



Politics A level

Course plan

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Sample of the A Level Politics Course from Section 1

Topic 2

Representative and direct democracy

Introduction

In this topic we examine what the term 'democracy' means, and why it is so important to our political activity as citizens. In particular, we distinguish between 'direct' democracy and 'representative' democracy and look in some detail at the operation of representative democracy in the UK. Finally, we examine how UK citizens participate in the democratic process and outline the case for reform to improve participation and democracy in general.

The discussion and activities in this topic are also intended to help you engage with academic debates about the nature of politics. In particular, we would like you to think about the interesting and varied ways that people speak and write about 'democracy' – for example, on television, in newspapers, in casual conversation, etc. Such an everyday term has many different connotations, as you probably realise, but what does it actually mean? Bear this question in mind as you work through the topic. Although it may seem an abstract and difficult question, we will try to help you answer it by using familiar language and everyday examples in our discussion.

You will probably need 4 hours to complete this topic.



Objectives

When you have completed this topic you should be able to:

- explain what the term 'democracy' means
- define and explain the advantages and disadvantages of direct democracy and representative democracy
- explain how representative democracy operates and assess whether the UK political system is truly democratic
- analyse the impact of the various forms of political participation in the UK
- outline the case for reform of democratic processes in the UK.



The reading in the textbook for this topic is Chapter 1, **Democracy and participation**.

Study hint

As you go through this topic, remember to look at the activities in the textbook too. If you have the time, tackle some or at least think them through and, if it is helpful to you, write up your responses.

Remember, too, to continue compiling your own glossary of key terms, starting with those highlighted in bold in these course materials.

What do we mean by 'democracy'?

To find the origins of the term 'democracy' we have to go back to ancient Greece and the city state of Athens in the fifth century BCE.

Democracy literally means 'rule by the people'– from the Greek words *demos* (people) and *kratos* (rule or strength). Democracy is the key element of legitimate political activity and can be defined as: 'A political system in which the supreme power lies in a body of citizens.' Democracy offers citizens the opportunity to participate in government, however indirectly, through elections, parliamentary proceedings, demonstrations, public debates, etc. The key political concepts of democracy and participation are therefore closely linked because, in our role as citizens, we have the opportunity to engage and involve ourselves in how we are governed.

Unlike some democracies, e.g. Australia, it isn't compulsory to vote in elections in the UK; consequently, for a variety of reasons, many citizens don't actively participate in the process of elections and

voting. For some commentators and observers, this limited participation is worrying. In the UK election of 2015, for example, about 34 per cent of those eligible to vote did not exercise their right. In 2017, this number fell to just over 30 per cent – an improvement, but for some commentators still not good enough.

Those who do vote are not always happy with the results; such is the diversity of society that governments can never please or satisfy all opinions at all times. There were significant protests, for example, against the 1997–2010 Labour governments over issues such as the Iraq war and countryside issues, with millions of people visibly opposing government policy in high-profile marches. Similarly, there were widespread protests against the increase in student tuition fees introduced by the coalition government that came to power after the 2010 election, linked to disquiet over the decision of the Liberal Democrats under Nick Clegg to govern in partnership with David Cameron’s Conservatives. Such demonstrations highlight the strength of our democratic freedoms, but also expose the limitations we have in ensuring that government policy complies with the hopes and aspirations of citizens.

This is not so surprising in the UK, given that it is the norm for more than half of those who vote to support a party other than that which eventually forms the government. Not since 1935 has a government been supported by over 50 per cent of those voting and that was in the then unique circumstances of a National Government which put up cross-party coalition candidates. Although the Conservatives won both the 2015 and 2017 general elections, their popular support was only 36.8 and 42.3 per cent, respectively.

Progress check

At this point you should feel that you have achieved the following objective for this topic:

- Explain what the term ‘democracy’ means.

Different forms of democracy

What we have in the UK is most commonly referred to as representative democracy. However, there is another form, known as direct democracy, and it is important that you are able to distinguish between the two.

Direct democracy

In a **direct democracy**, which is essentially what the fifth-century BCE Athenians bequeathed to us, the citizens themselves make the key decisions. This is the purest form of democracy, with people giving their opinions and views directly rather than through the medium of a representative. Such a system can only really operate effectively in small, relatively uncomplex societies at regional and local levels, but there are modern examples. Switzerland is the most prominent modern democracy to use elements of direct democracy. This happens in local assemblies known as *landsgemeinden*, which take place once or twice a year in some cantons (Swiss divisions, roughly equating to our counties). In some American states, for example in New England, there is a system of town hall meetings, allowing residents to put their views directly to those in power locally. At a national level, though, such a system is just not practicable, given population sizes and geographical extent.

If possible, watch this short YouTube video (5:54) about direct democracy in Switzerland.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y5W45Va0cPE>

We do have an example of direct democracy in the UK, however – the **referendum**. A referendum is a single vote on a single issue. Since 1973 there have been 11 UK referendums. The most famous of these have been the 1975 vote on Britain's entry to the European Community and the 2016 'Brexit' vote on whether to leave the European Union. Many of the others have been on issues of devolution (i.e. breaking away to a greater or lesser extent from central UK authority), such as the 1973 referendum in Northern Ireland on whether to merge with the Irish Republic and the 2014 referendum in Scotland to decide whether it should remain part of the UK. There was also a referendum in 2011 to decide whether to change the voting system from first-past-the-post to the alternative vote (see Section 2 Topic 1). Although they have become more common, referendums are still used on a very limited scale (see Section 2 Topic 2).

