power is nevertheless concentrated and influence is not sufficiently spread.

- Separation of powers.
- Parliament = the House of Commons can hold the government accountable, yet the House of Lords is unelected.
- Free and fair elections.

All adults can vote and the results are trusted and accepted. However, under 18-years old cannot vote, and prisoners. Some argue that the FPTP is unfair.

- Corruption is illegal and punished by law.

Not always: cash for peerage scandal, the MPs expenses scandal, and cash for access to ministers.

- Protection of citizens' rights, minorities.
- Devolution and distribution of power = transfer of power from the central government to regional and local bodies, the Scottish and Welsh parliaments.

Criticism and calls for electoral reforms

- The House of Lords is unelected – a call to introduce an elected second chamber.
- Elections – the first-past-the-post system distorts representation and produces an unrepresentative House of Commons – a call for reform of the electoral system and introducing more proportional representative system.
- Distribution of power – England itself has no form of devolved representation except for some cities – a call to establish English devolution and devolve power from central government to regional bodies.
- Public participation – free to vote, to stand for office, and to express views – yet low turnout in general elections, let alone on other measures of participation. A call for lowering the age of voting and even to make voting compulsory.
- Protections of rights and liberties – quite strong in the UK, some argue too strong. UK signed the European Convention on Human Rights, enforced by UK court and the judiciary. Conflicts over immigration issues.
- In order to increase turnout and participation, suggestions to:
 - Make voting compulsory.
 - Make registering to vote easier.
 - Possible online voting.
 - Possible weekend voting.
 - Increase education in schools. Formal and informal curriculum.
 - Extend the franchise to 16-and-17-year-olds.

The franchise – Suffrage

= the right to vote.

In modern democratic systems the franchise is extended to all adults, without any exceptions applied to any group.

The principles

- Everyone above the age of 18 has the right to vote in the elections; except convicted prisoners, people detained and certified as insane (in specific situations only), and members of the royal family.
- No groups are discriminated against.
- Each individual is responsible to register to vote.

There is a debate about the lowering of the age of voting, and some campaigns for extending the right to vote to convicted prisoners and some certified mentally ill detained patients.

Political participation

Passive versus active.

Voting as the parochial act.

Forms

- Voting.
- Joining a political party.
- Active member in a political party.
- Joining a trade union.
- Standing for election or office.
- Joining a pressure group.
- Active member in a pressure group.
- Participating in a political campaign.
- Signing a petition.
- Reading, watching and following the news.
- Engagement in political discussions/conversations.
- Protest – often considered to be a ‘separate’ category, because of its features and hence distinct explanations.

Is there a crisis of participation in the UK?

The main concern is that fewer people take part in various political processes, including but not only in elections. This is a similar concern pertinent to many democracies, and it undermines the core tenets of democracy, including and especially representative forms.

Impact on consent and legitimacy.

- General elections' turnouts were highest in 1950 (83.9%) and very low in 2001 (59.4%).
- However, it increased since then, around the 70% mark.
- Joining a political party = only around 1.7% of the population are members of a political party.
- **Democratic deficit** = when a system is with existing democratic institutions yet lacking with other features of democracy, often the less formal ones: such as democratic political culture etc.
- **Elitism**.
- Power of the media, corporations, and international organisations.
- Apathy, cynicism, alienation, mistrust.
- Disillusionment with the political processes, political parties and politicians.
- The preference for a referendum especially regarding critical issues, such as Brexit.

Francis Fukuyama 1992 – The End of History and the Last Man

- Originally coined by others, Kant, Hegel and Marx.

History as an evolutionary process, and that liberal democracy is the final 'winning' form of government.

The idea of the end of history as a philosophical, ideological and political thesis: a triumph of a particular sociocultural, economic and political system, as the end point in the evolution of humanity, thus, the final form of government.

For Marx = global communism, however a utopia: abolishing the distinction between the state and civil society, and the dialectical process.

- Link with core ideas topics.

Fukuyama argued that the 'end of the road' was achieved and democracy had won the battle to become the final consensual form of government in history. A quick examination of contemporary international relations, including at the time of the book publication, renders this idea a fanciful 'wishful thinking'.

The world is saturated with conflicts both between and within states and with power struggles that threaten democratic systems that most definitely have not conquered the international arena.

In other words, if there is any end to history, it certainly had not arrived yet, and most certainly it is not rooted in the victory of democracy over other political systems.

Pressure groups

= an organisation seeking to influence public policy choices.

