

Politics Intermediate 2

Political Representation



NQ Support Material

2006



Scottish Further Education Unit

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Statement of Standards

Political Representation (Intermediate 2)

Outcome 1

Describe the roles of political parties and pressure groups in the UK

Performance Criteria

- a) The roles of political parties and pressure groups are described clearly.
- b) Examples of these roles from the UK are described clearly.

Outcome 2

Evaluate electoral systems

Performance Criteria

- a) The strengths and weaknesses of the UK electoral systems are explained clearly.
- b) The key features and outcomes of electoral systems used in the UK are evaluated clearly.

Unit Content

The unit has two Outcomes:

1. Describe the roles of political parties and pressure groups in the UK.
2. Evaluate electoral systems.

The unit content can be summarised as follows:

- the concepts of democracy and representation
- controversies surrounding the issue of representation
- the roles of political parties (electoral/governing) in the UK
- the party system
- the major UK political parties
- pressure groups: aims, functions, power and influence
- distinction between pressure groups and political parties (aims and functions)
- UK electoral systems: key features, strengths and weaknesses, effectiveness and outcomes
- the UK parliamentary election system
- the Scottish parliamentary election system
- the Scottish local authority election system
- the European Union parliamentary election system
- examination of alternative electoral systems
- debate over electoral reform.

For further details refer to the unit specification from the National Unit Specification Document. This may be found on the SQA website: www.sqa.org.uk

Assessment

The unit assessment pack from the National Assessment Bank for this unit contains the following internal assessments:

Outcomes 1 and 2 = a 60-minute question paper comprising a mixture of short-answer, restricted response and extended response items, where questions may be structured, and may be based on stimulus material; to be conducted under closed-book, supervised test conditions. The test will be holistic, covering all Outcomes and Performance Criteria.

Instruments of assessment should therefore, comprise questions/items that reflect marking of the Outcomes as follows:

Outcome 1: Knowledge and understanding – 10 marks.

Outcome 2: Analysis and evaluation – 10 marks.

10/20 or 50% score required for a pass.

NB. Student/Pupil Activities within the Support Materials provide a balance of tutor led and student centred activities. Formative end of outcome activities have been included. A number reflect the style, content and layout of the NAB assessments. Marks out of 10, per question, should be awarded when feedback is given, thus reflecting the end of unit assessment.

Delivery Advice

Suggested timing

The notional timing for this unit is 40 hours. A suggested scheme of work is shown below which is based on the assumption that the unit would be taught for three hours per week, over a twelve week period, the twelfth week being used for final assessment. This will leave four hours for feedback on assessment, remediation, and when the candidate is ready, reassessment.

Introductory session: 1

This session is designed to provide a general introduction to the unit by explaining the concepts of democracy and representation.

Political parties sessions: 2 and 3

These two sessions examine the role of Political parties in the UK, the party system and the major parties.

Pressure groups session: 4

This session concentrates on the aims, functions, power and influence of pressure groups in the UK.

Comparative session: 5

This session examines the distinction between pressure groups and political parties regarding aims and functions.

Electoral systems sessions: 6-9

These four sessions look at the electoral systems of the UK, Scottish and EU parliaments, as well as that of Scottish local authorities.

Alternatives and reform session: 10

This session will consider alternative electoral systems, and debate over electoral reform.

Revision and Assessment sessions: 11 and 12

This then leaves two sessions: the first to revise and prepare for assessment, and the last for actual assessment. Centres must obviously plan to deliver according to their own timetabling system, but it is suggested that a formative approach is adopted whereby the student/pupil is introduced to the concepts of democracy and representation first. This then will enable them to understand the importance of political parties and pressure groups to the electoral process. A different electoral system can then be introduced each week. The learning materials, sample activities and examples of formative assessment included in this support pack are presented in the same order as the advice given above, and the scheme of work shown below. It is suggested that learners undertake the student/pupil revision activity, provided at the end of each week's outcome, before moving on to the next topic.

Scheme of Work

This illustrates how the pack could be used to deliver the unit. The example used is based on three-hour blocks of information, which can be broken down to suit local circumstance.

Week	Content	Outcomes
1	Introduction to the unit. The concepts of democracy and representation. The issue of representation and the controversies that surround it.	Outcome 1 – PC (a) Democracy and representation in relation to political parties
2	The roles of political parties in the UK: electoral and governing.	Outcome 1 – PC (a) Roles of political parties
3	The party system and the major parties.	Outcome 1 – PC (b) Examples of major political parties
4	The aims, functions, power and influence of pressure groups.	Outcome 1 – PC (a) and (b) Pressure groups roles/examples
5	The distinction between the aims and functions of pressure groups and political parties.	Outcome 1 – PC (a) and (b) Distinction in roles of political parties and pressure groups
6	UK electoral systems: key features, strengths and weaknesses, effectiveness and outcomes. The UK parliamentary election system.	Outcome 2 – PC (a) and (b) Key features, strengths/weaknesses of UK electoral systems: UK Parliament
7	UK electoral systems: key features, strengths and weaknesses, effectiveness and outcomes. The Scottish parliamentary election system.	Outcome 2 – PC (a) and (b) Key features, strengths/weaknesses of UK electoral systems: Scottish Parliament
8	UK electoral systems: key features, strengths and weaknesses, effectiveness and outcomes. The Scottish local authority election system.	Outcome 2 – PC (a) and (b) Key features, strengths/weaknesses of UK electoral systems: Scottish councils
9	UK electoral systems: key features, strengths and weaknesses, effectiveness and outcomes. The European Union parliamentary election system.	Outcome 2 – PC (a) and (b) Key features, strengths/weaknesses of UK electoral systems: EU Parliament
10	Introductory examination of alternative electoral systems and debate over electoral reform.	Outcome 2 – PC (a) and (b) Alternative systems and debate over reform

Week	Content	Outcomes
6-9	Appropriate electoral data will be introduced to enable student/pupil to develop skills in analysis and detecting bias and selectivity in source materials.	Outcome 2 – PC (a) and (b) Analysis, and detection of bias and selectivity
11	Revision and preparation for assessment.	Outcome 1 – PC (a) and (b) Outcome 2 – PC (a) and (b) Student revision
12	Assessment	Outcome 1 – PC (a) and (b) Outcome 2 – PC (a) and (b) Assessment

The last three-hour block could be used to administer the assessment, which is a closed book, supervised test, with a time limit of one hour and will be holistic, covering all Outcomes and Performance Criteria.

Remaining four hours to be used as appropriate for: feedback on assessment, remediation and reassessment.	Outcome 1 – PC (a) and (b) Outcome 2 – PC (a) and (b) Reassessment
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It will be up to teachers/lecturers to decide how best to allocate time within delivery and the above should in no way be seen as prescriptive.

Approaches to Learning and Teaching

Delivery

It is suggested that in the delivery of this unit, a variety of approaches to learning and teaching be used. Relevant audio/visual materials, such as current party political election broadcasts, topical information on pressure group activities, and reviews of election results, could be used. Other broadcast news, political discussions and documentaries could also be used to stimulate interest and understanding. Guest speakers could be invited from the local branch of political parties and pressure groups. Class debates and mock elections could also be held in order to help maintain interest and clarify understanding.

Topicality

It is often useful to begin each session by briefly discussing breaking news; this can help learners to understand the clear and relevant links that exist between the unit being studied, and the wider world. Party policy announcements, pressure group events and demonstrations, and election campaigning and results information, would be particularly useful news items to discuss. Controlled use of Internet resources can be used to encourage learners to gather additional information on political parties, pressure groups and electoral systems. If Internet sites are used, teachers/lecturers should carefully control those that are accessed; some pressure group and political party websites contain information and images that are inappropriate. Many are useful and safe, but a degree of caution should, of course, be exercised.

Active involvement

A range of useful textbooks is also available and visits to the Scottish Parliament and local authority council meetings can often be arranged. Throughout the study of this unit, learners should be encouraged to actively find out more through independent learning and participation in-group and whole class activities.

Direct relevance

The emphasis should be on an understanding that the decisions and actions taken by political parties and pressure groups have a direct, and very important effect on our representative, democratic political system, as do the decisions taken during elections by voters. Learners should therefore be encouraged to understand that politics is not an abstract thing, but very real, full of interesting arguments and debates, and will affect their lives. Encouraging students/pupils to monitor these debates and examine any electoral data that becomes available during their study of the unit will reinforce their understanding of the democratic and representative nature of the UK political system. The House of Commons is old and well established, as is its electoral system. The Scottish Parliament is new and settling in. EU and Scottish local authority electoral systems have experienced recent change. Political parties change, as do those who vote for them. Some pressure groups are with us for a long time, others disband when the issue on which they stood is resolved. For all of these reasons, it is important to stress the evolutionary nature of politics, and to encourage the learner to understand, follow and enjoy.

Note: This teaching pack contains more detail than is needed for Intermediate 2, and not everything contained need be covered. Teachers/lecturers can select what they use as appropriate to their student/pupils.

Information and Student/Pupil Activities

Democracy

Most British people would describe the United Kingdom as being a democracy. The nations of Europe, the United States of America and many more countries throughout the world also regard themselves as being Democracies. Democracy is usually regarded as being a good thing. Those countries in the world that are not governed in a democratic way are often encouraged to adopt democratic principles.

Democracy comes from two Greek words:

Greek word:	Meaning:
demos	the people
cratos	power

The word democracy has therefore come to mean **rule by the people** or **people power**. Aristotle, the 4th century BC philosopher, defined democracy as being **rule by the many**. He wrote that the three most common types of rule were likely to be:

Democracy	Rule by the many
Oligarchy	Rule by the few
Monarchy	Rule by the one

A country governed by oligarchy is likely to concentrate on looking after the interests of the rich and powerful within society. A monarchy would also be likely to favour a small elite group of people, at the expense of the majority of the population. Democracy is therefore perhaps the best option because it would look after the interests of the mass of ordinary people of a society.

Rule by the people therefore suggests that all should be able to take part in the running of the country: **government**, and making the laws: **legislation**. It also implies that people would be willing to get involved: **popular public participation**.

Direct Democracy

Ancient Greek city-states had small enough numbers of citizens to enable them, in some cases, to govern directly. All citizens could assemble and participate (debate and vote) in the legislative process; they could also appoint and scrutinise the work of those who governed. It should however be noted that a bias existed towards some members of the population. The right to participate in the democratic process did not extend to women, slaves, foreigners and men under the age of 20. Perhaps this type of democracy would have been better described as being **rule by some of the people**.