We can also see an element of direct democracy ('deliberative democracy') in citizens' juries and public petitions, which allow people to express opinions on policies or aspects of government. Some political commentators view these as an expression of growing public disenchantment with the modern political process and a wish to be more directly involved. In the UK, petitions to Parliament are almost as old as Parliament itself. A good example is the campaign to end the slave trade and slavery in the late eighteenth–early nineteenth century. Public petitions have become

more popular because of technological developments, notably the e-petition. If an e-petition gets 100 000 supporters, the issue is guaranteed a debate in Parliament. Recent e-petitions have involved the ending of badger culling and the limiting of insurance charges for young drivers. Between 2015 and 2017, 56 such debates took place. Majority views as expressed in a petition do not decide policy though: Parliament – or regional and local representatives – still have the final say.

Representative democracy

There is a tendency to think that the terms ‘representative democracy’ and ‘democracy’ mean the same thing. As you will realise by now, though, democracy is a complex term with several meanings.

A **representative democracy** is a system of government in which a legislature, made up of representatives of the people and with significant decision-making powers, is freely elected and accountable to the people. Thus, the authority of the government derives from the consent of those it governs. The ministers who form the executive are usually elected members of the legislature, who form a government that can command a majority of support from the elected parliament or assembly. When they lose that support, they must resign. This system of government is often referred to as the ‘Westminster system’. It is slightly different in the USA and some other representative democracies, where the President (the executive) is elected separately from Congress (the legislature). About one-third of the world’s population live in countries where the form of government is based on one form or another of representative democracy.

Unlike direct democracy, in a representative democracy the relationship between the government and its citizens is mediated by a small number of elected representatives. It is also based on the principle of majority rule, whereby politicians participate in competitive elections and those who win the most votes are elected into office and exercise power on behalf of the people. A ‘representative’ in this type of democratic system will meet one or other of the following theories:

- The ‘trust’ theory – now more commonly referred to as the trustee model – was expounded by Edmund Burke (an eighteenth-century political commentator). This argues that the elected representative (in the UK, the MP), while having a duty to consult and take into account constituents’ opinions, must ultimately act on the basis of conscience and according to the

national interest. This can be seen as an elitist argument that assumes the representative's superior education and intellect relative to his or her constituents.

- Under the 'delegate' theory, elected representatives are considered to be the agents of, and directly accountable to, their constituents. Generally speaking, the view in Britain is that the MP is not a delegate. However, if an MP antagonises party activists in his or her constituency by acting against their wishes, the activists can make things very difficult for the MP. All political parties have the power to deselect if they wish. After Jeremy Corbyn became Labour Party leader in 2016, the subsequent disquiet among those Labour MPs not happy with his leadership led to some local Corbyn-supporting constituency parties announcing their readiness to deselect their sitting MP if the anti-Corbyn stance was maintained.



Read the section in the textbook headed **Representative democracy**. Living in the UK, you are a citizen of a modern representative democracy. How does this affect your life, and what rights and advantages do you have as a consequence of being a citizen of a democratic state? Which is the better model – the trustee or the delegate model?

Activity 1

(Allow 10 minutes)

Summarise the key features of representative democracy.

Your textbook notes the following features:

- The basic feature is the election of representatives accountable to the public. Government is derived from public opinion and is **accountable** to it. This includes the notion of majority rule.
- Representatives should be broadly representative of society at large in terms of gender, age, ethnicity, religious affiliation, etc.
- A representative is expected to represent the national interest. This may sometimes cause conflict when national and local interests clash (see next point).
- There should be an element of local representation: in the UK this is the constituency; in the USA it is the congressional district. This can imply representing whole district interests or individual interests (**redress of grievance**). This also raises the question as

to whether a representative must go with the majority constituency view if they are not personally in agreement with it.

- Political parties are a feature of modern representative democracies and the vast majority of office-seekers will belong to an established political party. Before elections parties will publish a **manifesto**, i.e. a statement of agreed policies (see Topic 6).
- In addition to their constituency or region, representatives may also represent a group (functional representation); if supported by trade unions, for example, they will pursue the cause of worker groups.
- Representatives may represent ideas such as individual rights and freedoms or environmental protection (causal representation), although this sort of representation is more likely to be carried out by pressure groups (to be looked at in Topic 4).

You might also have considered these features:

- the right to vote for everyone over an agreed minimum age limit
- free, open and regular elections
- the rule of law and political checks and balances, especially between elections
- freedoms of speech, assembly and the press
- an independent judiciary.

The issue of what representative democracy means in the context of modern systems of government is the source of much controversy and debate. Items included in the list above, for example, may be challenged or subject to different interpretations. We will examine some of the more complex issues in due course.



Re-read the topic so far and the textbook section on **Two forms of democracy**, then attempt Activity 2. You will find Table 1.1 and the Debate section in the textbook particularly helpful.

Activity 2

(Allow 10 minutes)

Explain the respective advantages of direct democracy and representative democracy. Is there a compromise available to help democratic states become more democratic?

Direct democracy, as 'the voice of the people', is the purest form of democracy and decisions made in this way will be more authoritative. Direct involvement of the citizens will give decisions greater permanence and will mean participants are better educated on political issues.

Representative democracy is likely to work better, however, because elected representatives will be more used to exercising disinterested judgement and be better informed than the general public. They will better protect minority interests, too, so avoiding the 'tyranny of the majority'. Many people felt, for example, that the issues around the UK's departure from the EU were too many and too complex to be put to a public vote.