They can operate from inside and outside the political system.

Features

- Increasingly professional and focused.
- Increasingly powerful.
- Actively working to influence decision-making, not to be elected.
- Operates at various levels of government and employ various methods.

Functions

- Provide citizens with channels, access and means to influence decision-makers.
- Contribute to policy formulation.
- Encourage active political participation.
- Increase of governmental accountability.
- Educating the public.

Types

(1) Sectional/interest groups

- Representing a particular section of society, like trade unions and professional associations.
- Membership often consists of those belong to the section of society they represent; yet seeking public support.
- 'Closed' or restricted membership.
- Tend to promote direct 'inside' links with decision-makers.
- More subtle methods with links to direct parliamentary influence.
- **Examples:** National Education Union, British Medical Association, Trade Union Congress, National Union of Students.

(2) Cause/promotional groups

- Fight for a particular cause/issue rather than fight for the benefit of a specific group in society.
- Open membership to supporters.

- Tend to be considered altruistic as they promote interests of the general public.
- Tend to focus on mobilising public support.
- Tend to use direct methods such as demonstrations, internet campaigns, including protest and disobedience.
- **Examples:** Green Peace, Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, Amnesty International, Friends of the Earth.

A different typology

Insider versus outsider groups

1 – Insider = close links with decision-makers, operate from inside the political system (yet unelected), considered the ‘official’ group to represent a specific interest, consulted directly regarding policy choices.

Examples: British Medical Association, National Farmers’ Union.

2 – Outsider = relatively little contact with decision-makers; sometimes because they are marginal and/or weak like Fathers4Justice, or because their aims and methods are incompatible with governmental bodies and for ideological reasons they operate from outside, such as Amnesty International.

Differences between pressure groups and political parties

1 – Power = parties seek to gain or share power, pressure group to influence the political system and its representatives.

2 – Accountability = parties are accountable to the electorate, pressure groups to their own members.

3 – Policies = parties develop policies across a range of issues; pressure groups focus on narrow interests.

4 – Membership = parties often formal; and pressure groups often informal supporters, although sometimes formal membership as well.

Methods

- **Lobbying**

Persuasion through direct contact, used primarily by insider groups such as the National Farmers’ Association.

- **Public campaigns**

Can involve large-scale demonstrations to express a view and to increase awareness, such as pro-remain and pro-leave demonstrations.

- [Donations to political parties](#)

Donations are legal insofar they are declared. Used mainly by large corporations, trade unions etc. For example: Open Democracy found that the Conservative Party received £11 million from property developers during Boris Johnson's first year as a PM.

- [Media campaigns](#)

Often involved celebrities or high-profile public figures. For example, the 2020 campaign to continue with free school meals over the summer holiday.

- [Civil disobedience](#)

Often when other methods fail, people may resort to illegal methods. For example, Extinction rebellion (environmental) by blocking roads and bridges.

- [Social media and online petitions](#)

Especially to raise awareness and recruit public support. For example, the campaign that resulted in the government agreeing to scrap VAT on sanitary products.

- [Legal action](#)

Judicial reviews aim to prevent discrimination against women and other minorities and to preserve public services. For example, the Save Lewisham Hospital Campaign won a legal battle in 2013 when the Court of Appeal ruled that the government does not have the legal authority to close the hospital.

Factors influencing success or failure of pressure groups

- Consider the factors below to reflect 'resources' that can exercise power = the ability to influence others.

1 – Proximity to government ideology and existing policy trends.

2 – Insider status

Access can provide the opportunity to offer views and influence draft legislation; healthcare private companies were involved in drafting the controversial Health and Social Care bill they are going to benefit from. However, it doesn't guarantee effective influence, some groups have close links with a specific party and could not influence government policy, for example, regarding Brexit.

3 – Finance = funds

4 – Size and membership

A large membership is likely to entail a greater influence. The Campaign to Protect Rural England has 40,000 members and has been quite successful in protecting green belts from expansive development. On the other hand, the Campaign for Nuclear

Disarmament had 110,000 members in the mid-1980s but had little influence on the government.

5 – Organisation and tactics

6 – Pressure from rival groups, or power dynamic with rival groups.

7 – Public opinion and media

Groups with widespread public support are more likely to exercise greater influence. For example, the Snowdrop Campaign to ban the use of handguns was successful because of the public support following the 1996 Dunblane primary school shooting. However, those with the ultimate power to make decisions may still not be influenced by any of these factors.

