

UK Politics summer work

Pre-reading 1 – What are the key principles of a representative democracy?

What is democracy?

In 1947, in the House of Commons, Winston Churchill quoted the famous saying 'that democracy is the worst form of Government except for all those other forms'. Although his support for democracy might seem somewhat qualified, Churchill understood that the way in which democracy roots power in the people makes it the best form of government available. This is because the people hold their government accountable for what it does on their behalf and so choose the politicians whom they want to represent them. In autocratic forms of government, power is permanently vested in one individual or group, giving them ultimate power over their people.

The beginning of the UK's progression towards full democracy can be traced as far back as Magna Carta (1215) and possibly even to the Anglo-Saxon witan, giving the UK a good claim to have the longest history of democratic development in the world. In the USA, at the height of the American Civil War in 1863, President Abraham Lincoln (1861-65) in his Gettysburg Address established the principle of democratic government as 'government of the people, by the people, for the people'.

Through time, what became known as *liberal democracy* was accepted to have several key features:

- **The existence of a constitution in some form-** A constitution is a set of rules that outlines how a system of government runs. Most constitutions are codified, meaning they are largely written down in a single document. However, others, like Britain's, are uncoded and made up from a number of different sources.

- **The importance of the rule of law-** The rule of law is a complex idea, but at its most basic level it means a society in which everyone is treated equally and is subject to the established rules of the state
- **The existence of political parties and acceptance of plurality-** Political parties did not emerge by design in most liberal democracies. However, political parties have emerged as a way to represent the variety of groups and issues that can be found in a state. The acceptance of a variety of views is known as plurality.
- **The expectation of the protection of rights-** All liberal democracies place a value on civil liberties and the rights of citizens. Some of these ideas had long pre-dated democracy. Most famously, the Magna Carta (1215) established the right of Habeas Corpus – the right not to be detained without a lawful reason. Over time, civil liberties developed into a conception of universal human rights that need to be protected everywhere. In 1998 the Human Rights Act codified human rights into British law.
- **Universal or comprehensive suffrage and free and fair elections-** Universal suffrage was achieved in Britain in 1928 with the Representation of the Peoples Act. The concept of universal suffrage (that every adult can vote) is now central to liberal democracy. The notion that elections should be free and fair, are essential to liberal democracy.
- **Freedom of the Press and Freedom of Expression-** Freedom of expression is central to liberal democracies. This right applies to criticism of the government and is a key difference between liberal democracies and totalitarian regimes.
- **Limited Government-** The notion that the government should be limited is central to liberal democracy. This is achieved in many ways, for instance through the imposition of separation of powers and checks and balances. In Britain, it is fundamentally

achieved by the fact that the government only retains its position with the support of Parliament and can be removed at any time through a 'motion of no confidence'.

Without these, a state which may consider itself, or claim to be, a liberal democracy may instead be described as an illiberal democracy.

Feature	Britain (Liberal)	Russia (Illiberal)
Power of the Head of Government	Britain is a parliamentary democracy with clear limits on the Prime Minister. A government can be bought down by a simple majority in Parliament through a motion of no confidence.	Vladimir Putin has been in effective control of Russia for 22 years and has overseen alterations to the constitution that will allow him to stay in power.
Freedom of Elections	Britain has elections monitored and adjudicated by an independent Electoral Commission.	Russian elections are regularly marred by accusations of fraud and international observers have been prevented from monitoring elections.
Freedom of the Press	Britain has a free press which is able to be critical of the government.	State media is dominant in Russia and journalists critical of the Putin regime have been targeted by the government.
Respect for Rights	Britain has a long history of protecting the rights of minority groups in society.	Russia has a reputation for attacking the rights of minority groups. For example, a 2022 Federal Law saw homosexual 'propaganda' banned.

Representative democracy is the most common model to be found in the democratic world today. The basis of this type of democracy is that the people do not make political decisions, but, instead, choose representatives to make decisions on their behalf. The most common way of choosing representatives is to elect them. Indeed, if representatives are not elected, it calls democracy into question. Elections are, in other words, what we first think of when we

consider representation. However, it is not only elections that characterise representative democracy. Those elected also need to be accountable.

