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Supporting Teachers : Inspiring Students



# Unit 1

## People & Politics

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This unit introduces students to the study of politics by looking at the central ideas of citizenship, democracy and participation, and by examining the representative processes in the UK.

## WHY ARE PARTICIPATION AND DEMOCRACY IMPORTANT?

### What are the main advantages and disadvantages of the UK's system of representative democracy?

The following points could be seen as advantages of the UK system of representative democracy

- The UK operates a system of free and fair elections. The secret ballot leaves voters free from intimidation. Results are counted in public and corruption is rare. With the exception of some groups such as lunatics or those recently convicted of electoral fraud, anyone over the age of 18 can vote. All voters are equal since we have one person one vote. Decline in electoral turnout may suggest we take this for granted, but it is important to remember that Britain is amongst only a handful of nations that are considered as being liberal democracies throughout the duration of the twentieth century.
- Political parties offer a choice of representatives and face few restrictions as to how they organise themselves. The organic and fluid nature of UK democracy is illustrated by the creation and success of new parties, e.g. Respect, whose leader, George Galloway, managed to win a seat in Bethnal Green and Bow in 2005 largely on the back of an anti-Labour/Iraq platform. This is a far cry from places like China where new parties exist only with the approval of the ruling Communist elite.
- For all its faults, our electoral system seems to operate effectively and has the consent of the people. For instance, in 1997 a relatively small swing of support away from the Tories swept a new government with fresh ideas into power. The removal vans can be sent round to Number 10 pretty quickly and we don't have a revolving door of Cabinet ministers in different positions as is the case in Italy. Usually the party with the largest share of the votes wins and thus there is clear accountability.
- Extensive personal freedoms are afforded to UK political citizens. We have only minor restrictions on freedom of speech such as libel, incitement to racial hatred etc. and the rule of law applies when someone is alleged to have contravened existing legislation, e.g. while some members of the government may find it disagreeable, the BNP leader Nick Griffin was not convicted following negative comments on Islam since a jury agreed that religion was not covered by anti-race hate laws. Freedom of assembly and association gives people the right to openly campaign against the government, e.g. the anti-Poll Tax campaign or the Stop the War marches.
- The raft of constitutional reforms carried out since 1997 makes the UK a more open and responsive democracy. The Scottish Parliament, established in 1999, brings government closer to the people of that nation and has permitted the introduction of more region sensitive policies, e.g. the abolition of up-front tuition fees and then the decision not to introduce variable fees for Scottish undergraduates. The new election systems in the devolved regions afford greater representation in a number of ways. Firstly, to supporters of parties with evenly spread support, e.g. UKIP secured 12 seats at the Euro 2004 elections under the list system, a number far in excess of what they would have won under first past the post. Secondly, a much larger proportion of women have seats in the devolved

assemblies versus the Commons: half of the MWAs in Cardiff Bay are women compared to only a fifth of MPs.

**The following points could be seen as disadvantages of the UK system of representative democracy**

- Not all voters play a part in elections. For instance, candidates are essentially hand picked by the party's top echelons. Paid up members have little ultimate influence, e.g. the imposition of Cameron's 'A list'. This is in stark contrast to the United States, for example, where ordinary voters can often take part in party primaries to determine who becomes the party's official nominee. In Euro elections British voters cannot even choose between candidates since they are presented with a closed list.
- Faith in the political process continues to suffer, as expressed by low levels of turnout at elections. The trend for General Election turnout is downward – despite an apparent revival in 2005. The average for elections from 1945 to the 1980s was around 75%, but the average for the last two elections has been around 60%. The introduction of other electoral systems in the UK has not resulted in a stampede to the polling stations: turnout for the Welsh Assembly elections in 2003 was only 38%.
- The main arena, the House of Commons, can hardly be considered to be politically representative:
  - In 2005 Labour were awarded an overall majority of 66 seats (55.1% of the 646 available) with only 35.2% of the national vote. Concerns are that there is very little consent for the government. Since turnout was just 61.3% it means that only 21.6% of the entire electorate voted for the government. Of comparable democracies only Turkey has a government with a majority on a lower share of the vote.
  - The single member simple plurality system does not convert the share of the vote into seats for parties on an equal basis. Unfairness in representation is illustrated by the fact that in 2005 Labour required an average of approx. 27,000 votes per MP, against 44,500 per Conservative MP elected, and 96,500 per Lib Dem MP.
- That the House of Commons is not socially representative, i.e. it is not a microcosm of society, is borne out by the following data:
  - Firstly, women are not fairly represented. Currently only 20% of MPs in the House of Commons are women, and although this is a slight increase on 2001 (18%) the UK still lags behind many other Western European parliaments.
  - Secondly, Parliament does not accurately reflect the black and ethnic minority population. In the 2005 elections there was an increase in the number of black and ethnic minority MPs, from 13 to 15, but the figure is still low when compared to the percentage of the black and ethnic population in the UK. If the Commons was to be truly representative there would be 51 black or ethnic minority MPs.