Representative Democracy

Large modern states like the United Kingdom would obviously find it impossible to accommodate millions of people into a system of direct democracy. The solution is therefore to operate a form of democracy whereby the people choose others to represent them. The country is divided into geographic areas of roughly similar population size. These are called constituencies. Approximately every four years an election is held to enable constituents to choose their representative. These people then attend the Parliament at Westminster in London.

Our democratic representatives are therefore known as Members of Parliament (MPs). These people make political decisions on our behalf and this means that we have an indirect type of democracy that relies on the selection of representatives.

Key features of a democratic system

It is generally agreed that, for a democratic system to work effectively, the following conditions would need to be in place:

- The people should be able to freely participate. This means that a universal franchise should apply. A universal franchise means that all adults are legally entitled to vote. They should also be legally entitled to stand for political office: to stand, for example, as a candidate in parliamentary elections.
- The political bodies, such as parliament and government, should conduct themselves in a way that is open and accountable. This means that systems should be in place to check what they do and the decisions that they take, if required, even to replace them. None of this can be done if they operate in a secretive way and the general public is unaware of their actions.
- There should be a free society in which the people not only have political rights, but also civil rights. These rights can include the right to free speech, the right to assemble, and the right to the protection of the law. Without these rights, people would not have the freedom to participate in a way that was democratic.

To be a democracy

Democracy is sometimes described in terms of **government of the people, by the people, for the people**. This means governing a country in a way that allows, even encourages, people to participate freely and regularly in elections. It relies on opposition political parties (explained later), the media, the law, and ultimately the people, to question those who we have chosen to govern on our behalf: to represent our views and wishes.

It is clear that opinions will differ as to how best a country can be governed. This means that like-minded people will come together and organise themselves into political parties, each with a different view of how best this can be achieved; each trying to convince us, the voters, to choose them to govern. This is known as a multi-party system and is considered to be an important element in a successful democratic system.

Other groups of like-minded individuals may wish to influence the democratically elected politicians, especially those holding power without actually gaining political office themselves. These are the pressure/interest groups, and they too are thought to be a vital ingredient in a democratic society.

In order that the politicians, and all of those that they represent, know what they can and can't do, most representative democracies have a written constitution; a set of rules describing how the country should be governed, how laws should be made, and how people should be elected to political office. Within most constitutions there will be a **bill of rights**, which states clearly the rights that a citizen is entitled to, such as those mentioned previously, for example free speech. A written constitution is regarded by many as being an essential component of a representative democracy; interestingly, the UK does not have such a document.

Advantages of Representative Democracy

'Democracy is the recurrent suspicion that more than half of the people are right more than half of the time.'

E.B. White

- Representative Democracy is regarded as being a very practical way to arrive at political decisions and to select those who make them. A society consisting of millions of people cannot, and most would not want to, participate directly. Those who wish to can then put themselves forward for such duties.
- It puts government into the hands of people who may be better able to do the job. Their commitment, education and knowledge can then be used to best advantage by the rest of the people, who would prefer to do other things.
- Representative democracy may also help to create a stable society because the people are aware that they can ultimately remove those governing them, if they have lost confidence in their ability to run the country. This happened in 1997 when, after 18 years in government, the Conservative party lost power to Labour. This, of course, encourages political parties to propose, and when they are in power provide, policies that are popular with as many voters as is possible. To do this successfully compromise is required, and this can help to create a stable society.
- Some people now worry that the main political parties have lost their ideological base. They don't seem to stand for any particular political cause anymore; instead they simply use researchers to find out what people want, and then promise at the next election, to give them this. This may simply be opportunism and not a very healthy development in British politics. It may however be a modern manifestation of representative democracy where **rule by the many** is achieved by finding out what the **many** actually want, and giving them it.

Disadvantages of Representative Democracy

'A democracy is nothing more than mob rule, where fifty-one percent of the people may take away the rights of the other forty-nine.'

Thomas Jefferson

- It is clear that no one political party is likely to win all of the votes at an election. This means that the political party that wins the greatest number of votes (in the UK's case, the greatest number of constituencies) will win the right to govern. Some people will therefore be governed by people that they did not want to run the country. They will be expected to accept the result, and respect the right of the party with the greatest majority to govern. Laws will then be made, and policy decisions taken, that they do not agree with. These people may therefore feel that they are experiencing what has been described as the **tyranny of the majority**. Representative democracy does not therefore provide **power** to all of the **people**. This is called majoritarianism and results in the majority receiving priority treatment at the expense of minority groups and individuals. It can lead to the majority in a society behaving in a way that is insensitive to others.
- Representative democracy is only ever properly democratic if a sizable proportion of the population actually participates and votes. People in the UK, and in the USA, have become increasingly apathetic towards politics and politicians, and this is evident in the declining number of people who bother to vote. The situation is equally bleak regarding the numbers who join political parties. Many seem to be turned off by politicians, parties and the whole political process; this at a time when increasing numbers are happy to pay for the privilege of voting for contestants on reality television shows. To vote in an election is free.
- What worries some is the fact that apathy can enable small parties, especially at local election level, to win seats on local authority councils, by encouraging all their supporters to vote, knowing that few others will. There is, of course, nothing wrong with small parties democratically winning seats, but what if these parties have policies that are opposed to the idea of representative democracy?

Student/Pupil Activity

Democracy

Elitism is believed by some to be better than representative democracy as a way of successfully governing a country. It is based on the idea that, within society, there will be a minority (an elite) who are wiser and therefore better able to govern. Political power should be in their hands because they know what is best for the rest of us. The mass of the people is unwise, ill informed and unlikely to know what is good for them and their country. It is best therefore to leave government in the hands of this small elite group and abandon democracy.

Group activity

The following questions should be discussed in groups of three to four. Each group should elect one person to feedback the decisions made:

1. Based on what you have read so far, do you think that it would be better if the UK abandoned the democratic process and allowed the elite within our society to run the country?
2. What do you think would happen to our country if this were to happen?

Representation

The British people, as constituents, are periodically entitled to elect those who will represent their views in a number of political assemblies:

Assembly	Representatives
UK Parliament	Members of Parliament (MPs)
Scottish Parliament	Members of the Scottish Parliament (MSPs)
EU Parliament	Members of the European Parliament (MEPs)
Scottish Local Authorities (Councils)	Councillors

A similar system of government exists within most democratically run states, where different levels of government operate. In all cases however, those elected are expected to act as representatives of the people and serve on their behalf.

It used to be the case that the United Kingdom parliament consisted of men who promoted their own sectional interests. This means that they passed laws and governed in a way that benefited the minority elite groups that they belonged to. This will be explained later when we look at political parties. In the 18th century, an English parliamentarian, Edmund Burke, argued that parliament should consider the national interest, rather than just the interests of a powerful minority. He didn't even think that it should only act on the interests of the majority, arguing that Parliament should represent the interests of everyone, the whole of the nation. It should therefore be a small version of the whole of society.

Burke's view of representation is based on the idea that a Member of Parliament should act independently and take account of the wishes and needs of his constituents, and balance this with what he judges to be right. A parliament consisting of these people would then be capable of making decisions that properly represented the will of the people.

This type of representation, within a democratic system, means that, if the people judge the elected parliamentarians to have **got it wrong**, they can replace them when next there is an election.

Representing the people

It is generally agreed that, for a representative system to work effectively, the following conditions would need to apply:

- The people elected to political power would be expected to take responsibility for those who elected them; to find out, and understand, their wishes and needs. They would therefore act as the voice of their constituents and act on their behalf.
- Elected politicians would therefore be expected to put the welfare of their constituents above their own, or any group that they belong to. This is difficult when he or she belongs to a political party, as most do.
- Elected politicians, such as MPs, are expected to make provision so that they can regularly meet the people that they represent. They do this by arranging constituency surgeries. MPs make themselves available regularly at town halls, community centres and many other venues, in order to be able to meet their constituents. These meetings enable constituents to tell MPs their views on any political issue that they feel strongly about, and also to seek advice, guidance and help regarding problems that they are experiencing. MPs have access to government ministers and civil servants that ordinary people would find difficult to gain. They are therefore better able to help with the type of grievances that local people may not be able to deal with on their own.
- An MP can, on behalf of his or her constituents, ask questions of the Prime Minister, or any other government minister, either in the House of Commons or by writing to them. This can draw the government's attention to an issue of concern to local people.
- It is also possible, but rarely successful, that an MP could initiate a private member's bill and try to have a law introduced that reflects the wishes of constituents.
- Political representation is only ever achieved therefore if the views of the people are properly expressed and their wishes are fully achieved.
- Nowadays it is accepted that everyone should be regarded as being equal politically. The principle of 'one person, one vote' and that everyone should be equally valued, should ensure that the views of all are fairly represented in parliament.

Representation in the Commons

The House of Commons represents the nation indirectly; it debates and votes on issues on our behalf. There is however criticisms levelled at this representative political institution:

- MPs practically always belong to a political party. Parties adopt specific policies on important issues such as health and education. The leader of the party is able to instruct his/her MPs to vote according to the party line. This may mean that the MP votes in a way that is unpopular with constituents.
- Some MPs are sponsored (given money by, for example, a trade union). They may have business interests, perhaps holding a position on the board of directors of a commercial company. This could cause them to vote in a way that suits the union, or business, but not perhaps their constituents.
- The make up of parliament does not properly represent that of the country. Proportionately there are, for example, too few women, people from minority ethnic groups, and young people. It does however have more than its fair share of white, middle-class, middle-aged and elderly men. This then leads some to believe that the decisions taken by parliament are more likely to represent the views and wishes of one part of society, at the expense of the rest.

Referring to the people

Referendum – a way of enabling the people to directly represent their views to parliament in a democratic way.

It is possible, and sometimes happens in the UK, that the government will refer to the electorate and ask for their opinion on a specific proposal. The Scots were asked in 1997, if they wanted to have a Scottish Parliament. The Labour government have indicated that, when the time is right, a referendum may be held to find out whether the British people want to replace the pound with the euro.

A referendum is therefore an opportunity for the people to vote on a specific important political issue. It then enables those in power to gauge the mood of the people. It is, in a way, a form of direct democracy, although parliament is not legally bound to act on the outcome of a referendum.

Advantages of using a referendum

- It can stimulate political discussion and debate within society and help politicians understand the public mood.
- Allowing people to put their individual views directly to the elected politicians can strengthen democracy.
- Important constitutional issues can be settled by finding out the will of the people.