Although direct democracy is not feasible in most modern states, a representative democracy can make occasional use of the referendum as an 'add-on' where a key decision affecting all citizens needs to be made.

Progress check

At this point you should feel that you have achieved the following objective for this topic:

- Define and explain the advantages and disadvantages of direct democracy and representative democracy.

Representative democracy in the UK

Representative democracy is a relatively recent phenomenon, originating in Europe and North America in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Its development formed part of the process that sociologists refer to as 'modernisation' which, in the European context, refers to the move from traditional, feudal societies to capitalist, industrial societies.

Traces of representative democracy had emerged in Great Britain (England, Scotland and Wales since an Act of Union in 1707) and the UK (Great Britain and Ireland since an Act of Union in 1801; Great Britain and Northern Ireland since the partition of Ireland in 1922) before that time, however. The republic of the Interregnum (literally 'between reigns') of 1649–60 following the removal and execution of Charles I saw some short-lived experiments in democracy, most closely associated with Oliver Cromwell. The restored monarchy of Charles II conceded some powers to Parliament, which increasingly

became the 'senior partner' in government after the Glorious Revolution of 1688–9 pushed out James II in favour of William III and Mary II. Parliament consolidated its power after the Hanoverian George I came to the throne in 1714 and by the nineteenth century the monarchy had largely nominal authority only. This isn't to say the UK was truly democratic yet. It was only the succession of Reform Acts between 1832 and 1928 (see Topic 3) that produced something approaching true parliamentary democracy based on all adults over 21 having the vote.

With the completion of universal suffrage in 1928, the ballot was firmly established as the legitimate means of choosing and controlling the government. At this point we can say that the UK had 'come of age' as a representative democracy. Elections provided the winning party with the authority and power to govern and pursue specific policies. Governments therefore gain legitimacy from the democratic electoral process. However, it is possible to question the legitimacy of governments that receive a low percentage of public support on a low turnout.

By the twentieth century, the notion of representation based on party government had become a reality. All major parties came to accept universal suffrage, regular elections, freedom of speech, freedom of the press and an elected legislature. Very few independent candidates stand for election nowadays and even fewer get elected. The MP is invariably a party person nearly always voting for his or her party line – with a few notable exceptions.

The democratic deficit

The question arises of how effectively the citizen is represented in the British political system today. Many political commentators draw attention to perceived shortcomings in the UK's political system. This **democratic deficit**, as it is called, is a matter of continuous debate. Some members and supporters of the Labour Party and the Liberal Democrats are especially critical and vociferous in calling for 'improvements'. Particular bugbears are the continuing powers of the unelected House of Lords and the continued use of the first-past-the-post system in UK parliamentary elections (see Section 2 Topic 1).



Read the section in your textbook headed **The nature of representative democracy in the UK**.

Activity 3

(Allow 20 minutes)

Consider the UK's representative democracy. Summarise the different levels of representation and the nature of the representative at each level.

There are variations between the different UK countries but, broadly, from smallest to largest, the levels of representation are:

- parish/town council and, above these, county/district/metropolitan councils – represented by local councillors
- city regions and metropolitan authorities – represented by assembly members (as in London) and city mayors, respectively
- devolved government – members of the Scottish Parliament (MSPs) or Welsh and Northern Irish Assembly members
- national government – constituency MPs.

A further level of representation until Brexit is finalised is the MEP (Member of the European Parliament).

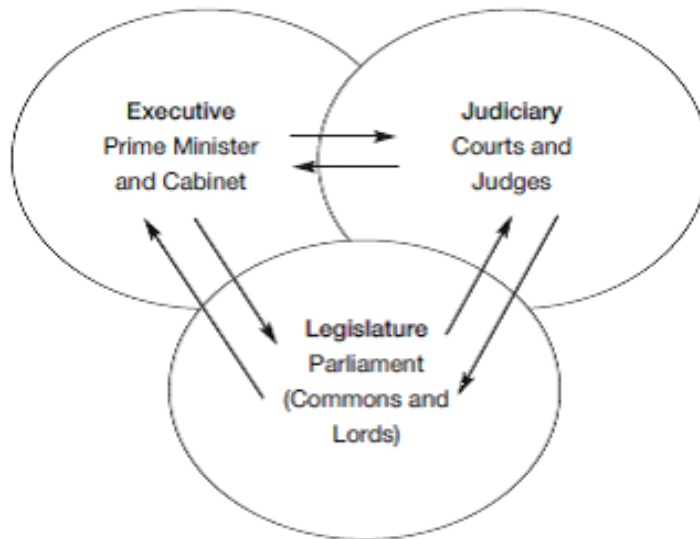
Liberal democracy and parliamentary democracy

The specification for this course focuses on representative and direct democracy and these are the two forms of democracy that you will be examined on. However, you may come across two further terms in your reading so it will be useful to look at these briefly: these are liberal democracy and parliamentary democracy.

- A **liberal democracy** may be either a representative or a direct democracy. You will examine liberalism briefly in Topic 6 and (A level students) in more detail in Part 2 of this course. Liberal values such as respect for the individual citizen's rights, tolerance of minorities, free and fair elections, freedom of speech and condemnation of arbitrary arrest are seen as central to the culture of present-day representative democracy.
- **Parliamentary democracy** is a system of representative democracy. In the UK, because we have a Parliament, the two phrases are synonymous. In our parliamentary democracy, the executive of Prime Minister and Cabinet, supported by advisers and civil servants, is drawn from, and accountable to, an elected parliament. Such a system is well established in many other countries but it contrasts with the American 'presidential system'

of democracy whereby the President is elected in a separate electoral process from Congress and there is a much clearer separation of powers. Unlike the UK, the USA actually has a written constitution which specifically disallows any fusion of the three powers of executive, legislature and judiciary.