- Thirdly, Parliament is overwhelmingly middle class. Just under 90% of MPs were, before entering Parliament, based in occupations that put them into the top two categories in terms of social class compared with just over a third of the general population.
- The constitution is imbalanced, with the executive holding far too much power. Parliament is a toothless body, i.e. it is unable to effectively hold government to account. PMQs achieves little of lasting worth since PM's often evade answering questions and focus instead on political point scoring. Select committees have little real impact since they cannot subpoena witnesses and have limited resources.
- Rights are not entrenched in our political system. That civil liberties receive little protection was illustrated in full Technicolor by Blair's fourfold extension of detention without trial. Unless the surreal application of the law is adhered to, SOCPA makes it a criminal offence to protest in the vicinity of Parliament. ASBOs have created a criminal class of innocent civilians.
- Supporters of direct democracy would argue that government actions bear no relation to popular opinion. The outcry over Iraq is testimony of this. That referendums are held infrequently, and even then only when the government of the day deems them to be politically expedient, is further confirmation that people power does not exist.
- Pressure groups may claim to aid the ordinary citizen but pluralism is a utopian fantasy. Clearly some groups have more power and influence than others and this skews the democratic process. Recent media reports detailing the attempts by Blair and Brown to court the director of News International, Rupert Murdoch, pose obvious concerns. The defence contractor BAE systems have the government (whatever the colour of the door of Number 10) lobbying on their behalf.
- The House of Lords appointment process is corrupted. 'Cash for peerages' has brought into question the shady nature of life peer appointments. Our system of representative democracy has been seriously discredited since there is an inference that a seat in the legislature is not obtained on merit (if it ever was) but by a desire to get political parties out of financial difficulty.

### **Has democracy been strengthened or weakened in the UK since 1997?**

#### **The following points would suggest that democracy has been strengthened**

- The increase of direct democracy via the use of referendums. There have been five referendums since 1997, in contrast with the Conservatives who had none in eighteen years in office.
- Constitutional reform: the removal of all but 92 peers from the House of Lords is more democratic. The Secretary of State for Constitutional affairs, Lord Falconer, points out that an entirely appointed house is not appropriate for a twenty-first century democracy, and places us on a par with Lesotho in this respect.

- The introduction of the Human Rights Act in 1998 and the Freedom of Information Act in 2000 show a commitment to protecting the rights and liberties of the individual, and to making government more transparent and therefore accountable.
- Devolution has strengthened democracy: it remedies the democratic deficit, and in weakening calls for independence has strengthened the UK system.
- The Big Conversation of 2003: an initiative to consult with the people in person and on the web. Subsequent to this it is clear that far from accepting that apathy is a new paradigm, parties have sought to engage the electorate by embracing new technologies:
  - In September the Tories launched 'webcameron' – a website for video blogs by their leader.
  - Following the Queen's Speech, Labour is encouraging voters to have their say on its contents through the online 'Let's Talk' initiative.
- Reforms e.g. of sitting times in Parliament have made it more in step with the twenty-first century. The arrival of the so-called 'Blair's babes' in Parliament also shows attempts to make MPs more representative of the population. (Though only 20% of MPs are women.)
- Recent events would serve to confirm the above ideas.
  - Britain is becoming more democratic in terms of the participation of women in politics. The Conservative Party has boosted the number of female parliamentary candidates, such as Priti Patel for Witham in Essex. According to Tory headquarters, 36% (28 out of 78) of candidates selected so far are female. At present, 9% of Tory MPs (17 of 198) are women.
  - We could argue that the government are interested in boosting political participation. Harriet Harman, the Minister for Justice, plans to pilot a scheme whereby the public will have a role in helping to choose judges and magistrates for a national network of US-style community courts.
  - The elevation of David Cameron to the Conservative Party leadership has boosted the fortunes of his party: after years of the Tories being in the doldrums, they now lead the government in the opinion polls. Many now feel that we have a more vibrant two party system than we did when Michael Howard, Iain Duncan Smith, or William Hague led the Conservatives.

**The following points would suggest that democracy has been weakened**

- Concerns about the erosion of civil liberties.
  - The Terrorism Bill and the debate on the length of period of detention for terrorist suspects. The proposal to increase this from 14 to 90 days was defeated by 31 votes in the Commons. A compromise of 28 days was reached in Feb 2006. Some still regard this as too long. John Wadham, the chair of human

rights group Liberty, described this as 'a fundamental violation of the rule of law.'