Disadvantages of using a referendum

- Important political decisions are put into the hands of people who may have little real understanding of the issues involved, and may have been unduly influenced by, for example, tabloid newspapers. This may mean that their response is emotional, rather than rational, measured and considered. This obviously is the argument that would be used by those who support an elite theory of government.
- A referendum can let the politicians **off the hook** by enabling them to say that a decision, if it turns out to have been a bad one, was made democratically, by the people.
- They may be nothing more than a snapshot of public opinion, and often over-simplify complicated issues into a simple **yes** or **no** question. Elected politicians are expected to take a longer-term view, and to examine and understand the complexities of issues, before making their minds up.

Summary: Democracy and Representation

We can see that representative democracy is a political system where a small number of people are elected in order to govern on behalf of all of the people. This means that limited, indirect democracy takes place, rather than the direct system that was only ever possible when city-states allowed a limited number of their population to hold citizenship and engage in the political process. Through a system of representative democracy, it is expected that political equality, where the views of everyone will be equally respected, will be achieved.

Student/Pupil Activity

Representation

'In the 30-odd years in which I have contested General Elections, I have seen the proportion of electors willing to turn out slip by virtually 20 per cent. By the last General Election less than 60 per cent exercised their vote and a full 40 per cent saw no point in doing so. A smaller percentage of electors turned up at the polls than at any point in the century since women won the right to have their votes counted. But within the headline figure there is an even more alarming set of statistics, which suggests that without a significant cultural shift we will see turnout continue to decline. Among young voters the proportions of participation are precisely reversed. In their age group only 40 per cent voted and 60 per cent passed up the opportunity to select the government of the nation. If this cohort retains the same participation rate as they grow older we will have a true crises of parliamentary democracy.'

The above passage is taken from the book *The Point of Departure* by Robin Cook, who was a Scottish MP and member of government.

Pairs activity

Having read what Robin Cook had to say about the worrying trend in voting behaviour, work with another student to answer the following questions:

1. Why do you think that fewer and fewer people are prepared to turnout to vote?
2. Why do you think that it is particularly true of young people?
3. If the trend continues, what do you think that the implications for our **representative** system could be?
4. Should we be concerned; does it really matter?
5. What do you think that the government should do to encourage more people to participate in the representative **democratic** process?

Political Parties

People, who are like-minded in their opinions about how a society should be governed, often form organisations known as political parties. These people are likely to base their opinions on a specific ideology.

Ideology – a collection of ideas and beliefs that enable us to understand our society, look critically at issues that affect our lives, and then be able to recommend the type of actions that may make our lives better.

To do this, political parties need power; power to legislate (make laws) and power to govern (run the country). Political parties therefore concentrate on three main activities:

Campaigning and electioneering	Trying to convince the people to vote for them at elections
Executive and legislative duties	Governing the country and controlling the legislative process, if they win a majority in an election.
Scrutiny and opposition	Checking the actions of the party in power, opposing those actions if they disagree with them, and trying to convince the electorate that, at the next election, they should be given the opportunity to govern.

Examples of the types of ideologies that a party may promote can include:

Trying to create a fairer society in which the wealth of the country is more equally distributed.	This is a left-wing ideology.
Trying to encourage individuals to take responsibility for themselves and their families, and not to rely on the state for welfare handouts.	This is a right-wing ideology.
Trying to convince people that the part of the state they belong to would do better if it became independent.	This is a separatist ideology.

As mentioned before, it is now the case that some political parties seem to rely on a populist approach where they concentrate more on finding out what people want from government, and then promise to give them this.

Party systems

A two-party system exists in the UK. Even though there are many political parties vying for our votes, only two normally stand a realistic chance of gaining the power to govern. Labour and Conservative have, for a very long time, alternated in holding the reigns of power. From 1945 to 1979, there was a fairly frequent change of governmental control between these two parties. This changed in 1979 when the Conservatives took power and held it for 18 years. Since 1997, Labour has been in office. The two-party system enables one party to rule, and the other to act as an **official opposition**; the others then represent less popular ideological alternatives. You will see later that this type of party system is not necessarily applicable to the other systems that we will examine. A two-party system is normally able to provide:

- A clear choice between two well-known rival parties; both with a different programme of policies and an alternative vision of how the country should be governed.
- A party with a winning majority that is able to carry out the pledges made whilst electioneering.
- An opposition party with enough political weight to effectively scrutinise and criticise the actions of the party in government, and hold it to account.

Until 1922, it was the Conservative and Liberal parties who dominated the two-party system in the UK, David Lloyd George having been the last Liberal Prime Minister. The 2005 UK general election saw the Liberals (now known as the Liberal Democrats) gaining substantial numbers of seats in parliament, and offering themselves to the electorate as the 'real alternative'. Their hope was that the unpopularity of the Conservatives would continue and that they could become, once again, one of the two dominant members of the two-party system.

Political consensus and polarisation

- Consensus occurs when there is broad agreement between groups.
- Polarisation occurs when groups with two very different views can't agree; they are **poles apart**.

There have been periods of both consensus and polarisation as far as relationships between the two main parties have been concerned.

Two-party consensus

The period between 1945 and the late 1970s was largely one of consensus. Britain had just come through another devastating war. The introduction of radical social and economic policies by the 1945 Labour administration – welfare state; nationalisation of some key industries, and the creation of the National Health Service (NHS) – was not violently opposed by the Conservatives, who, at the time, considered themselves to be **one-nation** Tories. The fact that business could, and did, flourish during this period meant that both parties, but not all of their members, were generally happy with the **mixed economy** that had been created. On coming to power in 1951, the Conservatives did not therefore undo the work of the Labour administration. There was a political consensus between left and right-wing ideologies.

Two-party polarisation

Consensus came to an end in 1979 when Mrs Thatcher, a more right-wing conservative leader, whose followers called the one-nation Tories: 'Wets', came to power. These neo-Conservatives argued that the state had become too big, too intrusive in the lives of individuals; it had become a 'nanny-state'. As far as the economy was concerned, it believed that business was over-taxed and over-regulated. Mrs Thatcher therefore wanted to, as she put it, 'roll back the state'. The Conservatives described Labour as being the party of 'tax and spend'. They saw no prospect of any kind of consensus between the two parties. Many of the nationalised industries were therefore de-nationalised/privatised, and elements of UK health care provision were opened up to the market.

The Third Way

In 1997, under the banner of New Labour, Prime Minister Tony Blair made clear his position that his party was neither left nor right wing. It was new and different, following a **third way**. It recognised that most of Britain's problems resulted from the fact that many people experienced social and/or economic exclusion. A programme of social inclusion would therefore be the driving force behind most of his government's policies. His would be the party in government that encouraged people to go from: 'welfare to work'. In this way, he managed to marry the left-wing ideology of providing welfare for those in genuine need, with the right-wing ideology of encouraging people to get to work, rather than live on state benefits. New Labour seemed therefore to have managed to appeal to an electorate that previously were poles apart.

Two-party system – advantages and disadvantages

From what we have learned, it can be seen that the UK's two-party system may be both good and bad for British politics:

Advantages

- There is a competitive element to political debate. This then provides a clear choice for voters, between two parties.
- A clear winner usually emerges from an election. This provides strong government with a good majority in the Commons.
- The other main party can then provide strong opposition and an alternative to vote for, come the next election.
- The official opposition party is able to hold the government to account.
- The two main parties try to avoid proposing any extreme policies, for fear of discouraging various voter groups from electing them. This then means that the party in power is likely to be moderate in the decisions that it takes. Most British voters don't like extreme politics.
- This is traditionally the way that UK politics have operated and people are used to it.

Disadvantages

- It is sometimes difficult to differentiate between the policies of the two main parties. In 2006, both the Labour government, and the Conservative Party proposed that more political decision making should be passed down to local community level; so-called **double-devolution**. This fits with Labour's devolution agenda, and the traditional Conservative view that there should be as little central government interference as possible; what Mrs Thatcher described as **rolling back the state**.
- There have also been times when the two main parties occupied positions that were poles apart. The neo-Conservative ideology of the Conservatives in the 1980s was very different from the left-wing stance taken by Labour. Some felt that this had a very divisive effect on British society.

Floating voters

It is not just the parties that shift position. An important part of the electorate does the same. They are known as **floating voters**. Even though the political system depends on party ideology to give a framework for the electoral process, the outcome of an election can be determined by the least committed of voters. It is reckoned that roughly 20% of the electorate change whom they vote for at each election. These people often make their decision based on current factors, rather than on any deep commitment to a party or an ideology. Someone who has recently been burgled, or robbed in the street, may decide to vote for a party that promises to be 'tough on crime'. Their vote might be affected by the image of the leader of a party. Tony Blair, for example, was seen, in 1997, as being the young, fresh face of British politics. Eight years later, the Conservatives chose their own young, fresh-faced David Cameron, partly in the hope that this would appeal to the electorate.

Some people criticise the fact that UK elections seem to be becoming more **presidential** in style; televised coverage having become so influential. To some, the political debate may have become **dumbed-down**, with policy and ideology having given way to image and **sound bites**.

Sound bites. The political parties realised that, over a period of time, fewer people were interested in hearing or reading detailed political information. They therefore borrowed from the world of advertising, which has, for a very long time, been using simple phrases to put across its messages. This then gave the parties a kind of shorthand to try to capture the imagination of an increasingly disinterested electorate. Examples have included:

- 'Roll back the state'
- 'Back to basics'
- 'Welfare to work'
- 'Tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime'.

During the 1997 general election, Tony Blair trumpeted his most important policy pledge, using the sound bite: 'education, education, education'.

Two-party system: The complications of having different electoral systems

Later, we look at what happened when, in 1999, the first ever Scottish parliamentary election took place. This used a new, for the UK, electoral system called proportional representation (PR). In this system, each party wins the proportion of seats in parliament that corresponds to the proportion of votes that it won.

In 1999 and 2003, Labour won the most seats and the Scottish National Party the second highest number. This therefore meant that these two parties should have dominated the Scottish two-party system. PR however meant that Labour, whilst gaining the highest number of seats, did not win an outright majority; in other words, the total number of opposition seats was greater than Labour's. All the other parties could therefore gang together and vote down any Labour Bills. (Bills are proposed laws.)

The Liberal Democrats agreed to cooperate with Labour, on condition that some of their MSPs (Members of the Scottish Parliament) were given positions on the Scottish Executive. This working arrangement became known as the Labour/Lib-Dem coalition. The combined numbers of MSPs from the two parties was greater than all of the rest.