8 – Celebrity endorsement, high profile individuals, and influences. Social media with increasing power of engaging and mobilising public attention and opinion.

9 – Events can trigger and affect public support or lack of it, such as banning of handguns.

Pressure groups and democracy

Do pressure groups enhance or threaten democracy:

Enhance

- Help to disperse power more widely.
- Educate people about important issues and related policies.
- Provide opportunities and channels for greater participation. Engagement in politics in-between elections, healthy democracy.
- Can nurture democratic political culture to promote all democratic and liberal values embedded in the idea of democracy.
- Can promote and protect the interests of minority groups.
- Can help in calling the government and representatives to be transparent and to be accountable.
- A check and balance on the executive branch, also on the legislature.
- Greater scrutiny of decision-making by parliament.
- Opportunity and access for minority groups to influence policy.
- An essential part of pluralist democracy, and an essential consequence of representative democracy.

Threaten

- Some groups are elitist and tend to be characterised by centralised power, such as special advisors to ministers being selected for top jobs at lobbying firms so their contacts and access are utilised.
- Power tends to remain concentrated around the centre rather than being shared.
- Insider groups benefit from greater access and influence, not quite neutral.
- Some pressure groups may distort information and/or undermine measures for social and technological progress by engineering the topic and advancing controversial and unfounded arguments, such as the Stop5G regarding health and environmental hazards.
- Some groups are internally undemocratic because their leaders are unelected thus it is argued the group is not genuinely representing its members.
- Participation in pressure groups is not always effective.
- Minority groups might enjoy disproportionate higher access and influence especially when funded by corporations.
- Empowering an unelected elite with little accountability to the general public.
- May spread misinformation because of narrow interests and methods.
- Finance = as other resources are a key factor in the actual ability to influence others = power.

Other collective organisations: think tanks, lobbyists and corporations

(1) Think Tanks

- Public policy research groups.
- A body of experts that is active in investigating and offering solutions to various social, economic, and political challenges.
- Often associated with a political ideological position.
- Seek to influence policy and focus on public campaigning.
- Release publications.
- No membership.
- May be neutral and linked to a university, or with a clear agenda.
- Examples
 - Left-wing = The Institute for Public Policy Research, Fabian Society.
 - Right-wing = The Adam Smith Institute, Centre for Policy Studies.

They are aligned to a political party and therefore their influence is minimal when the party is not in power, like the left-leaning IPPR. However, some, like the Centre for Social Justice exercised much influence on the coalition government (2010-15) with respect to welfare reforms and the introduction of universal credit.

(2) Lobbyists

- Seek to influence the government.
- Lobbyists are individuals or companies that are being paid to influence decision makers towards a particular cause and interest.
- Companies that are paid to promote a particular interest, often a commercial one.
- Politicians must register their interests to prevent corruption.
- Often referred to as 'public relations' firms, these are political advisors that are hired and paid by private interests.
- Often individuals that worked in the political system and have expert knowledge and close links. The problem of 'cash for influence'.
- **Examples:** Media Intelligence Partners, Government Affairs Services Ltd.

MPs are banned from accepting money from lobbyists in return to representing their interests. However, lobbying firms spend £2 billion each year to influence policy choices and employ thousands of people. It is an 'industry'.

(3) Corporations

- Major businesses that play a significant role in the economy.
- Thus: size, money, employees; these are resources of power and influence.
- Hence, often cannot be 'ignored' by the government.
- May benefit the general public, yet they prioritise their own interests and profits over the national public interests.
- **Examples:** Google, Starbucks.

Corporations are not always successful with securing policies that benefit them despite their enormous range of resources. For example, many unsuccessfully opposed Brexit. However, they donate to election campaigns and think tanks that can be 'used' to try and secure their interest. Over a fifth of the Conservative party donations were from corporations during the 2019 election campaign.

Rights in the UK

Civil liberties

Protecting people from undue government interference.

Rights and freedoms that cannot be damaged by public bodies, thus effectively, these are freedoms from the government: freedom of opinion, expression, association and movement.

Civil rights

Protecting people from discrimination and thus it relates to the distribution of fundamental liberties regardless of race, sex, religion or any other characteristic.

Rights and freedoms that must be protected by the government, by law. These are also freedoms from the government: voting, standing for office and protection from discrimination.

Milestones – rights in the UK

Magna Carta 1215 =

Considered to be the foundation for the UK constitution, and the first statement of rights in England.