Figure 2.1 Key features of UK parliamentary democracy and overlap of powers



To consolidate your knowledge and understanding, read the section in the textbook headed **How democratic is the UK?**

Activity 4

(Allow 20 minutes)

- 1 What criteria are commonly used to define a democratic society?
- 2 What factors mitigate against a claim that the UK is fully democratic?
- 3 In your view, is the UK a democratic society?

- 1 While no society will conform to all of them fully, the following criteria are widely regarded as characteristic of a democratic society:

- the peaceful transition of power after elections
- free elections based on universal suffrage and secret ballots
- fair elections with an equal vote for all adults
- widespread participation in politics

- freedom of expression and information, i.e. a free media with no government censorship
 - freedom of association, i.e. freedom to form parties and pressure groups provided their aims and methods are legal
 - protected rights and liberties
 - the rule of law upheld by an independent judiciary
 - a limit on what governments can do, which may be defined in a written constitution.
- 2 Factors mitigating against full democracy, i.e. indicators of democratic deficit, include the following:
- The FPTP system for electing MPs is held by many to be unfair (Section 2 Topic 1).
 - The House of Lords is influential but unelected.
 - Parliamentary sovereignty (Topic 1) in theory gives government unlimited power. The fact that there is no written constitution means the limits to government power are vague.
 - Prime ministerial power is based on the authority of an unelected monarch.
 - The European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) is not binding on Parliament, which could threaten individual rights. (Note that ECHR is not an EU institution so the UK's commitment to it is unaffected by Brexit.)
 - Freedom of expression and information is arguably less compromised by government (except where national security is at stake) than by the fact that the press is controlled by a handful of large organisations such as News International.
 - Voter turnout at elections and party membership is too low to suggest widespread participation, although there are signs that both are increasing.
- 3 You will have your own view on this, but most would regard the UK as a democratic society. The opportunity for political participation is there for those who choose to exercise it, for example. Curtailment of civil liberties is generally for a specific reason, for example the banning of terrorist or racist organisations. However, reform of both the electoral system and the House of Lords could enhance democracy.

Progress check

At this point you should feel that you have achieved the following objective for this topic:

- Explain how representative democracy operates and assess whether the UK political system is truly democratic.

Self check 1

(Allow 10 minutes)

To check your recall and understanding of democratic systems and the extent to which the UK is democratic, read the following statements and write down whether they are true or false. If false, what is the correct answer?

- 1 Voting is compulsory in Australia.
- 2 Austria is the most prominent modern democracy to use elements of direct democracy in some of its local assemblies (landsgemeinden).
- 3 Since 1973 there have been 11 UK referendums.
- 4 An e-petition gaining 100 000 supporters is guaranteed a debate in Parliament.
- 5 Under the trust theory, elected representatives are considered to be the agents of, and directly accountable to, their constituents.
- 6 Functional representation exists where representatives represent particular ideas such as individual rights and freedoms or environmental protection.
- 7 Completion of universal suffrage in the UK occurred in 1928.
- 8 Westminster MPs are elected using the first-past-the-post system.
- 9 Political parties set out their policy intentions for candidates to follow in a document called the mandate.
- 10 The continuing powers of the unelected House of Lords can be seen as an example of democratic deficit.

You will find feedback to self checks at the end of the section.

Political participation the UK

Democracy, as we have seen, presupposes at least a basic level of participation in the political process. In a representative democracy, elections provide the main means through which citizens can exercise an influence on the government, but participation is not simply a case of voting in elections.

The question of what it actually means to take part in politics is very complex and ultimately ambiguous. We would, for example, assume that activity within a political party or an organisation that regards itself as a pressure group should count as political participation. But what about activity in other organisations, such as sports associations and churches? Although not overtly political, these organisations contribute to setting the context of politics, give their members administrative experience and are capable of overt political action if their interests or principles are threatened.

Evidence of weak participation

Using votes in general elections as the criterion, the degree of popular participation in British politics can be regarded as limited, despite comparing favourably with some other representative democracies (see textbook Figure 1.3.) During the twentieth century, turnout always exceeded 70 per cent. However, general elections since 2001 have been notable for much lower turnouts. The 59 per cent turnout in 2001 was an historical low; since then, there has been a steady increase until, in 2017, 68.7 per cent turned out. It is possible to regard this as a sign of improvement – or as a continuing poor level of participation compared with years gone by. Things look worse, if anything, if we examine other electoral systems within the UK. In the Scottish parliamentary election of 2011 about 50 per cent voted; in the 2014 European Union election, only 34 per cent did so. On the other hand, nearly 85 per cent voted in the referendum on Scottish independence in 2014.

This throws up the question of the legitimacy of elected governments based on limited participation. In 2001, for example, Labour was supported by 40.7 per cent of those who voted. As turnout was only 59.4 per cent, this meant that the Labour government had the backing of just about a quarter of registered voters. In the 2017 election, 42.3 per cent of those who voted backed the Conservatives on a 68.7 per cent turnout. This gave the Conservative government the backing of just under 30 per cent of registered voters – an improvement, but still a concern for those who worry about legitimacy.

If we use political party membership as a yardstick for measuring participation, there have been clear signs of decline, with party membership falling sharply since 1945. In the 1950s, Labour had over a million affiliated members, thanks in part to trade union affiliation, while the Conservatives had approaching three million members. In 1983, only 3.8 per cent of the population were party members. By 2008, this figure had gone down to under one per cent.