The Liberal Democrats found themselves in the awkward position of being:

- As far as the UK was concerned: a party in opposition to the Labour government, and trying to win votes and seats from them.
- As far as Scotland was concerned: a party in coalition with Labour, but trying to win votes and seats from them, during the period of the Scottish parliamentary elections.

Things came to a head in February 2006, when the Liberal Democrats unexpectedly won a Labour stronghold (Dunfermline and West Fife) in a UK parliamentary by-election.

By-elections take place in between general elections, when an MP resigns, dies, or for some other reason, is unable to carry on as an MP.

Immediately after the result, tensions within Labour emerged between the party in Westminster (London) and in Holyrood (Edinburgh). It was felt that Labour, in Scotland, didn't campaign hard enough against their Lib-Dem coalition partners, much to the annoyance of their colleagues down south.

It can be seen therefore that the very clear-cut electoral system used by the UK Parliament, normally ensures that one party is a clear winner, within a two-party system. The system of PR used in Scotland can provide a less clear-cut result, where parties may have to work in coalition with those who, elsewhere would act in opposition to each other.

The need for parties

We can see from what we have read so far that political parties are at the heart of the UK's political process. They enable it to function effectively by:

- Representing the wide variety of needs and opinions that exist within our society.
- Developing and presenting rival policy solutions to the problems that we face, on issues such as: health, education, employment, crime, terrorism, and many more.
- Helping voters to choose who they think would best run the country.
- Governing, or opposing the party that does hold power, and offering alternatives to what the government is doing.

Political parties enable the parliamentary process to work effectively, by operating a well-established system of practices and procedures. In the House of Commons, for example, party leaders can organise their MPs to vote, serve on committees, and perform other duties. These leaders meet regularly to arrange for the smooth running of the House. A parliament consisting of independent MPs, all of whom belonged to no party, would be very difficult to organise into any cohesive legislative body. It would also make it difficult for the nation to know who, or what, they were voting for. Political parties can therefore provide a stable basis for a system of representative democracy.

Party membership

The people who join political parties are known as party members. They are expected to pay money to the party and also help it raise funds. This money can then be used, for example, to pay the costs of election campaigning. The main function of any branch is, of course, to help the party to successfully contest elections. Parties are organised at national level and then divided into local branches. A person joining a party normally becomes a member of the local constituency branch. Members are therefore expected to attend constituency branch meetings and play a full part in the political and social activities of the branch.

Party organisation

Political parties have within their membership and support, a hierarchy. It is normally as follows:

Party leadership	A small number of parliamentarians who hold government positions: Prime Minister, Cabinet and Junior ministers. The other parties appoint people to shadow those in power.
Back-benchers	Elected parliamentarians (MPs) who are expected to support their party by, for example, voting according to the party line.
Party members	Unpaid members who work for the party at local branch level; organising election campaigns and fundraising events within their own constituencies. Some may be elected councillors who serve on local authority councils.
Party supporters	Not actually members of a party, these are the people who help a party by giving their stalwart support; voting for it whenever there is an election. They may belong to a family, or community, that has for generations, supported the party. Some may even be former members of the party.

Party finance

Much of the money raised by a party is used at national level. This helps to pay for the costs of running an organisation that operates full-time, normally on a countrywide basis. In the period leading up to an election, a party needs to find much greater funds, in order to mount an effective campaign. The cost of advertising, for example, can be very expensive, but essential if a party is going to successfully put its message across.

In addition to the funds received from ordinary party members, substantial donations are also received from wealthy supporters, businesses, and large corporations. Some large donations come from abroad. There are some who believe that it would be better if the state funded political parties. This would then mean that concerns about where money is coming from, and why it is being given, would no longer arise. It is unlikely that a wealthy individual, or a large organisation would hand over substantial sums of money to a political party, without expecting something in return. State funding for parties would also mean that money could be distributed more equally, and that the smaller parties may get more.

Party electioneering

Before an election is held, branches interview and then choose from a number of candidates. All candidates will be party members; some local, some perhaps proposed by the national headquarters of the party. The person chosen will then stand for election, representing that party. Each constituency in the UK will therefore have a number of candidates, each representing a different party.

This means that a person chosen by a branch may, if he or she wins the greatest number of seats, become, for example, the Member of Parliament for that constituency. All of the rest who stood for the other parties will obviously have lost, and therefore won't be able to represent their party in parliament. In addition to choosing people to represent them in the various elections – UK, Scottish and EU Parliaments, and Scottish local authorities – members also have a say in deciding who leads their party.

Party campaigning

Having chosen the candidates, a party then needs to get organised. Most parties tackle this at two different levels:

- **National level.** The manifesto is agreed and the corporate message is launched. Parties use identifiable slogans, logos and colours to differentiate themselves from the opposition. Well known senior party figures make themselves available for interview to TV, radio and the Press. Television stations try to organise live head-to-head confrontational programmes between the leaders of the main parties. The Media can, in fact, whip up a level of excitement similar to that of a major sporting event, during the build-up to an election.
- **Local level.** At constituency level, the party knocks on doors and delivers leaflets, as a way of spreading the message and trying to drum up support. High profile politicians from the party try to make as many whistle-stop visits to constituencies as is possible. Candidates often have a campaign agent; a member of the local branch who's job it is to coordinate the campaign within the constituency, trying to get as much positive media exposure as possible. Photo opportunities are an example, where candidates are happy to be photographed with different sections of the local community, such as babies, factory workers and elderly people; all designed to show that they understand, and empathise with the worries and concerns of a wide spectrum of socio/economic groups.

Party political issues

Manifesto pledges, and much of what is debated during an election, are based on issues identified as being important to the electorate. Some are social in nature, others economic and some of constitutional importance:

Social issues

People are often concerned about the state of the National Health Service (NHS); the length of time, for example, that someone must wait before getting a vital operation. The standard of education that young people receive and the condition of the schools that they attend is often another concern. Crime, and the fear of it, also worries many people.

Economic issues

The level of tax, and the fear of inflation (rising prices) are important to many individuals and businesses. They also worry about the amount of money that is spent by government (public spending).

Constitutional issues

People are interested in the position that the different political parties take towards:

- The UK's position in relation to the EU; has the EU become too powerful?
- Devolution and where this leaves Scotland in relation to the rest of the UK.
- The way that the House of Lords is being reformed.

The party that wins a general election may therefore be the one that manages best to position itself in such a way that its policies reflect the opinions of the people, as far as important issues are concerned.

Party loyalty. MPs, because they have been democratically elected, cannot be sacked by their party. If they behave in a way that brings disgrace to the party, or simply talk and vote against it, they can be disciplined, suspended and even expelled from it. They would however remain an MP until the next election.

George Galloway was a Labour MP who, having been expelled from the party on five charges of bringing the party into disrepute, helped form a new party called Respect/The Unity Coalition. He went on to win a seat in the 2005 election, under his new party's banner.

Parliamentary Party

This could be described as being a 'party within a party'. All of the MPs in the Commons belong to one of the parliamentary parties, for example the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP). These groups meet regularly, sometimes to listen and talk to their leader or other senior party (in some cases government) members. It gives all of them a chance to gather and discuss the direction of the party within parliament. If a party is in power, it is important for its leader to be able to rely on the support of all his/her MPs. This can only be done if the leader understands the mood of the party in parliament. Parliamentary meetings enable this to happen.

Party leadership

How a leader is chosen varies from party to party. It is however important because the person chosen to lead a party will, if his or her party wins a general election, become the Prime Minister; the head of government. Between 1979 and 1997, this meant that Margaret Thatcher, and then John Major, were able to form Conservative party governments. Since then the Labour party, under the leadership of Tony Blair has held the government reins.

Party leaders are normally constituency MPs and this therefore means that Tony Blair is:

- Leader of the Labour party
- Prime Minister of the UK
- Member of Parliament for Sedgefield (a constituency in the North-East of England).

Party Representation

Political parties are often seen as representing a specific sector of society, for example:

The Conservatives are regarded as being the party that represents the interests of the middle-class, business and those who would prefer to **conserve** the best of traditional British values. They are a party that believes individuals should take personal responsibility and not become over-reliant on the state. Within the party there are also members who believe in a **one-nation** ideology; believing that, whatever class a person is, they have a part to play in society.

Labour was regarded as being the party of the working-class (the labouring-class) and the trade unions. It stood for the redistribution of wealth and a more equitable society. In recent years its position has changed and, under the banner of **New Labour**, it has concentrated on the idea that Britain will become a fairer society if, through a variety of government measures, social exclusion can be greatly reduced.

Party Change

The ideology of a party can change over time, as can be seen in the way that Labour shifted its position. Society also changes over time; fewer people in Britain nowadays would think of themselves as being working-class. This means that political parties sometimes re-invent themselves in order to attract voters in a changing society. More people live in London and the South of England, than in all of the rest of the UK. This part of Britain is often described as 'Middle England', ie. middle-class, middle-aged and middle-income. It is widely believed by party organisers that, if a party can appeal to Middle England, then it is much more likely to win UK general elections. It is for this reason that political parties try to strike the right balance between **ideology** and **popularity**.

Role of a Political Party

From what we have learned so far, we can see that political parties exist to:

- Seek support, and power, in order to control the political decision making process.
- Develop, and offer to the electorate, a coherent programme of policies to govern the country.
- Provide a political ideology that is acceptable to the voters; one that is both morally acceptable (is it good?), and practical (is it likely to work?).
- Act as a focus for politically like-minded people to join and get involved, in some cases even stand for election.
- Most importantly, to try to change society for the better.

What you have also learned is that:

- Political parties fall in and out of favour with the electorate.
- Parties alter their ideological position from time to time.
- People change their opinions about who they see themselves as being (working/middle-class?) and they also change their minds about what they are looking for from politicians and parties.

Functions of Political Parties – Electoral

Democracy, and the representative process in the UK, is dependent on people voting in elections. The fact that the vast majority of candidates who stand for election represent a political party puts them at the centre of the electoral process. Political parties can prove useful to this process for a number of reasons.

