

## UK Politics: 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 uncodified 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.

<b>Feature</b>	<b>Britain (Liberal)</b>	<b>Russia (Illiberal)</b>
<b>Power of the Head of Government</b>	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.
<b>Freedom of Elections</b>	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.
<b>Freedom of the Press</b>	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.
<b>Respect for Rights</b>	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.

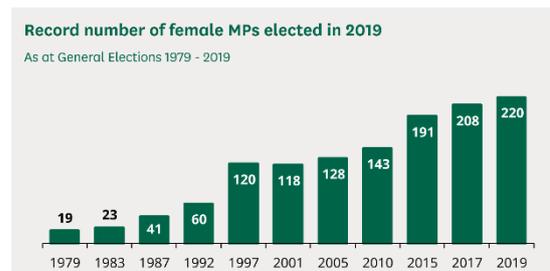
***Task – Using the above information, answer the following.***

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.18. 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.

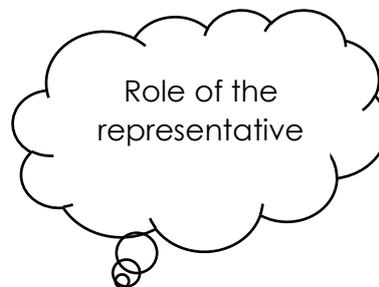
- Representing the interests of the constituency as a whole. How can funds be extracted from central government for the redevelopment of a town centre?
- Representing the interests of individual constituents. This is often described as the *redress of grievances*. Has a constituent been unfairly treated 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?