

## Defining democracy in the UK

### Parliamentary democracy:

The UK is a **parliamentary democracy**. This is a system of government in which the parliament (the House of Commons and House of Lords in the UK) is considered to be **sovereign (the highest power or authority)**. This means that only parliament has the power to pass laws.

### Liberal democracy:

The UK can also be said to be a liberal democracy. This is a form of democracy which includes rights protection for all citizens, including: **human rights** for every individual and all social groups; **freedom** of speech, opinion, press, and religion; and an **equal right to vote** (one person, one vote).

### Pluralist democracy:

The UK is a **pluralist** democracy. This means a range of political parties, pressure groups, and interest groups are free to exist, voice their views, campaign for change, and communicate with government. This means there is a wide range of views and interests represented in society. The public have a huge amount of choice over the groups they join, or the political parties they choose to support.

### Representative democracy:

Put simply, a system of representative democracy is one where the people (the public) do not make decisions about how the country is governed themselves, but instead elect representatives to do this on their behalf.

Britain is primarily a representative democracy in which **parliament is sovereign**. Britain holds **regular free and fair elections** based on one person, one vote to elect **representatives** at every level: national, regional, and local.

The concept of representation is central to UK democracy: each Member of Parliament (MP) is elected by a constituency (of which there are 650 in the UK) and then represents the interests and concerns of their constituency in parliament. This 'constituency model' is designed to create a strong link between the MP and the constituents they represent.

In a representative system, the citizens effectively delegate (give) their political authority to representatives (MPs) who have (in theory) the expertise, access to resources, and time to make decisions for the good of the people. Parliament thus represents the interests of every citizen and constituency in the UK.

### Direct democracy:

Direct democracy requires the **public to express a direct opinion** and, often, allows the public to directly impact decisions. Direct democracy involves the **direct involvement** of the people in political life and decision making.

The people themselves make the decisions - it is not done on their behalf by representatives. It can be described as a system of self-government or 'consultative government'.

Direct democracy is not the main system of government used in the UK. However, direct democracy – usually in the form of referendums – is used in the UK in addition to representative democracy. A referendum is where the public get to vote on a specific issue, usually in the form of a simple 'yes / no' question.

Some recent examples of referendums include:

- 2016: EU Referendum: Leave: 51.89% Remain: 48.1% (Turnout: 72%)
- 2014: Scottish Independence: Yes: 44.7% No: 55.3% (Turnout: 84.6%)

## The key feature of representative democracy

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#### Free and fair elections:

Elections based on one-person-one-vote occur at a range of levels: General Election (5 years), Local Council elections (2 – 4 years), Mayoral (4 years), European (5 years).

#### Elected representatives:

Citizens do not take decisions but elect representatives to make decisions on their behalf. The UK is divided up into 650 electoral regions – known as constituencies – each constituency elects a single MP to represent that constituency in parliament. Representatives **represent their constituents** but also consider the broader national interest when making decisions.

In other words, the public invest their decision-making power in their representatives at election times and confer upon them (give them) the **authority to make decisions** and act on their behalf.

However, MPs (representatives) in the UK are not mere slaves to the wishes of their constituents: representatives are expected to use their own judgement and develop policy or pass laws that are in the national interest – even if this is in contrast to the wishes of their constituents. This is sometimes described as the **'Burkean'** model of democracy.

#### Constituency representation:

The electoral system (First Past the Post) operates a **constituency system** in which each of the **650** constituencies in the UK elects an MP to represent them in Parliament: the MP is expected to represent the interests of their constituency. This creates a strong **'constituency link'** whereby the MP acts as a voice for their constituency in parliament. This allows the local concerns of people across the UK to be raised and heard in parliament.

Although an MP is expected to defend, champion, and **voice the interests** and concerns of their constituency in parliament, an MP will sometimes vote against the wishes of their constituents if they feel it is in the national interest to do so.

