

Democracy in the UK

Democracy in the UK comes in many forms — MPs, Lords, devolved parliaments, referendums and petitions all play a part.

The UK has traditionally been a representative democracy

In a **representative democracy**, **representatives** make political decisions **on behalf of citizens**.

- In the UK, citizens **elect** Members of Parliament (MPs) to the **House of Commons** (see p.71).
- The **House of Lords** is **unelected**, but its members also **amend** and **approve** laws (see p.72-73).
- The **Scottish Parliament**, **Welsh Parliament** and **Northern Ireland Assembly** also form part of the UK's representative democracy (see p.66-67).

Direct democracy has been used more in recent decades

In a **direct democracy**, **citizens** make political decisions **themselves**.

- **Referendums** are the best-known form of direct democracy in the UK. **Between 1997 and 2016, 9 referendums** have been held on **constitutional issues** (see p.5).
- The UK also uses **e-petitions**, which allow citizens to express their views on any **political or social** issue. Any petition that attracts over **100 000 signatures** is **considered for debate** in Parliament.

Switzerland has the highest level of direct democracy in the world. Swiss voters can take part in several public votes each year.

Recall of MPs Act (2015)

- 1) Under this act, constituents can **recall** their **local MP** (vote to remove them from office) if the MP has been:
 - convicted of a **crime** and **handed a prison sentence**.
 - **suspended** from the House of Commons for **10 days or more**.
 - convicted of making **false expenses claims**.
- 2) A **by-election** is triggered if 10% of eligible voters sign a **petition**.

Margaret Ferrier was **recalled** in **2023** after admitting to **breaking lockdown** and **social distancing guidance** by travelling from London to Glasgow after a positive COVID-19 test.

There are defenders and critics of the UK's political system

Democracies can be **judged** against the following **criteria**:

- 1) Levels of **participation**
- 2) How far **all groups** and **individuals** have **opportunities** for **political influence**
- 3) Levels of **trust** in the political system
- 4) How **effectively rights** are **protected**

Defenders of the UK's political system argue that it upholds the principles of **pluralist democracy** (where **many groups** and **individuals** are able to have political influence).

- The **Human Rights Act (1998)** set out **fundamental rights** that belong to **all in the UK**, including **freedom of speech** and **freedom of assembly** (the right to gather, e.g. for meetings, political rallies, protests).
- **Parliament** has passed many other laws that **protect** the **rights** of **minorities** and **vulnerable individuals** (see p.13).
- The **Supreme Court** frequently **defends** **minority rights** in its rulings (see p.98-99).

Elitist political systems allow those with wealth and connections to exercise disproportionate amounts of power.

Critics believe that the UK is becoming increasingly **elitist**.

- There have been high-profile examples of **wealthy party donors** achieving significant **political influence** in recent years (see p.17-18).
- The influence of **corporations** and **lobbyists** is seen as an example of **elitism** (see p.12).
- The **privileged backgrounds** of many **MPs** can also be seen as evidence of **elitism** — see p.81.
- The **appointments process** for the **House of Lords** has been **criticised** for a **lack** of democracy. The **prime minister** oversees most **nominations**, with **no opportunity** for **voters** to express their views. For example, **29 peers** were appointed to the House of Lords during **Liz Truss's premiership**, despite her short term in office.



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Representative democracy has three main advantages...

- 1) Political decisions are made by **specialists** who should understand the **complexity** of the **issues** they're voting on. They can then be **held accountable** for their decisions.
- 2) Representatives have **time** to consider the **impact** of legislation, whereas many **members of the public** may not.
- 3) Representatives can take **minority interests** into account when making decisions, whereas **referendums** reflect **majority views**.



"Ann said you were a specialist, but I didn't know you were this good"

...but it also has significant disadvantages

- 1) Representative democracy relies on the **good performance** and **conduct** of those in power.
 - There have been several **high-profile scandals** in Parliament. Between **2019** and **2024**, at least 20 MPs were either **suspended** from the **House of Commons**, **suspended** by their **party** or chose to **resign their seats** following accusations of **misconduct**.
- 2) If **turnout** in elections is **low**, there can be **questions** about the **mandate** of the **representatives**.
 - Turnout in **general elections** between **2001** and **2019** was between 59% and 69%. In the **2024 general election**, turnout dipped **below 60%** for the first time since **2001**.
 - As of 2021, elections to the **Welsh Parliament** have never attracted turnout above 47%.
- 3) Because representatives are mindful of the need to **remain popular** with the electorate, they can sometimes **avoid** making **necessary reforms** that are **unpopular** with **influential groups** of voters. For example, the Public Accounts Committee has consistently called for a **long-term funding** agreement for **adult social care**, but **neither major party** has been willing to introduce either **tax increases** or **cuts in other policy areas** in order to **fund** the spending increase.