There are signs of a revival in party membership. An increase in Labour Party membership followed the introduction of cheap membership fees by Ed Miliband prior to the 2015 election and the excitement created among many young voters by Jeremy Corbyn's emergence as party leader post-election. The pro-EU Liberal Democrats signed up 50 000 new members after the Brexit vote and 12 500 new members in the week after Theresa May called the snap election in 2017. Even so, low party membership remains a problem as it both reduces party funds and keeps the pool of potential candidates small. We will return to this theme later in the course.

Exam hint

Don't worry if you cannot always remember precise figures and statistics like those given in this and other topics. They are not essential to your answer in the exam but you should try to use them in your assignments to illustrate your points more fully. If you do manage to remember them in the exam, that is a bonus! You may find it helpful to construct your own pie charts or some other visual representation of the figures to aid your revision.

Solving the participation crisis

Various solutions to the problem of political apathy – the so-called participation crisis – have been suggested.

- Perhaps a greater section of the population would take a more active part in elections if they were given more encouragement and incentive to take part.
- Democracy is more likely to succeed if people are reasonably well informed on important matters and this might make them more inclined to participate, to some degree, in political activities. Education is key to this; some commentators have noted that the existence of an enlightened educational system and mass media is likely to help people to become literate on political matters and raise the standard of discussions. The better educated, higher socio-economic status groups have

tended to be the most active in political organisations – more likely to vote and more likely to participate in the political system.

- Political inactivity and withdrawal have often been associated with low socio-economic status and with a sense of powerlessness and alienation from the wider community. Voter turnout and political activism generally tend to be lower among more deprived social groups. In the wake of the Brexit vote, there are signs that this is changing. Stoke-on-Trent Central, for example, had the worst turnout in 2015 of 51 per cent; over 57 per cent voted in 2017.
- Some argue that the public and Parliament are often unable to understand certain issues due to secrecy on the part of the executive.



Read the section in your textbook headed **Political participation in the UK**.

Activity 5

(Allow 30 minutes)

- 1 List six kinds of political participation.
- 2 What have been the trends in party activism and voting turnout over the last few years?
- 3 What do the referendum turnouts between 1998 and 2016 tell us about political participation and interest?
- 4 What form of political participation has shown a notable increase?
- 5 What benefits might arise from greater political participation?

- 1 Ways of participating include:
 - standing for public office
 - active party membership
 - passive party membership (i.e. a commitment to the party's cause but probably only expressed at election times)
 - active pressure group membership
 - digital political activity
 - voting.

Which of these do you engage in? Which of these could you engage in?

- 2 Both party activism and voter turnout are in decline overall. Membership of the three main parties fell from 1.7 million (4.1 per cent of the electorate) in 1980 to 0.5 million (1.1 per cent) in 2016 (Figure 1.1). We have discussed the reasons for the increase in Labour Party membership in 2016–7. Membership of both the Scottish Nationalist Party (SNP) and the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) was very healthy around 2014–15 onwards, but UKIP membership has fallen away post-Brexit referendum.

In 2001 there was a marked drop in turnout from percentages consistently in the 70s to under 60 per cent (Figure 1.2). Since then there has been a steady recovery, but turnout still lags behind the figures for the end of the twentieth century.

- 3 The figures suggest volatility, depending on the importance voters attach to the issue in question. The two most important referendums (arguably) – on Scottish independence and Brexit – saw high turnouts.
- 4 Digital democracy or e-democracy – tweeting, blogging, e-petitions, etc. – is a fast-growing way to participate and one that is likely to appeal to young people.
- 5 You might have noted down some of the following ideas:
- Some theorists claim that greater participation produces better decisions because it means that the decision-makers are better informed about the circumstances and desires of the electorate. However, better decisions are not an inevitable outcome: high levels of participation may be self-defeating, producing slow and poor-quality decisions.
 - Participation is valuable in educating people, enhancing both the meaning of their lives and the value of their relationship with other citizens. It may also contribute to a more vibrant and self-confident society.
 - Participation is important in protecting the rights of the individual and ensuring that government remains accountable, and serves the interests of the people; in short, it is a safeguard of democracy.

Activity 6

(Allow 10 minutes)

What signs are there that political participation is becoming more widespread in the UK?

You may have noted down some of the following:

- The last four general elections have seen a steady rise in turnout, suggesting greater political engagement from the public. Given the population increase in the last few years, more people than ever before have been voting.
- The Scottish independence and Brexit referendums show that, where there is an issue that people care about, people will vote.
- Nine parties are now represented at Westminster, with many more having support even if they have no MPs.
- Although UKIP's fortunes appeared to be in decline following the decision to leave the EU, the support given to it locally and nationally, and the involvement of people in UKIP in the years prior to the referendum, demonstrates the readiness of the public to engage in political activity where they feel strongly about a particular issue.
- Initiatives such as cheaper membership may well set a trend for making joining parties easier.
- Digital democracy is making it easier for people, especially younger people, to participate.

Interestingly, some writers have expressed doubts about the value of participation. They see public apathy as indicating contentment with the way the country is run and associate high levels of politicisation with unstable societies with fundamental problems, like the Weimar Republic in Germany between 1919 and 1933, which culminated in the rise of Hitler and the Nazis.

Progress check

At this point you should feel that you have achieved the following objective for this topic:

- Analyse the impact of the various forms of political participation in the UK.