Choice	They make it easier for the electorate to make an informed choice about who to vote for, by providing candidates and policies from which to choose. This then provides some accountability; they may not be re-elected, if they fail to keep their campaign promises.
Policy pledges	Each party provides a set of promises, known as pledges , which explain what it will do if it wins an election and gains power. These pledges are normally contained in a party manifesto and its acceptance by the majority of voters gives the party a mandate to govern.
Electoral process	Most parties have been established for a long time and therefore know how the electoral process works. They provide the funds and the know-how. Elections in the UK usually run quite smoothly.
Compromise	Many of the parties can be described as having a broad church approach. In other words, they have within them people with a wide variety of views. In order for them to come up with an acceptable set of pledges, there has to be compromise and the more extreme ideas normally have to be watered down. In this way most of the parties propose the kind of policies that they hope will be acceptable to the majority of the general public.
Represent views	During elections, each party is likely to represent, and articulate, the views and interests of one or more sections of society. They do therefore pull together various strands of argument in a way that makes it easier for people to understand, and then make the correct voting choice.
Political office	Through a process of elimination (at branch and national party level) those who are best suited to hold political office are identified. These people then stand for office in local authority, Scottish, UK and EU elections. Some become prominent politicians; even party leaders.

Party following	People are by their very nature tribal. Having a party to support, and others to criticise, helps many voters to focus their political thoughts. This competitive aspect of elections is, of course, played out in the media, especially on television; where representatives from various parties compete in interviews to beat each other's arguments and, in doing so, convince voters to elect them.
Rationalise political thought	It can be seen that political parties hold a crucial role in the electoral systems of the UK. They recruit most of our politicians and help us to rationalise our political thoughts about the type of Britain we want our politicians to give us.

Functions of Political Parties – Government

We know that parties exist to win elections and that this then gives them the political power that they need to get things done. What we should now consider is: what do they do with this power?

Legislative power of a party

A party that has won the majority of seats in a legislative assembly, for example the House of Commons, has the power to pass laws that will keep the pledges made before the election. It can do what it promised to do. That is not to say that parties always keep their promises. If however, a party carries out its election pledges, it will be managing to change things within society in a way that is consistent with its political ideology. The other parties will just have to watch, criticise and, when the next election comes around, try to convince the voters that they could do better next time.

A party in government

In the UK, the party that wins a majority in the House of Commons is invited by the monarch to form a government. This means that, not only does this party control the legislative function, it is also in charge of all of the government departments; it runs the country. The party leader will become the head of government, the Prime Minister, and he can then appoint ministers of state, all from his party. This then means that, not only does one party make the laws; it also has the power to execute them (carry them out.)

When in government, a party performs the following functions:

- Provides a policy agenda to be used as the basis for its legislative and governmental decisions. It is often the case that a new government initiative cannot be achieved until the appropriate legislation is in place. The Labour government's wish to cut the number of deaths caused as a result of smoking was aided by the 'ban on smoking in public places' legislation that it introduced.
- Reacts to unforeseen circumstances. Things happen whilst a party is in government that it did not foresee. The government's anti-terror policies and legislation began to be introduced soon after the 9.11 terrorist atrocity in the USA. Prior to this, anti-terrorist policy was not high on any of the UK parties' manifesto agendas. A party in power therefore reserves the right to introduce new initiatives and act differently from what had been promised. Prime Minister Harold Wilson famously said 'a week is a long time in politics'. A political party is likely to hold power for at least four years, in the Conservative's case, 18.
- Allocate office. On coming to power, a Prime Minister will choose from all of the party's MPs, those that he wants to hold Cabinet or junior ministerial positions. Over time, the PM will promote, sack and move sideways these ministers. This is known as a **re-shuffle**. Members of the ruling party will hold all of the positions, in order that the power to govern remains solely with the party in power.

- One member of Cabinet, the Leader of the House, is responsible for the organisation of the House of Commons. This person concentrates on ensuring that the government party gets its legislative agenda through parliament successfully. Laws proposed by the party in power are known as **government sponsored Bills**. Practically all legislation falls into this category. This is regarded as being acceptable because the electorate gave the party a mandate to rule. Having a majority in the Commons does, of course, only yield results if party discipline is maintained and the party whip is obeyed.

Student/Pupil Activity

The roles of political parties in the UK

Individual activity

Answer the following questions in relation to the functions of the UK party political system:

1. What document, normally available before an election, explains a political party's policy pledges?
2. What can the electorate do, to hold a governing party accountable for its actions?
3. How is the Prime Minister chosen?
4. Why is it important for there to be an effective opposition party?
5. Why may a party in power introduce legislation that was not one of its election pledges?
6. What does it mean if a party has been given a: 'mandate to govern'?
7. Why do you think that it is important to have a choice of political parties to choose from at an election?

Major parties in the UK

The emergence of the two-party system

The Whigs and the Tories were the first real political parties in the modern sense. These 18th-19th century parties consisted of MPs who were politically like-minded and often linked by family. These parties existed only within the confines of Parliament itself.

Conservative Party. Tory is an Old Irish word used to describe anyone who is on the run, a fugitive from the law. The word came to be used by Whigs as a put-down to their parliamentary rivals. The Tory Party was seen to represent the interests of the landed aristocracy, gentlemen farmers and the established church, The Church of England. By the 1830s the party had become known as the Conservative Party. The word Tory is however still used today to describe members and supporters of the Conservative Party.

Liberal Party. The Whig Party were in opposition to the Tories at this time. Like Tory, the word Whig is a put-down. The Scottish Covenanters were sometimes called 'Whiggamores' and this is where the word is said to have come from. The Whig Party was seen to represent the interests of the newly emerging industrial and mercantile business class. Such people had become rich and powerful as a result of the Industrial Revolution. In many cases they had become members of the landed gentry but did not hold aristocratic titles. The Whig Party also represented nonconformist Christian groups. The Whigs changed their name to the Liberal Party at about the same time as the Tories changed theirs.

The Tories/Conservatives can therefore be seen as a party that represents traditional and established values, whereas the Whigs/Liberals offered more radical ideas and reformist policies. The mass of the people in Britain at this time had no say in the political process, nor was there a party to represent their interests.

Industrial Revolution is a term first used in Britain early in the 19th century to describe the fundamental changes that took place in the way goods were produced. This shift from an agricultural to an industrial society began in the mid-18th century. The social consequences of this change were immense. The mass of the people eventually moved from their rural homes and work to the new industrial cities. Instead of working on the land for (or renting from) a landowner who their family may have served for many years, they now worked for factory or mill owners. Many experienced terrible working and living conditions.

Reform

1832 saw the introduction of the Great Reform Act. This was one of a number of Whig sponsored reform bills that increased, albeit slightly, the size of the electorate. It was however a requirement of the act that voters had to register with the authorities. It is for this reason that the two parties encouraged groups of supporters to organise under the control of newly established party headquarters. The Reform Club (Whigs) and the Carlton Club (Tories) were soon opened in London to do just this. The relationship between the politicians, their party and the electorate was now established.

National party organisation

More electoral reforms took place between 1867 and 1918. Each increased the size of the electorate further until by the early part of the 20th century, a mass electorate had been established. The two parties realised that in order to govern they must attract the support of the majority of voters. This meant fielding candidates in all the newly established constituencies and offering an attractive range of ideas and pledges. In other words, they had to get organised. The mass of the people now had the vote but were still unable to vote for a nationally organised party that represented the views of this, now largely industrial, working class.

Major parties in the UK

The emergence of a third major party: the Labour Party

Two important factors in the 19th century led to the emergence of the Labour Party in the 20th century:

Trade Unionism

Trade unions are made up of individuals who belong to a particular trade or work in a specific industry. The collective power and influence of such unions is then used to negotiate good wage rates and working conditions for members. The second half of the 19th century saw trade union membership rise substantially. A national body was formed to represent the interests of the trade union movement. The Trades Union Congress (TUC) managed to gain some legal rights for unions. A few union leaders even stood for election and became MPs. Some Liberal Party branches actually put forward working class candidates because new voting rights meant that some constituencies now had a majority of working class voters.

Keir Hardie, the Lanarkshire coalminer and socialist, said at the TUC conference of 1887 that he thought it wrong that working people should support and even join political parties that worked for the interests of the bosses and against those of the workers. At every conference that he attended in the 1890s, he urged the trade union movement to form its own party; a party for the labouring classes. Hardie became the MP for the London borough of West Ham in 1892. He stood as an independent candidate. The Conservative and Liberal Parties were the subjects of his scorn in the Commons because he said that they showed no interest in the plight of the working class. Soon after this, he and a number of others formed the Independent Labour Party (ILP). Hardie and 27 other ILP candidates stood in the 1895 general election; all lost. This was however the start of a party formed specifically to represent the ordinary people. From then on support grew. In 1899 the TUC decided that a conference should be held to discuss ways to enable working class MPs to win seats at the next election. The conference took place the following year in London and this heralded the arrival of the Labour Party.

Socialism

Socialists suggested a fairer alternative to the exploitative relationship between employer and worker that they saw in Britain at this time. Britain was a liberal society; the state interfered very little in the expanding industrial sector. The capitalist elite, those who owned the factories, had a very free hand. This meant that they were able to exploit their workers by, for example, paying them very low wages to work very long hours in bad, sometimes dangerous, conditions. The owners would take profits earned by the workers.

More workers began to learn about the writings of Karl Marx. They came to see that they were being exploited. Marx predicted that a crisis point would come to all capitalist economies where revolution, violent or peaceful, would cause an inevitable change leading to the creation of socialist societies. These societies would operate on the basis of shared wealth and cooperative working. Most working people in Britain had no enthusiasm for a violent revolution. Many were however supporters of a peaceful move towards socialism, the existing political system being reformed rather than smashed. The stage was set for the creation of the Labour Party. A series of parliamentary acts in the 19th century gradually increased the number of workingmen able to vote. It was not until the early 20th century that the franchise (right to vote) was extended to include women of any class.

Major parties in the UK

The Conservative and Unionist Party

This party evolved out of the Tory Party. Its intention was to appeal to the old landed aristocracy and the newly emerging entrepreneurs of the Industrial Revolution. The party argued that, whilst it did not oppose change, it wished the traditions and institutions of Britain to be **conserved**. The Industrial Revolution brought great changes to British life, and a lot of wealth to some people. The Conservatives wanted change to occur slowly and in a way that would not affect the place of established institutions such as the monarchy and the church.

One nation conservatism

For a long time **one nation** ideology was dominant in the party. There was always another strand of Conservative thought, known as neo-liberalism and this emerged as the dominant ideology later in the party's history. One-nation Conservatives encouraged both rich and poor to support the party. It was their view that the interests of all should be served by one party. The wealthier sections of society had a responsibility to those who did not lead privileged lives. The goal was to create a prosperous nation based on a competitive market economy because this in turn would enable society to reduce poverty. This approach accepts the need for some form of minimal welfare provision, because anyone, at some point, could fall on hard times. A caring nation should in these circumstances offer a safety net.