It limited the power of the monarch; required ‘barons’ to provide consent prior to taxation.

Included the right to trial by jury.

Some argue that it only protected the rights of the nobility and did not include protection of basic rights such as freedom of speech, freedom of religious beliefs, of protest. However, it is a milestone because of the implementation of the idea that the power of the king can and should be limited. That includes protection of the ‘barons’: 25 rebels who were high at the feudal hierarchy.

The Bill of Rights 1688 =

Secured a few individual rights such as freedom from cruel and unusual punishment and false imprisonment.

Common Law =

Developed over many centuries to include various rights that have been recognised and commonly enforced. These rights are therefore confirmed by judicial precedent. For example: the rule of law guaranteeing equal treatment under the law; freedom from imprisonment without a trial.

Statutes = parliamentary law can also protect rights, for example: the Freedom of Information Act 2000 granting the right to access official information.

Human Rights Act 1998 =

Rights that were codified under the European Convention on Human Rights became UK law. A wide range of rights and freedoms: speech, assembly, not to be discriminated against etc.

It allows UK citizens to resort to UK courts when they consider their rights are violated. The controversy centres around the implications on criminal and terror suspects.

The Equality Act 2010 =

Replaced several existing legislations and expanded and outlawed any form of discrimination (sex, gender, ethnicity, race, disability etc).

Examples of human rights organisations

Liberty, since 1934

Not associated with any political parties, and active through the courts to challenge governmental bodies on a legal basis.

Current campaigns include migrants' rights, against use of facial recognition technology and against mass surveillance in general.

Successful results include the Human Rights Act and scrapping of ID cards.

Amnesty International

An international pressure group focusing on abuse of human rights.

Current campaigns include the rights of refugees, rights of LGBTQI.

Successful results include some countries abolishing the death penalty, The UN's convention against torture and the release of many political prisoners.

Rights in conflict = especially individual versus collective rights:

Individual rights = belong to a person regardless of personal characteristics and apply to all individuals regardless of race, religion, gender, ethnicity etc.

Collective rights = belong to a group that might share a particular characteristic such as gay rights, or a group within an organisation, such as workers' rights.

- Right to freedom of expression and the right not to be discriminated against.
- Right to freedom of speech, running to office, and the protection of key democratic values.
- Freedom of expression versus the right of minority groups not to be subjected to hate speech.
- The right of privacy versus the right of the community to be protected from terrorism.
- Right to demonstrate versus the right of the community to freedom of movement.
- Difficult to resolve, and even judges often disagree on how to resolve some disputes.
- **Example** = 'the gay cake row' where Christian cake bakers refused to bake a marriage cake for a gay couple (similar with accommodation in a hotel case but

different results – the court ruled against the hotel, and they had to pay damages to the couple).

- An initial court decision ruled that the bakers discriminated against the customers, but it was reversed by the Supreme Court arguing that it was the political message on the cake (support for gay marriage) rather than the sexual orientation that led to the bakers’ decision: freedom of conscience = the bakers cannot be forced to write something that goes against their own beliefs. The problem remains in undermining or the conflict with the right of the LGBTQ to equal access to services.

In the UK, the effectiveness of protection of rights

- A strong common law tradition: yet it can be vague and often there is disagreement.
- The UK is subject to the ECHR (European Convention on Human Rights): yet parliament is sovereign and can ignore or reverse some laws under certain circumstances.
- The judiciary is independent and strong in maintaining the rule of law: yet sometimes the rule of law can mean different things, if only because many rights are in conflict.

HOW DEMOCRATIC IS THE UK?			
01	PEACEFUL TRANSITION OF POWER	UK democracy is mostly free of conflict.	None.
02	FREE ELECTIONS	All adults able to vote freely in a secret ballot protected by law.	Monarch and House of Lords are not elected by the people.
03	FAIR ELECTIONS	Proportional electoral systems used in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales, and for EU parliamentary elections (pre-Brexit).	First Past the Post system can be disproportionate, and governments can be elected without full consensus.
04	PARTICIPATION IN POLITICS	Good level of participation in pressure groups, and rise in e-democracy enabling participation.	Party membership and voter turnout falling, particularly with younger citizens.
05	EXPRESSION & INFORMATION	Media and press free from government influence, internet free of access.	Media outlets owned by a small number of larger companies.

*<https://www.tes.com/teaching-resource/democracy-in-the-uk-edexcel-a-level-politics-12356679>