The case for reform

Despite the points made by optimists, there are still valid criticisms that can be made about UK democracy. As well as the need to address low levels of participation, we can point to the perceived distance and lack of accountability of our politicians and to the lack of fair representation for women and ethnic minority groups.

An unfair electoral system?

Reform of the electoral system remains an option for enhancing democracy and we will look at the options in more detail later in Section 2 Topic 1. In the wake of the historically low turnout in 2001, the Power Inquiry was established in 2004 to investigate how political participation and involvement might be improved in the UK. Its 2006 report, *Power to the People*, made 30 recommendations for 'rescuing' democracy. Because its recommendations are so central to ongoing campaigns for reform, it's worth looking at some of them. Among its recommendations were the following:

- Seventy per cent of the members of the House of Lords should be elected by a 'responsive electoral system' – and not on a closed party list system – for three parliamentary terms. Candidates should be at least 40 years of age. (In 2012, Liberal Democrat proposals to reform the House of Lords had to be abandoned due to lack of support from their Conservative coalition partners.)
- There should be an unambiguous process of decentralisation of powers from central to local government.
- A concordat should be drawn up between central and local government setting out their respective powers.
- Local government should have enhanced powers to raise taxes and administer its own finances.
- A responsive electoral system – which offers voters a greater choice and diversity of parties and candidates – should be introduced for elections to the House of Commons, House of Lords and local councils in England and Wales to replace the first-past-the-post system.
- The Electoral Commission should take a more active role in promoting candidacy so that more women, people from black and minority ethnic communities, people on lower incomes, young people and independents are encouraged to stand.
- The voting and candidacy age should be reduced to 16 (with the exception of candidacy for the House of Lords).

- Automatic, individual voter registration at age 16 should be introduced.
- Donations from individuals to parties should be capped at £10 000, and organisational donations capped at £100 per member, subject to full democratic scrutiny within the organisation.
- All public bodies should be required to meet a duty of public involvement in their decision- and policy-making processes.
- Citizens should be given the right to initiate legislative processes, public inquiries and hearings into public bodies and their senior management.
- Ministerial meetings with campaign groups and their representatives should be logged and listed on a monthly basis.
- 'Democracy hubs' should be established in each local authority area. These would be resource centres based in the community where people can access information and advice to navigate their way through the democratic system.

The campaign Power 2010 was an attempt to keep these issues at the forefront of the national political debate. It particularly emphasised the need for some form of proportional representation (PR) and House of Lords reform and came out in favour of the implementation of a written constitution for the UK.

An elitist Parliament and government?

The image of politicians as a middle-class, university-educated, male elite remains. Is this a fair assessment?

- After the 2017 election almost a third of the House of Commons and half of the House of Lords were privately educated. This was seen as a symbolic reflection of the disengagement between politicians and society at large, as only 7 per cent of the population are privately educated. At 30 per cent, Theresa May's new Cabinet in 2017 had the lowest number of privately educated ministers since 1945, but there were still multi-millionaires sitting round the Cabinet table.
- Following the 2017 general election, there were 208 women MPs, 32 per cent of the total (putting the UK at 46th in the world list). Labour had the highest proportion with 119 female MPs, 45 per cent of their total. Next highest was the SNP with 34 per cent of its MPs women. The Conservatives had 21 per cent. About a quarter of Theresa May's Cabinet were women. In the House of Lords 210 out of 804 peers (26 per cent) were women.

- After the 2017 election, 51 MPs, 8 per cent of the total, and 6 per cent of peers, were non-white. Whilst this represents an improvement on figures after previous elections – there were only 12 non-white MPs in 2001 for example – it remains a significant under-representation for ethnic minority groups in a society where 13.6 per cent of people are non-white.

The challenging task for politicians seeking to reinvigorate British democracy and encourage wider political participation is to adapt politics to reflect British society in the twenty-first century. Tony Blair, between 1997 and 2007, and David Cameron, after 2005, both tried to modernise their parties in order to engage more fully with a changing British society, but how well is this working?

Activity 7

(Allow 30 minutes)

Read the two passages which follow. These come from the *Guardian* and the *Independent*, respectively. How representative is the House of Commons they describe? Use your own knowledge to expand your explanation if you wish.

You will see that the first relates to the aftermath of the May 2015 election, while the second relates to the June 2017 election. As both sources look at MPs' educational backgrounds and the numbers of women and minority ethnic MPs, you have an opportunity not only to assess the general picture but also to see whether there was a marked change between the two elections.

Exam hint

As well as helping you to consolidate your knowledge, this activity will help you get some experience in analysing sources, something you will be required to do in Paper 1.

Source 1 How representative are our MPs now?

A profile of parliament by the Smith Institute, entitled *Who Governs Britain?* finds a stubborn tendency for MPs to be 'male, pale and stale', as the saying goes. The average MP is still a man, aged 51 (as has been the case since 1992), and, somewhat predictably, is most likely to have previously worked in politics.

A third of MPs went to fee-paying private schools (compared with the national average of about 7%). Among Conservatives, 52% attended private schools,

while that figure comes down to 12% among Labour MPs. Those results are similar to those of 2010.

A quarter of MPs also have an occupational background in politics, highlighting the growing professionalisation of politics, a trend that many suggest has left MPs isolated from the priorities of the wider electorate. The general background of MPs continues to be ever more biased toward business and the 'metropolitan professions', particularly finance, law, public affairs and politics. Indeed, only 3% had a background in manual work before being elected, as compared with 11% from public relations and 10% from the media. However, there are major disparities between the parties. Only 4% of Labour MPs have at some point worked in finance, as compared with 25% for the Conservatives. An alternative trend emerges among those who have come from the public and voluntary sector, which is dominated by Labour MPs. As might be expected, most of those who previously had blue-collar and trade union occupations represent Labour.