**Constituency size:** England = 72,400 people, Scotland = 69,000, N. Ireland = 66,800, Wales = 56,800

#### Government by experts:

By electing representatives the public are surrendering their decision-making power and conferring authority to their representative. In theory, **representatives are better equipped to make decisions** due to their knowledge, expertise, resources, and time. MPs also have access to the Civil Service who provide them with the information they need to make reasoned decisions that weigh-up the national interest. Representatives have the time and expertise to consider issues (such as the economy, society, or foreign policy) that are too complex for the general public.

Furthermore, whereas the public can sometimes act emotionally or out of self-interest, representatives are better able to make rational, unemotional decisions that consider the needs of the various groups and regions in the UK.

#### Accountability:

Representatives are elected by their constituents – and so can be removed by their constituents. Regular elections provide an opportunity for the public to hold their representatives to account for their decisions and actions. If constituents are not happy with their representative, they can remove them at the next election.

General Elections are held approximately every 4 years, providing a regular opportunity to hold our representatives to account and – if necessary – replace them.

## The advantages and disadvantages of representative democracy

### Advantages:

Representative democracy enshrines the principle of **'government by experts'**. Essentially, representative democracy places power in the hands of **'experts'** who are better placed to make complex decisions than the average citizen. Our representatives (MPs) have the time, the expertise, the resources, and the support of the civil service to help them make decisions on our behalf. In a modern society, many issues – such as the economy or foreign policy – are simply **too complex** for the voting public.

Furthermore, representatives are better able to look past emotional arguments and are able to assess the **'national interest'** by weighing up the priority of different policies. Whereas individual voters tend to make decisions (or vote) based on their own personal circumstances or self-interest, representatives are able to take a more holistic view, which takes account of the national interest. As a result, representatives can look beyond the specific interests of the various groups in society and introduce measures which are for the good of the whole of society.

Similarly, whereas the voting public can easily be swayed by emotion or the media (including 'fake' news), representatives are better placed to make **dispassionate or impartial** decisions. As a result, representative democracy provides society with stability and prevents extreme decisions based on emotion or populism.

Representative democracy also provides **accountability**. In a representative democracy, the voting public confer their political authority to a representative, who is then bound to represent the interests of their voters. In the UK, each of the 650 constituencies directly elects a representative to defend their interests in parliament. However, should the voting public be unhappy with the decisions made by their representative, they have the right – and regular opportunities – to hold their elected representative to account and, if necessary, remove them via an election. Thus, the public can ensure that their views are faithfully represented and acted upon in parliament. For example, in the UK, General Elections are held (at least) every five years, providing the voting public with a regular opportunity to **hold their representatives** to account for their actions and decisions.

Furthermore, elected representatives can also provide **'social representation'** whereby they represent – in order to protect – the interests of minority or vulnerable groups, such as the elderly, those with disabilities, or the LGBT+ community. Representatives are able to **champion and defend** the rights and interest of minority groups to ensure that their voice is heard. In a system of direct democracy, the minority opinion (or group) always loses. However, in a representative system, our representatives are able to act (or legislate) in the interests of minority groups who would have **otherwise been overlooked or ignored**. As a result, representative democracy can ensure that a wide diversity of social groups are heard and their interests are taken into account in policy making. In turn, this prevents something called the **'tyranny of the majority'** – a situation where the majority opinion always wins, and minority group or opinion always loses.

Finally, it is not only the interests of constituencies that are represented in the UK. The UK system of representative democracy ensures that the **different regions** of the UK are also represented via regional assemblies and parliaments. This process of creating regional parliaments – known as **devolution** – ensures that the specific interests of each region of the UK (Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland) are all represented. Since 1998, the Scottish Parliament, Welsh Senedd, and Northern Irish Assembly have ensured that the people of these regions have their voices heard and are defended at a regional level.

Ultimately, representative democracy is the **only practical form of democracy** in a large modern society. Direct democracy is unpractical in a modern society for a host of reasons. The public cannot be expected to constantly make decisions about every aspect of society and, as previously mentioned, do not have the knowledge and expertise to make decisions on complex aspects of policy. Furthermore, representative democracy is the only way of ensuring that all groups within society – no matter how small – are championed and represented.