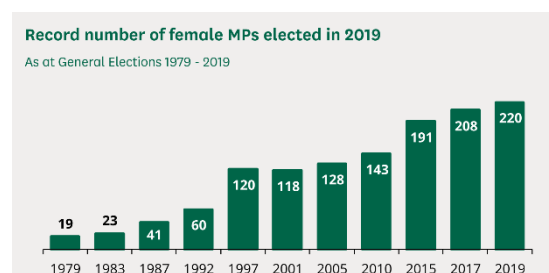
Accountability is essential if representatives are to act responsibly and in the interests of the people. It is at election time that accountability is most striking. Both individual representatives, such as MPs in the UK, and the government as a whole are held accountable when the people go to the polls. During the election campaign, opposition parties will highlight the shortcomings of the government and will offer their own alternatives. At the same time, the government will seek to explain and justify what it has done in an effort to be re-elected. Similarly, individual representatives will be held to account for their performance - how well they have represented their constituents and whether their voting record in the legislature meets the approval of those same constituents. In between elections, accountability is less certain. The legislature can hold government to account regularly, but the individual representatives are normally safe until the next election. Having said that representatives in a democracy will be elected and will be accountable.

Task – Using the above information, answer the following.

1. What is the basis of a representative democracy?
2. What are the key features of a liberal democracy?
3. Can you foresee any problems with a representative democracy?

Task – As you read the role of the representative, annotate the diagram on p.19. Consider the different types of representation an MP faces.

Social representation – This implies that the characteristics of members of representative bodies, whether they be national parliaments, regional assemblies or local councils, should be broadly in line with the characteristics of the population as a whole. For example, close to half



should be women, a proportion should be drawn from ethnic or religious minorities and there should be a good range of ages and class backgrounds in representative bodies. This is difficult to achieve, however.

Representing the national interest- Though representatives may be elected locally or regionally, if they sit in the national Parliament they are expected to represent the interests of the nation as a whole. Sometimes this may clash with the local constituency they represent, so they have to resolve the issue in their own way. For example, an MP representing a constituency near a major airport may be under pressure to oppose further expansion on the grounds of noise and pollution, but may see it as in the national interest to expand that airport. Fortunately, not all issues concerning the national interest cause such a dilemma. For example, foreign policy does not usually have a local effect.

Constituency representation – The locality that elects a representative in UK national politics is known as a constituency. Wherever these kinds of representation exists, though, it concerns local interests.

- Representing the interests of the constituency as a whole. How can funds be extracted from central government for the redevelopment of a town centre?
- Representing the interests of individual constituents. This is often described as the *redress of grievances*. Has a constituent been unfairly treated by a public body such as the NHS or the taxation authorities?
- A representative listen to the views of his or her constituents when deciding about a national issue. This can lead to another dilemma. What happens if the elected representative does not personally agree with the majority of the constituents? This

becomes a matter of conscience that has to be resolved by the individual concerned.

This occurred during the EU referendum.

Party representation – All modern democracies are characterised by the existence of political parties. Furthermore, the vast majority of those seeking and winning elections are members of a political party. It is unusual in modern democracies to find many examples of independent representatives



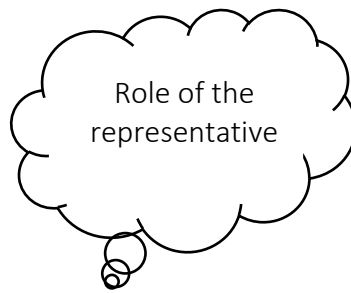
who do not belong to a party. Parties have stated policies. At election time, these are contained in a manifesto. It follows that members of a party who are seeking to be elected will campaign on the basis of the party's manifesto. This means that they are representing their party and the voters understand that they are.

Function representation – This refers to the fact that some elected representatives will represent not only their constituency or region, but also a particular occupational or social group. For example, those who support and are supported by trade unions will often pursue the cause of groups of workers; others may represent professions such as doctors or teachers. This function can also apply to social groups such as the elderly, those with disabilities, members of the LGBT community or low-income groups.

Casual representation – Here representative bodies are not representing people so much as ideas, principles and causes. In a sense this represents the whole community, in that the beliefs and demands involved are claimed to



benefit everyone, not just a particular group in society. Typical causes concern environmental protection, individual rights and freedoms, greater equality and animal rights.



What are the different levels of representation in the UK?



Parish or town councils - The lowest level of government. Only a minority (about 20%) of people come within the jurisdiction of a town council. They deal with local issues such as parks and gardens, parking restrictions, public amenities and small planning issues.