There is, however, some hope that things are changing. It was a good night all round for ethnic minority MPs on Thursday, with 41 entering parliament, up from 27 in 2010. Of the 2010 intake, 25 retained their seats and were joined by 16 newcomers (eight for Labour, seven for the Tories, and one with the SNP).

And the gender balance is improving, albeit slowly. In 1987 women made up 6% of MPs. The proportion shot up as a consequence of Labour's 1997 landslide, when Tony Blair's party increased its number of female MPs (cringingly called the 'Blair Babes') by 173%. On the back of such momentum, the proportion of females elected in 2010 was 22% and on Thursday it increased to 29%. Labour is ahead on this with 41%, followed by the SNP with 36%, and then the Conservatives with only one in five. The Liberal Democrats no longer have a single woman representative among their eight remaining MPs.

<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2015/may/10/who-are-the-new-mps-middle-aged-white-men-again>

Source 2

The number of state-educated MPs sitting in the House of Commons has risen to a record high, new data has revealed. MPs educated at comprehensive schools now make up 51 per cent of the Commons – the highest number since Sutton Trust began recording figures. The report by the social mobility think-tank found 29 per cent of MPs in 2017's Parliament were privately educated, while 18 per cent attended grammar schools. While the figures reveal undeniable progress in equal opportunities, the report also found one in ten MPs had attended Eton, one of the UK's most exclusive public schools. Conservative MPs were disproportionately privately educated, with 45 per cent attending private schools, compared to 14 per cent of their Labour counterparts. The data found 86 per cent of MPs to be university graduates, with 23 per cent attending Oxford or Cambridge.

"This report shows that educational background is still a strong determinant of opportunity to become an MP," the authors wrote. "With independent and grammar schools still disproportionately attended by the better off, there is still a long way to go until there are truly equal opportunities in society."

However, Parliament now has more black and minority ethnic (BAME) MPs than ever before. Ten new MPs from non-white backgrounds were elected in Theresa May's snap election, taking the total from 41 to 51 sitting in the

Commons. While this is still only around one in 13 MPs, it means the Commons is now more diverse than in any previous Parliament.

The new Parliament will also have a record number of women – up to 208 from 191 in the last Parliament, but still only 32 per cent of the total. Four of the new female MPs are black women – a group that has traditionally been hugely underrepresented in Parliament.

www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/election-2017-mps-more-than-half-comprehensive-schools-state-education-labour-tory-study-a7783571.html

Source 1 tells us that, very much as in 2010, in 2015 a third of MPs overall and just over half of Conservatives had been to fee-paying private schools. Source 2 tells us that by 2017 there had been a slight fall to 29 per cent now being privately educated. With one in ten MPs having attended Eton and still 45 per cent of Conservative MPs privately educated, the evidence of change is still not great. This is all against a national figure of 7 per cent educated privately. In 2017, for the first time, more than half of MPs (51 per cent) were educated in comprehensive schools. Despite this, the overall picture is that strong elements of elitism persist. As the report of the Sutton Trust think tank, the basis of the articles, says: 'With independent and grammar schools still disproportionately attended by the better off, there is still a long way to go until there are truly equal opportunities in society.'

The sources also tell us about the growing numbers of women and ethnic minority MPs. The trend towards higher proportions of women entering Parliament in 2015 continued in 2017. Source 1 tells us of a rise in women MPs from 6 per cent in 1987 to 29 per cent in 2015. Source 2 shows that the increase continued in 2017, when 32 per cent of MPs, 208 in total, were women. Labour had about twice as many women MPs as the Conservatives.

There is also a slow rise in the number of non-white MPs. Source 1 tells us that non-white MPs increased in number from 27 in 2010 to 41 in 2015, increasing again to 51 in 2017 (Source 2). This is still only one in 13 MPs though, representing 8 per cent of the total of 650. As 13.6 per cent of the population are non-white, people from ethnic minority backgrounds, like women, are still underrepresented. Four of the new female MPs are black.

Source 1 gives us information about MPs' occupational backgrounds in 2015. The evidence suggests that politics is becoming more professional, with a quarter of MPs having a political background. Public relations and the media account for a fifth of MPs between them. Business, finance, law and public affairs make up much of the balance. Only 3 per cent had a background in manual work, with most of those from blue-collar and trade union occupations being in the Labour ranks. Labour also had a number

of MPs coming from the voluntary and public sectors. Despite some exceptions, this all adds up to what many see as MPs being isolated from the priorities of the wider electorate.

Reforming the UK system

So what are the possibilities for re-engaging the public with the political system?

Electoral reform

Governments have not been totally averse to change; for example, fixed-term parliaments with a life of five years were introduced in 2010 to prevent mid-term speculation and uncertainty.

Pressure to change the voting system for the UK Parliament remains. As you will see in Section 2 Topic 1, the current first-past-the-post system is said to deter people from voting when the outcome of an election in many constituencies appears to be a formality. In an attempt to engage and encourage more people to vote and participate, Labour introduced the Additional Member System (AMS) of voting, a hybrid of first-past-the-post and a form of PR, in the devolved Scottish and Welsh assemblies and the Greater London Assembly. An attempt by the coalition government to introduce a new electoral system, the Alternative Vote, for parliamentary elections was rejected in the 2011 referendum. As you will see in Section 2 Topic 1, there were a number of reasons for this: the complexity of the system, the unpopularity of the Lib Dems who proposed it and a poorly-run pro-reform campaign.