This ideology was by no means socialist but it did accept that many of the welfare and economic measures introduced by Labour after World War 2 were popular with the British people. When the Conservatives regained power in the early 1950s, they didn't dismantle the work of the previous Labour government. The National Health Service continued to develop. Even the 'mixed-economy' of public utilities and private companies remained in place. The period from the late 1940s until the mid-1970s became known as the period of post-war consensus. During this period the governance of Britain switched between Labour and the Conservatives on a fairly regular basis. Neither party, when in power, drastically changed the work of the other. This meant that the Conservative Party was able to attract a reasonable number of working class votes.

Neo-liberalism

Margaret Thatcher became leader of the party in 1975 and Prime Minister four years later. She remains the only woman to have held either position. Hers was a very different ideology to that of the one nation Tories who her followers called 'wets'. The 'New Right', as she and her supporters became known, were firm believers in the free market. They believed that the government should interfere less in the lives and businesses of the British people. She called this 'rolling back the state'. No longer would government take responsibility for the task of eliminating unemployment. The Conservatives were now saying that it was up to the individual to take responsibility and find work. Norman Tebbit, a minister in the Thatcher administration, was famously quoted as saying that the unemployed should 'get on their bike and get a job'.

On taking power in 1979 the Conservative government made it clear that they would apply strict financial (government spending) and fiscal (taxation) controls. They vowed that never again would Britain have to go to the International Monetary Fund to be bailed out, as they said the previous Labour government had to do.

The Conservatives now championed the 'monetarist' economic argument. Monetarists see inflation (rising prices), as being the danger that government should always guard against. They believe that it occurs as a result of an increase in the money supply (too much money available to spend in the economy). A government can cause inflation by overspending and then having to increase its borrowing. High levels of consumer spending can have the same result. Sellers see an opportunity to increase their prices because of these increases in demand for goods and services. Monetarists therefore believe that tightly controlling the money supply, for example by raising interest rates, will cause a fall in prices. People will not borrow as readily and therefore less money will be available in the economy to spend. The money supply will therefore have been controlled. Monetarists accepted that such a policy might cause greater unemployment in the short term. The reduction in demand would mean that fewer workers were needed. They did however argue that ultimately lower prices would make Britain more competitive in the world market and that this in turn would create employment opportunities. Tax cuts were introduced in the belief that they would act as an incentive to people to work. They would keep more of what they earned.

The Falklands Conflict

This conflict helped Margaret Thatcher's image of being the 'Iron Lady'. It is also seen as being a major factor in her party's win in the subsequent general election. The Falkland Islands are British territories that lie off the coast of Argentina in the South Atlantic. The Argentineans have claimed ownership of the islands for over 150 years. The islanders regard themselves as being British. In 1982 Argentinean forces invaded the Falklands and the island of South Georgia. This caused a political crisis. The government had been taken by surprise. The Prime Minister sent a large taskforce, which included two aircraft carriers and nearly 30,000 military personnel. A relatively short yet brutal conflict caused the loss of many lives on land and at sea. Argentinean forces were however overwhelmed and surrendered. Britain once again held the Falkland Islands and Mrs Thatcher was hailed by many as being a heroic leader.

Troubled Times

Despite winning three successive elections, eventually Mrs Thatcher's style of leadership became too much for many of her Cabinet colleagues. Her popularity with ordinary party members did however remain very solid. The introduction of the community charge; known as the **poll tax**, was unpopular, as was her hostility to much of what the European Union was doing. Within the party some feared that she had become an election liability. She was ousted and replaced by John Major. This change of leader worked and in 1992 John Major became the new Conservative Prime Minister, but with a very small majority. His troubles started almost immediately. 'Black Wednesday', when billions of pounds were lost by the Bank of England trying to maintain the value of the pound, shattered the notion that the economy was safe in Tory hands. Britain had to withdraw from the Exchange Rate Mechanism (ERM), which was designed by the European Union (EU) to harmonise interest rates. As a result of this the pound was devalued.

The problem of Europe

John Major's next problem concerned the deep division within the party at all levels between those who supported Britain's continued membership of the EU: **Europhiles** and those who would wish Britain to withdraw, or at least limit its powers, known as **Eurosceptics**. A large number of anti-European Tories defied Major, making it obvious that he didn't have the full support of his party. Major became so concerned by the friction within the party that he challenged his critics to 'put up or shut up'. He resigned as party leader and forced a leadership contest. He won but it was an unconvincing win. Over a third of all Conservative MPs didn't vote for him. They felt that he still wasn't prepared to stand up to the EU strongly enough.

The problem of sleaze

Another problem that haunted John Major throughout his leadership was the almost constant reports in the media of corruption and misconduct concerning important Conservatives. He was portrayed as being weak because he didn't sack those concerned. Matters were made worse by his policy statement in 1993 that the British people should get 'back to basics'. This meant that the government was encouraging personal morality and responsibility, much in the same way that Mrs Thatcher talked about a need to return to 'Victorian values'. Many now thought that the Conservatives were untrustworthy. After 18 years of Conservative government, it was time for a change. In 1997 the Labour Party won the general election and John Major resigned as leader of the Conservatives.

A new leader: William Hague

The Conservatives elected William Hague as their new leader. He promised to try to stop the divisive and damaging infighting that had led to such a disastrous election defeat. His was a Eurosceptic approach that argued for no further integration into the European Union. The defence of sterling and rejection of the idea of the UK entering into European Monetary Union was one of the party's main policies. Unfortunately the party appeared to lack any clear direction in many other areas of policy. The policies of New Labour now appealed to many from the middle classes who would traditionally have voted Conservative. Despite his ability to debate effectively with Tony Blair in the House of Commons, William Hague and the Conservatives were unable to convince the British people of their ability to offer a credible alternative to Labour. Hague resigned as leader of his party when Labour won a second general election in 2001.

A new leader: Ian Duncan Smith

Ian Duncan Smith was then chosen to lead the Conservative party. Smith was the first Tory leader to have been elected under a new system, which allowed all party members to have a vote in leadership elections. By October of 2003 however the leader who had dubbed himself 'the Quiet Man' had become very unpopular, especially with his fellow Conservative MPs. Despite managing to deal with his party's arguments over Europe – it adopted a clear Eurosceptic approach – and his success in English local authority elections, he was seen as being a weak leader. Tory MPs held a vote of no confidence in their leader. Smith lost by 15 votes. 90 Conservative MPs voted against him and 75 for. He resigned and within one hour senior Tory MPs were declaring their support for Michael Howard, the Shadow Chancellor. Howard had been Home Secretary in John Major's government and was regarded as being the leadership candidate with the most government experience.

A new leader: Michael Howard

Howard was elected unopposed. Many thought he was a better leader than his predecessor; better able to tackle Blair in the Commons. To some people however, Michael Howard was remembered as being one of Mrs Thatcher's ministers. Despite the Conservatives gaining 33 seats in the 2005 General Election, Labour for the third time in a row, beat them. On the day after the election, Howard announced that he intended to stand down 'sooner rather than later'. He told the party that he would be 'too old' to lead it into the next election, in four years time.

A new leader: David Cameron

In December 2005 David Cameron, the 39 year old MP for Witney in West Oxfordshire, was elected leader of the Conservative Party. Soon after becoming leader, he unfolded his vision of what he called modern compassionate Conservatism, a tactic that he believed would help lead his party to electoral victory.

Major parties in the UK

The Liberal Democrat Party

This Liberal Democrats are the result of the joining together of two parties. The Liberals which evolved out of the Whigs in 1859 and the Social Democratic Party (SDP) which was formed as a result of a split within the Labour Party in 1981. This merger took place in 1988 and the resultant party was first called the Social and Liberal Democrats (SLD). One year later it changed its name to the Liberal Democrats. The party is usually known as the 'Lib-Dems'.

The Early Years

The Liberals were, from the mid-19th century until 1914, one of the two most powerful parties in Britain. The Conservatives were their main rivals in the two-party system. The last time that the Liberals held real power was in 1910 when they won their last majority at a general election. Ever since then the Labour Party has been the Conservative's main rival to power.

During the First World War the Liberal Prime Minister, David Lloyd George, replaced Herbert Asquith, another Liberal. This caused a split in the Party because Lloyd George formed a coalition government with the Conservatives. In the 1918 election he encouraged his supporters to continue to support the coalition. Other Liberals, led by Asquith, could not stomach this. The result was a deep rift in the Party. During this period the number of working people able to vote was trebled. The Labour Party was the natural choice for the majority of them and this further lessened the chances of the Liberals ever gaining power.

The Reasonable Alternative

From the 1920s to the 1980s the party didn't manage to win more than 23 seats in a general election; despite winning millions of votes. The first-past-the-post electoral system and the fairly even spread of votes across the country, makes it difficult for them to win large numbers of seats. For this reason they have argued for the replacement of the present system with 'proportional representation'. The Liberals during this period occupied the middle ground of British politics. They were not socialist in their ideology, nor were they particularly right wing.

Often seen as the reasonable alternative to Labour and Conservative, it greatly frustrated them that the electorate would simply not vote Liberal in sufficient numbers to give them a real chance of regaining power.

The Merger

1979 saw the end of consensus politics in the UK. The two main parties polarised their positions. The Conservative's neo-liberal stance moving them further to the right and the 'hard left' within Labour pushing in the opposite direction. In 1981 a number of prominent Labour politicians decided to form a new centre-left party, the Social Democratic Party (SDP). Despite initial success in by-elections shortly after this, the SDP did not do well in either the 1983 or 1987 general elections. In many areas of policy their views were very similar to those of the Liberals. It was time to talk to their closest political allies. Initially the two parties tried to function as an alliance with two leaders, David Steel (Liberal) and David Owen (SDP). This proved to be confusing to the electorate. It was decided to ballot the members of both parties on whether to merge. The members agreed to the merger.

Slow Progress

The Liberal Democrats, in the 1990s, steadily gained support, offering a credible alternative to voters who traditionally would have voted Conservative, but now felt that they had moved too far to the right. More recently the Lib-Dems have been considered a slightly left-of-centre alternative to Labour who some see as occupying a right-of-centre position. This modest increase in popularity was reflected in the 1997 general election where the Lib-Dems won 46 seats, twice the number they previously had.