**Disadvantages:**

Most representative democracies result in the emergence of a **'political class'** – a group of 'professional politicians' who are normally from affluent and privileged backgrounds – who dominate the political sphere. This is particularly true of the UK (and US) - the narrow nature of representatives, who mostly share similar backgrounds, are **not a true reflection** of the people in society who they claim to represent. As a result, some claim representative democracy simply results in 'rule by the elite' in which representatives become separated from – and so do not truly understand – the citizens they are supposed to represent.

Indeed, some sections of society – including younger voters and minority ethnic groups – are under-represented in the UK Parliament, leading many to argue that parliament cannot truly represent the diverse UK public, if it **does not reflect that diversity**. Indeed, some minority groups may feel excluded and marginalised under such a system of representative democracy if they feel that the representatives (MPs) do not represent or understand their identity.

Another problem with representative democracy derives from the **way political parties in the UK operate**. While each MP in the UK is elected to represent their constituency, each MP is also loyal to their political party. As a result, this loyalty to a party can sometimes override the loyalty to a constituency. In short, the party system undermines the representative process as MPs may feel more inclined to follow the wishes of their party leader than the wishes of their constituents.

This problem is worsened by something called the **'Party Whip'** system. Each party employs 'Party Whips' to control and coordinate the voting behaviour of their MPs. Each 'Party Whip' can instruct their MPs to vote a certain way on a certain issue. However, this can often force an MP to vote in a way that does not represent the interests of their constituents. All of the main parties make substantial use of this mechanism to control their MPs. This can lead to frustration for the voters who may find their MP does not always vote in-line with what their constituents might want.

Another problem with representative democracy in the UK arises as a result of the electoral system used for General Elections: **First Past the Post**. Many regard this electoral system to be unfair as, due to the working of this system, smaller political parties (such as the Liberal Democrats or Greens) are **under-represented** in parliament while larger parties (such as the Conservatives or Labour Party) are grossly **over-represented**.

For example, in 2017, despite winning 7.9% of the vote, the Liberal Democrats were only awarded only 8 seats in parliament (1.2% of the seats). In contrast, in 2019 the Conservative Party won 43.6% of the vote but were awarded 365 seats (56% of the seats). Ultimately, this means that the make-up of parliament is not necessarily an accurate representation of the wishes of the electorate as the 'seats' are not allocated fairly. Smaller parties will always struggle to do well, while the larger parties have an in-built advantage. Furthermore, as the 2019 example shows a government can be elected despite having failed to win 50% of the vote, calling into question how far that government can be said to truly represent the public.

Finally, **low participation levels** (i.e. turnout at elections) has been seen as some as an indicator of growing **apathy and disengagement** from the political process. Some commentators argue that, due to the perception of elitism within parliament, many feel that politicians no longer represent them or understand their concerns. For example, turnout levels at elections in the UK have followed a steady trend of decline since the 1950s. Whereas turnout was 83.9% in 1950, it was just 66.4% in 2015, 68.8% in 2017, and 67.3% in 2019.

In the 2019 election, there were 287 constituencies (44% of the UK's 650 constituencies) in which turnout was less than two-thirds of the electorate. This problem of disengagement and apathy is even more concerning when different regions are considered: turnout is considerably higher in the south-east than in other regions. Low-turnout constituencies in 2019 tended to be clustered in certain areas such as urban northern England, the West Midlands metro area, the Thames Estuary, the South Wales Valleys, the Scottish central belt and Northern Ireland.

**Task 1: Key terms**

Define each of the terms below based on your reading.

<b>Parliament</b>	
<b>Constituency</b>	
<b>Representative</b>	
<b>Parliamentary democracy</b>	
<b>Liberal democracy</b>	
<b>Representative democracy</b>	
<b>Government by experts</b>	
<b>Accountability</b>	
<b>Constituency representation</b>	
<b>Social representation</b>	
<b>Party Whip</b>	
<b>Direct democracy</b>	
<b>Referendum</b>	

**Task 2: The advantages and disadvantages of representative democracy**

Using your reading, complete a bullet point summary of the main advantages and disadvantages of representative democracy. Ensure you use key terms in your notes.

Advantages	Disadvantages
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<b>Advantages</b>	<b>Disadvantages</b>
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