- The Health Bill which banned smoking in all enclosed public places and workplaces. Forest, a pressure group which promotes the right to smoke, called this 'unnecessary and illiberal.'
  - The Labour Government continues to attempt (and often succeeds) to undermine personal liberty via draconian legislation. The government continues to press ahead with plans to introduce ID cards. As Shami Chakrabarti, director of Liberty, said of Tony Blair's scheme: 'Does the public that he [Blair] claims to speak for really want a future devoid of all of the rights and freedoms which previous generations of Britons fought to defend?' This year's Queen's Speech was top heavy with home affairs, taking the number of bills from the Home Office to over 60 since Blair entered office, creating in excess of 3,000 new offences. The government's authoritarian streak was in further evidence in the inclusion in this year's Queen's Speech of a planned Criminal Justice Bill that will give legislative flesh to the bones of the Blair 'Respect agenda'. Amongst other plans on the table is the idea that the police will be granted new powers to evict noisy neighbours, and to be able to shut down premises for persistent antisocial activity.
  - Britain is not as open a society as it could be. In October Lord Falconer, the Secretary of State for Constitutional Affairs, announced plans to curtail rights afforded under the Freedom of Information Act. Tony Blair described freedom of information legislation as 'absolutely fundamental' to the form of government he wanted, but, as the *Independent* has said, recent evidence suggests that he considers openness as a luxury in the government's gift.
  - In response to Nick Griffin, the BNP leader, being cleared of inciting racial hatred, Labour ministers want to review the need for more restrictive legislation. The Chancellor, Gordon Brown, said: 'Mainstream opinion in this country will be offended by some of the statements that they [Griffin and his co-defendant] have heard made. If there is something that needs to be done to look at the law then I think we will have to do that.'
- There are concerns that Blair does not respect Parliament as he should. This ranges from Blair's limited appearances in the Commons and lack of respect for the monarch to the little-known Legislative and Regulatory Reform Bill, which aroused concerns in the Public Accounts Committee in that the government might amend legislation without a vote in the Commons within three weeks of the passage of a bill.
  - The incumbent of Number 10 is not the only one guilty of ignoring years of convention. In April 2006 Brown pledged £8bn to Africa without a Commons debate.
  - Some see the lack of respect for Parliament as a defining feature of Blair's style of government. This also potentially extends to the sidelining of the Cabinet. The Hutton

report into the Kelly affair focused media criticism on 'sofa politics', Blair's preference for informal bilateral meetings.

- In structural terms, the rise of the Prime Minister's Office (formally recognised since 2001) is important. All three of its sections are headed by unaccountable special advisors, the number of whom had doubled to 81 by 2001. This has led to charges of 'cronyism,' for example in the appointments of Derry Irvine and Charlie Falconer as successive Lord Chancellors.
- The Freedom of Information Act was watered down considerably from when Labour made its proposals in opposition, for example the Security and Intelligence Services are exempt. Critics argue that the government can still declare any disclosure to be against the national interest and block it.

## DO ELECTIONS GUARANTEE DEMOCRACY?

### Explain the case for the use of referendums

- Referendums allow voters to accept or reject a proposal contained in a manifesto outside of a General Election. The great constitutional scholar A.V. Dicey argued over one hundred years ago that during elections 'voters were placed on the horns of a dilemma' since they may want to keep the government but may disagree fundamentally with one of their policies, i.e. that the referendum allowed voters to 'distinguish between men and measures'. For example, in November 2004, voters in the North East of England roundly rejected the proposals for an elected assembly in the region but supported Labour in the Westminster elections held either side of the vote in 2001 and 2005.
- The British system of parliamentary democracy is also limited in the extent that elections are held only every four or five years. Using referendums between election times reduces this democratic deficit. Since 1997, Labour has held referendums in each of their first two terms we could say that the deficit has been reduced.
- Referendums bring government closer to the people at a time when faith in politicians is falling and decision making has become too distant, reducing democracy to an abstract. Voter turnout during referendums is high when the vote is precipitated by a long and sustained debate about the issue, thus showing that the electorate is keen to engage in the political process when it is felt that their vote matters. For example, 81% voted in the referendum on the Good Friday Agreement.
- Referendums can be seen as important ways to confer legitimacy upon government plans that involve major constitutional change or the introduction of novel ideas. Devolution is such an issue and the voters of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland were consulted regarding the transfer of Westminster's power. Directly elected mayors were a new initiative and thus the Londoners were consulted on this issue as were a host of other council regions around the country, e.g. Middlesbrough.