In Scotland

1999 saw the Lib-Dems forming a coalition with the Labour Party in Scotland. The first ever Scottish general election was won by Labour, but not with an outright majority. This meant that they could only form an executive if they could convince another party to work with them. The Lib-Dems agreed to this and two Members of the Scottish Parliament (MSPs) were given ministerial positions in the Scottish Executive. Jim Wallace was made Deputy First Minister and Justice Minister and Ross Finnie became the Minister for Rural Affairs

The Credible Alternative

In recent years Lib Dem leaders such as Paddy Ashdown and more recently Charles Kennedy have helped to establish the party as an alternative to the two main parties, at least in England. Scotland and Wales are different in that they both have a nationalist party to contend with. In March 2006, Sir Menzies Campbell became the new leader of the Party.

Major parties in the UK

The Labour Party

The period between the beginning of the 20th century and 1923 saw the Labour Party begin to emerge as a credible opposition to the Tories. The Liberal split in 1916 paved the way for Labour and the modern 'two party system'. In 1924 Labour were for the first time able to form a government. It was a minority government in coalition with the Liberals. It lasted only 10 months. In 1929-31 they again formed a minority government. On both occasions the Prime Minister was a Scot, Ramsay Macdonald. He found it impossible to convince the British people that his party was trustworthy and able to initiate moderate reforms. No socialist ideas could really be considered achievable under these circumstances. The Liberals would simply not tolerate them. The Depression of the early 1930s caused Macdonald to dissolve his Labour government and replace it with a multi-party **national** government. This caused a split in the party. The Labour Party became the opposition to the National Government and they expelled Macdonald and others. There followed a period of 14 years in opposition.

Real Power

The 1945 General Election saw the Labour Party come to power for the third time in its history. This time however it was able to form a majority government. It made sweeping changes. The National Health Service (NHS) was created. For the first time, healthcare was made available to all, free at the point of use. A comprehensive welfare system was created. Many of the public utilities, such as the railways, coalmines, gas and electricity production and steel production, were nationalised. A massive slum clearance and council house-building programme was started.

The Mixed Economy

Despite the socialist nature of much of Labour's programme at this time, it did not attempt to dismantle the capitalist system. Most businesses carried on as before. The blending of socialism with capitalism became known as the **mixed economy**. From 1945 until 1979, government power shifted fairly regularly between Labour and the Conservatives. Neither attempted to undo the work of the other and this time became known as the period of **consensus**. After the period in the late 40s and early 50s of rationing and economic recovery the UK experienced an economic boom. This lasted until the early to mid-70s. Unemployment levels were very low and people's living standards rose sharply. A Conservative Prime Minister at this time, Harold McMillan, was quoted as saying that we had 'never had it so good'.

Troubled Times

By the middle of the 1970s, the economic climate began to change dramatically. The organisation that represents the leading oil producing nations (OPEC) decided to triple the price of a barrel of oil. This had a major impact on many industrial nations including the UK, which at that time, did not yet have its own oil industry properly up and running. Prices rose, as did inflation and unemployment. The trade unions, which were powerful in terms of membership and influence on the Labour government, made increasing demands on employers for wage rises. This was in order to enable their members to maintain their standard of living in the face of rising costs. These demands were not fully met and this led to industrial action.

The government, under the Tory Prime Minister Edward Heath, had to introduce the **three-day week**. This meant that business and commerce was restricted as to when it could operate. The power supply was affected and power cuts were introduced.

In the late 1970s, the Labour Prime Minister James Callaghan, went to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to borrow funds to prop up the UK economy. Many in Britain felt that Labour had badly handled the economy and allowed the trade unions too much power to influence government policy. The stage was set for the rejection of what came to be known as **Old Labour**. In 1979, the Conservative Party came to power under the leadership of Margaret Thatcher.

18 Years

For 18 years the Labour Party found it impossible to convince the electorate that it was fit to govern. The view of many, promoted by the Tories and much of the Press, was that Labour would again spend money that the country didn't have and allow the trade unions too much of a say in policy decisions. The party had four leaders during this period:

1. The first was Michael Foot who had the unenviable task of leading the party when it was at its lowest ebb. He was well respected within the party and regarded as someone who stood for the old socialist values of Labour.
2. Neil Kinnock was next. He recognised that Labour would not be able to attract sufficient voters whilst it still had a militant tendency within its ranks. He successfully rid the party of much of its extreme left-wing membership.
3. The Lanarkshire MP John Smith followed and he was regarded by many as being a man who could lead the party to electoral victory. He managed to unify the party and present it as being a viable alternative to a Tory government that was perhaps now running out of steam. John Smith did not however live to see this happen.
4. Tony Blair then became leader, promising to carry on the work of John Smith.

New Labour

Tony Blair believed that to win back power, the party had to appeal to a much wider range of people. It had to win the confidence of **Middle England**. This metaphor describes those voters who are middle-aged, middle-class and middle-incomed. By the mid-1990s many of these people had lost faith in the Conservatives. Stories of Tory sleaze dominated the papers

The Third Way

Under Tony Blair's leadership, Labour introduced an ideology that was new and different. The Third Way is based on the notion that a government should adopt policies that follow a middle route and not yield to extremes. In this way the majority of the electorate will support it. This ideology argues that many of the problems of Britain today stem from the fact that people often experience forms of social exclusion. This therefore means that **social inclusion** must be central to any policy decisions. Unemployment is one of a number of examples of social exclusion. It demotivates individuals and may lead them into a culture of welfare dependency. The government-sponsored **welfare to work** scheme was introduced by New Labour as a way of dealing with this type of social exclusion.

The New Deal scheme was designed to offer alternatives to the problems caused by being unemployed, by encouraging people to take up places on training or work experience schemes. This would then lead to them finding work and in so doing, no longer experience social exclusion. The Third Way therefore attempts to balance the need for society to look after and help all of its members with an insistence that individuals take responsibility for their lives and actions.

Major parties in the UK

The Scottish National Party

The Scottish National Party was formed in 1934. Its unifying principle was, and remains the wish for Scotland to become an independent, sovereign nation.

In 1945 Dr Robert McIntyre became the SNP's first MP by winning the Motherwell seat. He held the seat for only six weeks but this was at least a start. Two decades later Mrs Winnie Ewing shocked Labour by taking the Hamilton seat in a November 1967 by-election. In 1970 Labour regained the seat and the SNP lost all of the 42 seats that they fought. However four years later, they won 11 Scottish seats. The SNP was now established as the opposition to Labour in Scotland. Worryingly for Labour, much of the SNP's support was coming from the young urban working-class Scots who traditionally would have supported Labour.

By 1977 the SNP had made large gains in Scottish local authority elections. The party now attracted approximately 25% of the Scottish electoral vote. It now has representation in the Holyrood, Westminster and European Union Parliaments.

The SNP acts as the official opposition to the Labour/Lib-Dem coalition in the Scottish Parliament. The SNP has always been a party that wishes to achieve independence for Scotland by democratic means. It works to convince the Scottish people that, through independence, the lives of all Scots would be enriched. The problem is that the legislation passed in 1707 to join Scotland in an **act of union**, does not have a get-out clause. The fact that the UK has no written constitution makes the situation complicated, as it is unclear as to how Scotland could become independent. The assumption is therefore made, and the former Conservative Prime Minister John Major confirmed this, that if a majority in Scotland voted for independence, there would be a moral obligation on the State to grant independence.

Independence having been achieved, the SNP believe that Scotland should remain a member state of the European Union (EU). It would, because of the social and cultural ties between Scotland and England, propose that Scotland become part of a **Commonwealth of the Isles**.

In June 2004, John Swinney resigned as party leader. This decision followed the SNP's poor results in the European elections. He had been elected to the post in 2000, but latterly had been criticised for his acceptance of the concept of devolution. He argued that the party could use its power and influence in the Scottish Parliament to further the cause of independence. Others within the party felt differently; they argued that this policy was undermining the primary aim of the party: complete independence. His deputy, Roseanna Cunningham, amongst others, stood for the leadership position. Alex Salmond, the MP and former leader defeated her. His deputy is MSP Nicola Sturgeon. She leads the SNP opposition in the Scottish Parliament.

Political parties – pros and cons

They are useful to the UK political system for the following reasons:

- They pull together the various strands of public opinion into more cohesive arguments.
- Parties can educate and inform. Even if you may disagree with them, they made you think.
- They help organise the process of public debate. The British people are then able to come to a decision about what they want their country to be like, and who they want to govern it.
- When elected, they have a democratic right to legislate and govern, according to the principles of representative democracy.
- Political parties offer organisation and stability to a political system that, if it consisted solely of independent politicians, would be very difficult to achieve any sort of order.

There are also disadvantages to a political system that is reliant on political parties:

- A party with a large majority, and for a long time, may become what is called an elective dictatorship; having gained power democratically, it may then begin to abuse that power.
- Parties sometimes represent specific sectors of society, to the detriment of others. They can therefore have a divisive effect on society. The Conservatives, when in power, were accused by some of destroying the British coal mining industry. The closures had a devastating effect on mining communities. Labour, on coming to power, enabled the 'anti hunting with dogs' legislation to be passed. Some saw this as being working-class revenge on the rural middle-class, who had voted for the Conservatives.
- No party can ever represent the views of all of the people.
- The collective nature of political parties means that a candidate's own personal views, and those of the constituents must be secondary to those of the party.
- Minority groups with their own very important views will find it difficult to find a mainstream party that represents them.
- If you want to become involved in the UK's political system; if you feel that you have something important to offer, but don't belong to a political party, you will have little or no chance of being successful. The party system in Britain virtually excludes independent candidates.

Student/Pupil Activity

The party system and the major parties

Pairs activity

Using the above information and any other useful resources, such as newspapers and the Internet, work with another student to complete the following tasks:

1. Choose one of the major political parties.
2. Identify three prominent people within this party, and describe the positions that they each hold within their party.
3. Describe the basic ideology of this party.
4. Identify and explain a political issue that this party is involved in.
5. Describe the attitude of another political party to this same issue.

Pressure Groups

A pressure group is an organisation made up of like-minded people who have joined together in order to achieve commonly held objectives. They get their name because they usually try to achieve their objectives by trying to influence those who hold political power. They try to **pressure** them. These groups try to influence the decisions and actions that governments and legislative bodies take. Pressure groups hope that they will influence changes to government policy and to the law. To do this, they often attempt to enlist the support of the public and media in order that the pressure on government is even greater.

Applying pressure. Pressure groups are different from political parties because they don't try to win political power; instead they apply pressure to those who do: the political parties.