There is also an argument for change to the traditional structure of British elections which, by convention, are always held on a Thursday, with people voting in established polling stations. Reformers argue that elections could be held at weekends, possibly over several days.

Compulsory voting

Voting is compulsory voting in about 30 countries across the world, including Australia and Belgium where turnout in elections is consequently in the region of 90 per cent. (In Australia in 2001 the turnout was 94.9 per cent.) People who do not vote receive a small fine. Some pressure groups and think tanks such as the Institute for Public Policy Research support such measures. However, a MORI poll for the Electoral Commission in 2001 found the public

undecided on the issue, with 49 per cent against the measure and 47 per cent in favour.

All-out postal voting

In recent years, government legislation has made it easier to obtain a postal vote. In 2017, nearly 20 per cent of voters used this method. However, concerns remain about election fraud increasing as a result of this change, and there have been a number of criminal cases at local government level that have seen candidates for political office charged with electoral fraud.

Electronic voting

Voting using email, the internet, text messaging and other forms of technologies have been trialled at various local elections in recent years. Such voting methods are commonly used for popular television shows where participation and turnout is often impressive. However, the Electoral Commission is yet to be convinced that the use of such new technology will not be prone to fraud and error.

Voting at 16

There has been much debate in recent years about lowering the voting age from 18 to 16. Many argue that if you can fight for your country and pay taxes at 16, then you should be able to vote for who sends you to war or asks for those taxes.

Although the UK Conservative Party has been opposed to votes at 16, many political commentators think that change will only be a matter of time. All the other major parties support the proposal, as does the leader of the Scottish Conservative Party, Ruth Davidson. The Scottish Parliament allowed voting at 16 for the independence referendum of 2014 and this proved very successful in terms of engaging younger people: 75 per cent of 16- and 17-year-olds voted. The following year the lower age limit was approved for all Scottish local and regional elections. However, an attempt to lower the voting age for the 2016 Brexit referendum was rejected.

The extension of the right to vote has wide-ranging support (see Topic 3). The Reform Society pressure group, for example, argues that 'If young people are registered early and get into the habit of voting, we will see lasting improvements in turnout. If they vote early in life, they keep voting in later life.' Opponents of Brexit have ruefully argued that the decision to leave would not have been taken had this change been made, given the higher level of support for membership of the EU among young people.

All-women/all-BME shortlists

The use of all-women shortlists in many safe Labour seats has contributed to the significant increase in the number of women MPs elected for the party since the 1997 election (when the 101 'Blair's Babes' were elected). There has always been controversy over the practice but the Equality Act 2010 exempted it from being deemed discriminatory. The Liberal Democrats have also used all-women shortlists on occasion. However, despite David Cameron winning a debate prior to the 2010 election to allow him to push for 'A-Lists' of preferred candidates which would include women, in 2016 the party chairman argued against, saying that shortlists create resentment and narrow choice.

All-women shortlists have always had fierce opponents, especially in the Conservative Party and often among women. Many believe they demean and insult women's abilities, arguing that women can be elected in large numbers based solely on their abilities. Conservative MP Ann Widdecombe once condemned 'Blair's Babes' as 'sub-standard by virtue of the favourable method of their selection'.

Recently, black and minority ethnic (BME) groups, including the pressure group Operation Black Vote, have called for all-BME shortlists, especially in areas with large BME populations, to improve turnout.

Activity 8

(Allow 10 minutes)

Should voting be compulsory? Create a table and list the arguments for and against compulsory voting before you come to your conclusion.

You will have your own view on this, but arguably it is beneficial for as many people as possible to participate and engage within the political system via elections. Any government elected on this basis can claim a very strong mandate to govern. Society is arguably stronger and less prone to be aggrieved with decisions taken by government. However, many would argue that it is a civil liberty and legitimate choice not to vote, just as it is a legitimate right to vote. Even in countries where voting is compulsory, significant numbers still refuse to participate and are willing to pay any subsequent fine.

Progress check

At this point you should feel that you have achieved the following objective for this topic:

- Outline the case for reform of democratic processes in the UK.

Self check 2

(Allow 20 minutes)

To check your recall and understanding of aspects of UK democracy answer the following questions.

Did you notice?

- 1 Low election turnout and declining party membership are two examples of what?
- 2 Give some examples of the use of digital democracy.
- 3 Which 2006 report argued for, amongst other things, elections for the House of Lords and a reduction in the voting age to 16?
- 4 After the 2017 election, roughly what percentage of MPs were:
 - (a) women?
 - (b) non-white?
 - (c) educated in comprehensive schools?
- 5 Which referendum had the highest ever turnout for a UK referendum, at 84.6 per cent?

Can you explain?

- 1 To what extent can we speak of democracy in crisis when we use political participation through voting as our yardstick?
- 2 To what extent can Parliament be described as elitist and not representative of the public at large?

You will find feedback to self checks at the end of the section.

Summary

In this topic we have looked at the nature of democracy and considered in detail the theory and principles behind representative democracy, which is the form of political system that

exists in the UK today. We have compared representative democracy with systems of direct democracy, such as referendums, which are another means through which the electorate may participate in the decision-making process. We have also looked at the importance of political participation, and at possible political innovations and approaches that could enhance the UK's democratic system.

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What next?

We hope this sample has helped you to decide whether this course is right for you.

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