Local councils – These may be county councils, district councils or metropolitan councils, depending on the area. They deal with local services such as education, public transport, roads, social services and public health.



Metropolitan authorities – This is big city government such as in London or Manchester. These bodies deal with strategic city issues such as policing, public transport, arts funding, environment, large planning issues and emergency services. They normally have an elected mayor and strategic authority.



Devolved government – The governments of Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. They have varying powers, but all deal with health, social services, education, policing and transport. All three have elected representative assemblies (Parliament in Scotland).



National government – This is the jurisdiction of the UK Parliament at Westminster and the UK government.

We can see that all citizens of the UK are represented at three levels at least of representation.

It is also clear that representation has become increasingly decentralised with the advent of devolution and the delegating of increasing powers to city administrations.

There are many different forms of representation that flourish in the UK.

- **Constituencies** – It is a cornerstone and an acknowledged strength of representative democracy in the UK that every elected representative should have a constituency to which they are accountable and whose interests they should pursue. Individuals in the constituency should have their grievances considered, that the interests of the whole constituency should be given a hearing in a representative assembly and that the elected representative is regularly made accountable to their constituency.
- **Parties** – The UK is unusual in the parties play a much more central role in representation than in most other democracies. Parties are at the centre of representation in the UK. Their role is connected to the doctrine of mandate and manifesto.
- **Mandate and manifesto** – Successful representation in the UK depends on this doctrine. This principle is this – each party produces a manifesto in the run-up to the general election. This statement of policy intentions is followed by the party's candidates. If that party wins power, it is said to have a mandate to carry out all the policies contained in the manifesto.
- **Government representation** – The people as a whole are also represented by the elected government. It is a mark of a true democracy that the winning party or parties should govern on behalf of the whole community and not just those sections of society that typically support it.
- **Pressure groups** – Behave like political parties in that they have formal membership and clear supporting groups, but some also just have casual representation. Pressure groups represent us in various ways. Whatever we believe, whatever we do and

whatever our occupation, there is a pressure group working in our interests. It is all part of a pluralist democracy and a healthy civil society.

Task – Using the above information, answer the following questions.

1. What do you believe is the most important level of representation? Explain your answer.

2. What are the advantages and disadvantages of having so many different layers of representation within the UK?

3. Overall, what do you feel are the key strengths and weaknesses of the principles of a representative democracy?

4.

Summer work – UK Government – How did the UK political system evolve?

Read the following text and answer the questions throughout.

Magna Carta, 1215

Though Magna Carta is an ancient document it was an important landmark in the development of the political culture and constitution of the UK. This was the establishment of the rule of law – in particular, the principle that the monarch (the government in modern



times) cannot act above the law. Though often abused in the centuries since 1215, the rule of law still persists as a cornerstone of UK democracy.

The Glorious Revolution and the Bill of Rights, 1688-89



In 1688 the unpopular Catholic king, James II, was removed from the English throne. He was replaced by the Dutch Protestant prince, William of Orange, and his wife Mary. It was known as the ‘Glorious Revolution’ though it was largely peaceful. Part of the

price to be paid by William and Mary for the throne was a number of restrictions on their power. These were contained in the Bill of Rights in 1689.

Five terms of the bill, which was an Act of Parliament, were especially important:

- that the king would rule alongside a *permanent* Parliament
- that Parliament would be the result of *regular, free elections*
- that members of Parliament would enjoy *freedom of speech*
- that the monarch would require the *consent* of Parliament to levy taxes
- that the monarch would *not* have the power to repeal or set aside any laws without the *consent* of Parliament

As well as establishing parliamentary government and constitutional monarchy, the Bill of Rights was the main practical result of the political ideas of the great English philosopher and early liberal thinker, John Locke (1632-1704).

The events surrounding the Glorious Revolution also saw the early development of the traditional two-party system in England. The supporters of monarchical power were described as Tories, while the Protestant supporters of parliamentary power were called Whigs. Most Tories were members of the aristocracy and landed gentry while the Whigs tended to be members of the new capitalist middle classes. By the nineteenth century most Tories formed the Conservative Party, while most Whigs turned into Liberals.