Key Terms

mandate

The extent to which a politician, party or policy can be said to possess legitimate authority by virtue of an election or referendum result.

Supporters of direct democracy say it's preferable to representative democracy

- Direct democracy is the **form of democracy** that gives **the people** the **most power**.
- Referendums give **decision-making power** to **the people**, which can lead to **reforms** that would be **very unlikely** under **representative democracy**.
- Direct democracy can help to **engage** the **electorate** when **participation** is **low** in **general elections** and other forms of representative democracy.

An estimated 75% of MPs supported Remain during the Brexit referendum in 2016, whereas only 48% of voters voted to remain in the EU.

The **2014 Scottish independence referendum** had a turnout of 85% and the **2016 Brexit referendum** had a turnout of 72%. Both of these turnouts were higher than those for general elections between 2001 and 2019 (see above).

Critics of direct democracy emphasise the problems it can involve

- **Referendums** can **over-simplify** complex issues. There was **no consensus** over the **terms** on which the UK could **leave the EU**, so **Brexit** was **much more complex** than the choice to **remain** or **leave**.
- **Referendums** can only be held in the UK via an **Act of Parliament**, which means that a referendum is **highly unlikely** to happen unless it is **supported** by the **prime minister**.
- The **outcomes** of **referendums** only take into account the views of the **majority**, which is especially **problematic** when the **results** are **close**.
- **E-petitions** can create the **illusion** of democracy without offering **meaningful influence**.

In some US states, citizens can propose questions that are put to a public vote. In California, a vote called a 'proposition' is scheduled if it has enough support. To trigger a vote, there need to be signatures amounting to 5% of the turnout from the last election for state governor.

Exam Practice

For Edexcel students: Evaluate the view that representative democracy has more advantages than direct democracy. [30]

For AQA students: Explain and analyse three criticisms of direct democracy. [9]

Who would win in a fight between representative and direct democracy?

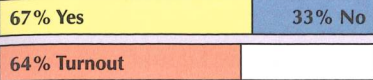
Okay, I'll admit that this isn't quite as thrilling a battle as a T-rex vs the Loch Ness Monster (my money's on the monster), but you may be asked to analyse these types of democracy, so it's handy to understand the advantages and disadvantages of both.

Referendums

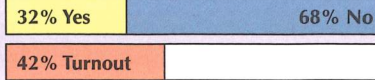
Ref-er-en-dums — it has a nice ring to it. Try saying it five times really fast though* — you'll wish it was called something else.

The UK has held three nationwide referendums

Remaining in the European Economic Community (1975)



Replacing First-Past-the-Post with the Alternative Vote electoral system (2011)



① Leaving the European Union (2016)



There have been several referendums in specific parts of the UK

Creation of a Scottish Assembly (1979)

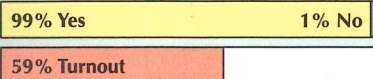


Although a majority voted to create a Scottish Assembly, this wasn't enough. Parliament had decided that 40% of the registered electorate had to vote in favour for the reform to happen.

Creation of a Scottish Parliament (1997)



Northern Ireland Remaining in the United Kingdom (1973)



This referendum was boycotted by nationalists, who feared that it would inflame tensions.

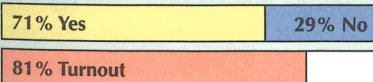
Scottish Independence (2014)



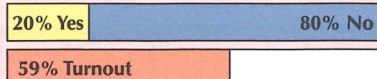
Creation of a North East Assembly (2004)



Good Friday Agreement (1998)



Creation of a Welsh Assembly (1979)



Creation of a Welsh Assembly (1997)



There are arguments for and against holding more referendums in the UK

Some believe that the UK should hold more frequent referendums...

- ✓ Referendums can help to legitimise major constitutional changes. Many would expect a referendum to be held on proposals to further change the UK Constitution.
- ✓ Holding more referendums in the UK would allow the public to express their views on areas of policy that politicians might not want to tackle.
- ✓ In other political systems, referendums are held on social issues like the legalisation of drugs.

Others argue that more referendums would harm the UK's political system...

- ✗ Referendum campaigns are divisive and their outcomes can cause even more division.
- ✗ Referendums can take attention away from other important issues. There was a fall in parliamentary productivity in the years after the 2016 EU referendum — this was partly caused by the Conservatives losing their majority in the 2017 general election, but also by the attention that needed to be given to Brexit.
- ✗ Holding more public votes can create voter fatigue.

More Maths Lessons in the UK (2024) — Yes: 23%, No: 99%, Turnout: 105%...

You might need to evaluate the use of referendums in the UK, so make sure you know the arguments for and against their use.

* You tried it, didn't you?