It is also noteworthy that several of the principles established in the English Bill of Rights were replicated in the American Constitution, written a century later. In particular, two clauses were almost exactly reproduced in the early amendments to the US Constitution in 1791, both of which remain controversial to this day. These are the *right of the people to bear arms* (second amendment), and the protection of the people from *cruel and unusual punishment* (eighth amendment). The English Bill of Rights of 1689 can be seen as a precursor of the US Constitution of 1787.

The Great Reform Act 1832

It is fair to say that, in the early eighteenth century, general elections in the United Kingdom ranged from being irregular at best to corrupt at worst. Constituencies varied in size, with some so small – just a handful of registered voters (mainly wealthy property owners) – that it was a simple task for a wealthy candidate to buy enough votes to win. These were often described as ‘rotten boroughs’. Many of the small rural seats were effectively in the hands of wealthy members of the aristocracy, who controlled the voters. The rural parts of the country were over-represented, while urban, newly industrialised parts still had few constituencies. In short, representation in Britain was corrupt and uneven.



This had the effect of bringing the House of Commons into disrepute. Far from representing the people, the Commons was full of wealthy members of the upper and middle classes, many of whom saw being an MP as a useful status symbol rather than

as a civic duty. Real power lay in the hands of the monarch, his or her courtiers, plus a few wealthy members of what was known as the 'governing class'. Many MPs rarely attended the chamber and few were concerned with the interests of their constituents. Britain was a parliamentary democracy effectively in name only.

Following a long campaign, mostly fought by the Whigs, a bill was finally brought before Parliament in 1832 to try to eliminate these problems. After fierce debate it was passed. Among its many clauses, two stand out:

- The franchise (right to vote) was extended. There was a qualification to voting which involved ownership and tenancy of property. This restricted the electorate to about 500,000. The Act reduced the property qualification to allow a further 3% of the population to vote. This may not seem radical, but it did begin the process of widening the right to vote (known as suffrage). Once the principle was established, it was inevitable that, before the end of the century, all adult men would have the right to vote.
- The Act redrew the electoral boundaries so that the rotten, or very small, boroughs were removed and parts of the country which were previously under-represented (mostly industrialised areas) were awarded new constituencies. This meant that few parliamentary seats could now be 'bought' and there was more even representation of the people.

The development of the two-party system

Despite the move to a two-party system beginning with the Glorious Revolution, it was not until the nineteenth century that anything like the modern two-party system arrived.

During the second half of the century, the Conservative Party emerged. Many historians count Sir Robert Peel as founder of the party. He was prime minister in both the 1830s and 1840s. This party tended to represent the interests of the wealthier 'gentrified' classes and stood for good order, the preservation of traditional institutions and values, and opposition to the new radical ideas being promoted by liberals and socialists. Though the Conservatives (still often described as 'Tories') were usually members of the wealthy classes, they claimed to represent the interests of the mass of the working people against the evils of the growing capitalist system.

The Liberal Party was largely formed from politicians described as Whigs and other radical thinkers. The date of its founding is a little vague but is generally put at 1859. Its first leader was Lord Henry Palmerston, who was prime minister twice between 1855 and 1865. Liberals were mainly made up of members of the fast-rising middle classes. They represented small independent farmers, merchants, tradesmen, industrialists and the professions. They campaigned to extend democracy, to preserve free markets and free trade, and to pursue the interests of small property owners and the business classes in general.

The two-party system that emerged in the nineteenth century reflected the division of society into two ruling classes – the upper classes and the middle classes. At that time, the working classes, though numerically superior to the other classes, were not represented by a political party of their own. In the nineteenth century there was no sizeable socialist party in the UK. The principal reason was, of course, that the working classes did not have the right to vote for most of the century. They had no property and so were excluded from the franchise. Property-less male members of the working class had to wait until 1884 for the right to take part in elections.

The electoral system

The electoral system was a second factor in the formation and retention of a two-party system. The first-past-the-post system makes it difficult for smaller parties to establish themselves, so the Conservatives and Liberals were able to dominate general elections until the emergence of the Labour Party in the early twentieth century.

The early Labour Party was led by a charismatic figure, Keir Hardie. As the party developed and began to gain parliamentary seats in the early years of the twentieth century, it found it difficult to make headway because the electoral system discriminated against it. The party just two seats in 1900 and this had increased only to 42 by 1920. In 1922, however, when it won 142 seats, the Labour Party finally demonstrated that it was about to replace the Liberals.

It had taken time for the newly enfranchised working classes to realise their interest lay in voting for Labour rather than one of the two established parties. When they did, in the 1920s and 1930s, the Liberal Party was doomed to decline. Instead of a three-

party system developing, as was occurring in the rest of the European democracies, the Liberals were largely replaced by Labour so a new two-party system arrived to replace the old one.

Two reasons are usually suggested for this. One is the electoral system, while the other is the division of British society in the twentieth century into two distinct and cohesive classes, middle and working, each represented by its own political party.

The creation of the welfare state, 1940s

In the 1940s, at the end of the Second World War, the Labour government that won the 1945 general election set out to create a system of state-run, publicly-financed welfare that was so extensive it became known as the welfare state.



The welfare state was a comprehensive system, to be financed from taxation and run by the state, both central and local government, covering people's needs 'from the cradle to the grave'. At its centre lay the National Health Service (NHS), set up in 1946, but the welfare state also included a system of benefits covering such needs as unemployment, disability, income support, sickness, maternity and care of the elderly. The state old-age pension was extended to all, and an increasing quantity of subsidised rental housing was made available through local government.

Issues surrounding the welfare state, how it is financed and run, what it should include and whether the private sector should be involved in supplying its services, have dominated British politics ever since. It has affected government and politics in a number of ways, including:

- The scope and powers of the UK state were expanded greatly. Put simply, government became bigger; it became responsible for a whole range of new services.
- The welfare state raised many political issues, often the centre of conflict between the parties. These have included how much should be spent on

services, who should be entitled to benefit from them, how they should be run and who should run them.

- In recent decades the issue of which services can be supplied by private-sector organisations, as opposed to the state, has become a matter of intense political conflict.

Britain joins the European Community, 1973



At the end of the Second World War many European politicians put their minds to the future of the continent. They were mainly concerned with two issues – economic reconstruction and the preservation of continental peace.

The main plan to deal with post-war Europe was based in France and was developed by two politicians there, Jean Monnet and Robert Schuman. This was the European Community (EC), which has since become the European Union (EU).

The plan was to invite European countries to form a customs union or free-trade area so that trade would grow and, with it, economic cooperation. The longer-term plan was to turn this economic union into a political one. At first just six countries were members, but in the years since it has grown to 27 members in 2020. The UK joined on 1 January 1973.

UK membership has had a number of influences on government and politics, including the following:

- The very issue of whether the UK should remain a member has twice created a major rift in British politics. At various times both the Conservative and Labour parties have been internally divided on the issue. On two occasions, in 1975 and 2016, this issue was settled by referendums, in 1975 to remain and in 2016 to leave.
- Because the EU laws and regulations are binding on members, all government decisions must take European law into consideration.

- The UK Parliament was no longer fully sovereign. It had to comply with European law.
- UK courts had to enforce European law.

In general, therefore, Britain, while remaining an independent state, had to accept that it was also part of a wider political community. Following the 2016 referendum, UK membership has come to an end, with the process completing on 31 January 2020 at 11pm UK time.

The UK leaves the European Union

The historic referendum vote of 23 June 2016 that began the process of bringing the UK out of the EU changed the landscape of UK politics. It saw the end of the career of a prime minister – David Cameron – and caused a major upheaval within the Labour Party. More permanently, though, it changed the whole nature of parliamentary sovereignty and the way in which UK government goes about making policy. The full impact of the decision on the UK economy and society remains to be seen, but the very masonry of UK politics has been severely loosened by the event.

Task – Using the information above, complete the questions below.

1) When was the Magna Carta signed?

2) What is meant by the 'rule of law'?

3) Summarise the five key points from the 1689 Bill of Rights below.

4) What were the two political parties established out of the Glorious Revolution and who did they support?

5) What were 'rotten boroughs'?

6) Who were these 'rotten boroughs' fixed through the Great Reform Act 1832?

7) When did the Conservative Party emerge and what did it stand for?

8) When was the Liberal Party formed and who was it made up of?

9) When did property-less male voters get the vote?

10) In what year was it apparent that the Labour Party could replace the Liberal Party?

11) Summarise Labour's post-war welfare system.

12) What were the two concerns at the end of the Second World War?

13) When did the UK join the European Community?

14) When were the two referendums held on membership to the EC/EU?

15) Which UK prime minister lost his job as a result of the most recent referendum on EU membership?

Task – Write a summary below of the key events leading to the development of UK Government today. Which do you think is the most important? Why?