Reducing the democratic deficit

A representative democracy like the UK may be criticised for lack of political participation by the British people. The extent to which many of us take part in the political process is limited to voting every few years. Putting a cross on a ballot paper is simply handing over power to a small group of politicians, who will then govern on everyone else's behalf, until the next election. This unhealthy situation is described as being a **democratic deficit**.

Remember that democracy means **rule by the people**.

Pressure groups are seen as being useful to the British political system because they help to reduce the democratic deficit. They provide individuals with a way of becoming politically active between elections. Unlike political parties, they offer the opportunity to act on single issues. Members of these groups can act by monitoring and pressuring the government. They try to stop those in power from misusing the democratic power entrusted to them by the people.

The trend is now for more people to join or support pressure groups whilst fewer are becoming members of parties. Many seem to have lost faith in the party political system. Pressure groups can be divided into two distinct categories:

- **Cause groups:** This type of group normally fights for what it believes to be a moral cause. It will be altruistic because its members and supporters are unlikely to benefit directly from the success of its actions.
- **Interest groups:** This type of group generally acts for the interests of its own members, or those of a specific sector of society.

It could therefore be argued that cause groups behave in a way that is largely **selfless**, whilst interest groups act in a way that is more **selfish**.

Cause groups

These groups campaign for what they believe to be a good cause. They think that some aspect of the way that society functions is wrong and therefore try to change or eradicate it. Members of this type of group know that their actions are for the general good, and may have a positive impact on the lives of other people, at home or abroad. Amnesty International is a cause group that campaigns against any state that falsely imprisons and tortures people. It encourages its supporters from around the world to put pressure on their governments to apply pressure on offending states, in the hope that such treatment will stop. Greenpeace is another well-known pressure group, in this case, an environmental group that fights to reduce the threat that pollution poses to the world.

Other groups exist because of a common concern for the welfare of a section of society that may be experiencing some form of exclusion or discrimination. The members of such a group may not benefit directly from their actions but they often feel that they are unable to sit back and watch, as others are disadvantaged. An example of this type of group is Shelter. This organisation pressures for the right of everyone to live in safe, warm, wind and watertight accommodation. Its main targets are the political decision makers within local, regional and national bodies. These are the people who determine housing policy and allocate the budgets for house building, renovation and development. Groups like this believe that if they are successful, a better and fairer society will be the ultimate outcome. Cause groups are often known as: **promotional pressure groups**.

These groups help to keep up the pressure on government to account for, or even change, its actions. They can force government to make available, information that it would prefer not to be in the public domain.

Interest groups

Some pressure groups have objectives, which, if achieved, would benefit its members directly. The collective economic interests of its members would also be helped. They exist, therefore, to protect member's interests. Examples of such pressure groups would include trade unions and professional organisations; in both cases, membership is restricted to those who are employed in a specific sector of the economy. Amicus is an example of a British trade union. It represents workers in both the public and private sectors, and works to improve the standard of living and quality of lives of its members by negotiating with employers and lobbying government. The British Medical Association is a professional organisation that represents the interests of most of the doctors in the UK. It too, lobbies government on issues of health provision and the working conditions of doctors. Organisations like this are known as: **sectional or protectionist groups**.

Political links

The separation of political parties from pressure groups is not as complete as some would like. Labour has long held links with the trade union movement in Britain. The Trades Union Congress (TUC), which represents most of the unions in the UK, has traditionally held some influence over the Party. Since coming to power in 1997, Labour has reduced this level of influence. The Conservatives have had a similar relationship with the Confederation of British Industry (CBI), an organisation representing many British employers. In recent years the Labour Party has managed to foster better relations with the CBI. It may nevertheless be the case that this type of influence is unhealthy. Pressure groups of this type are known as **insider groups**. They occupy a privileged position compared to **outsider groups**, who have little, or no, access to government ministers.

At least we can vote for the parties

Political parties hold the power to govern when they have been democratically elected. The same cannot be said of pressure groups. Parties can be held accountable to the electorate. If they get things wrong, the voting public may turn against them; they may lose power. Pressure groups are not democratically accountable. In many cases they serve a minority interest. This, of course, is contrary to the principle of democracy and the belief in rule by all of the people.

Laws in the UK are enacted by democratically elected MPs (MSPs in Scotland). Pressure groups who break the law whilst protesting may be considered a threat to democracy. Some argue that those groups, who wish laws to be changed, should seek election and operate from within the system. The Scottish Green Party is an example of a pressure group that has done just that. They may have increased their democratic legitimacy as a result of this.

Pressure groups and the threat to democracy

We know that, in ancient Greece, the word democracy described a political system in which citizens participated directly in the process of making laws and governing the state. This is known as **direct** or **participatory** democracy, and there was no distinction between the government and the governed. The citizens were the state.

A plurality of views

Modern democracies, such as the U K, have adopted a system known as **representative** democracy. This means that people choose those who will govern, by voting for them in periodic elections. Those elected are expected to represent the views and opinions of the voters. Elections provide a variety of candidates, and political parties, from which to choose, and not everyone will be happy with the result. Political decisions, such as legislation and government action, are therefore made, that go against the wishes of a sizable proportion of the population; the French writer Tocqueville called this **the tyranny of the majority**. It was Tocqueville who promoted the idea of pressure groups being seen as **intermediaries** between the individual and the state, the individual being virtually powerless, and the state being very powerful. He argued that if **like-minded individuals** organised into groups these groups could then pressure the state into making different political decisions. Tocqueville thought that a society with many such groups, offering a plurality of views, would help to keep government in check and ensure that these views were heard. This political doctrine is called **pluralism**.

A democratic deficit

We also know that a criticism levelled against representative democracy is that, having handed over power to democratically elected politicians, it may be another four years before the electorate can re-elect, or replace them. During this period, the government may act differently from the wishes of the people. This is known as the **democratic deficit**. Pressure groups are regarded as being useful in reducing this deficit, by maintaining the pressure between elections.

The threats to democracy

The pluralism and democratic deficit arguments therefore clearly demonstrate the very real need that a democratic society has for the continued existence of pressure groups. There are however arguments to show that, rather than being good for democracy, they can also pose a threat to it. The arguments are as follows:

- Pressure groups are not democratically accountable, in the way that political parties are. A party in power can be unseated, if a sufficient number of voters are unhappy with its performance and choose to elect another party. Pressure groups can carry on indefinitely, even if their actions are unpopular with the public.
- Government is scrutinised by parliament: question times, the committee system and constant media investigation. Pressure groups are not subject to such scrutiny; more often than not, they occupy the role of scrutineer, feeding information on the government to the press and opposition parties.
- Pressure groups, by their very nature, usually represent minority interests. This, as Tocqueville told us, can be a good thing, but not if a group is able to exert a level of pressure much greater than the size of its support. Some business interests groups, for example, represent a relatively small number of very wealthy shareholders. The massive funds available to these few people can however be used to ensure that their opinions are forcefully put to government, often by paying professional lobbying firms to do the work. The resources available to the group, rather than its popular support, then become a deciding factor in its success.
- The leaders and decision makers within many pressure groups are not democratically elected by their members. This can mean that the views of the majority of grassroots members may not be reflected in the policy decisions and actions taken by their leaders.
- Membership of some pressure groups, especially those representing the professions, is usually restricted to those people belonging to that profession. It is often the case that these groups are **insider** groups, and as such, have much greater access to government than ordinary citizens.
- Some pressure groups employ direct action methods that are disruptive, intimidating and in some case violent and illegal, in order to gain publicity and support for their cause. Whilst his or her cause may be an admirable one, if everyone with a political view behaved in this way, social order could break down. The democratic process is designed to ensure that peoples' wishes are realised, within a safe and fair political environment.

Student/Pupil Activity

Pressure groups

Group research activity

Using the Internet, and any other useful and relevant sources that you can find, complete the following group task:

1. Decide on a pressure group that your group would be interested in finding out more about.
2. Identify the aims of the group: what cause it supports and what it hopes to achieve.
3. Find out the methods that it uses to try and influence public opinion, and to apply pressure on the political decision makers.
4. Decide whether it is an **interest** or cause **group**.

Once you have completed your research, and you have discussed what you have found out, elect one of your group to feedback the information to the class.

It may be interesting to find out how many people in your class agree, or disagree, with the aims and methods of your chosen pressure group.

Pressure Groups and Methods of Operation

Pressure groups are only likely to be successful if they are able to persuade the public of the worth of their arguments. They do this by using methods that range from letter writing to sabotage.

Mild Forms

Simple methods used to publicise a cause can include fly-posting and distributing leaflets. Some pressure groups encourage their supporters to write letters to MPs and MSPs in the hope that they will influence government ministers. Groups often gather signatures; the belief is that a very large number of signatures will demonstrate a groundswell of public opinion in support of a cause. The handing-in of these petitions to, for example, 10 Downing Street, is used as a useful **photo opportunity**.

Demonstrations

If a group wants to show the government that it has widespread support, it may organise mass demonstrations. Not only do these events help to boost the morale of the group's supporters but they usually attract a great deal of media attention. A large turnout and celebrity supporters can further increase media attention. In recent years some of these demonstrations have been massive and in a few cases destructive. Cities throughout the world now dread the possibility of having to host an international economic conference because of the activities of the **anti-capitalist** demonstrators.

Publicity stunts

Greenpeace has become very adept at the art of staging publicity stunts; for example, they took over an oilrig platform and then waited for oil company security staff to retake the rig. Everything was videotaped, edited and turned into ready-to-use press releases. Some television channels then broadcast the material. It got to the point that the broadcasting authorities had to sanction some television companies for using the information provided without even editing it or checking the facts. The pressure group **fathers 4 justice**, who campaign for the right of estranged fathers to be allowed access to see their children, have carried out a number of very successful publicity coups. On one occasion, they managed to get into the Commons and shower government ministers with coloured dye.

Lobbying

Some pressure groups think it more practical to talk directly to the politicians. This is known as lobbying and is so called because people who wished to have the ear of important politicians used to wait in the lobbies of Westminster and try to catch their attention. Nowadays they are more likely to make an appointment to see politicians either in their office or perhaps over lunch. Lobbying is now a very sophisticated process often done by highly professional, and very well paid people. They are specially trained to be able to quickly present complex information in a clear and succinct way. This can be useful to politicians as it is a way of gathering information on a policy area that they may soon need to make a decision about. Some groups use commercial lobbying firms who specialise in providing this type of service, others employ their own staff. The criticism that is occasionally levelled at the lobbying process is that it may be open to corruption. It would, for example, be possible to bribe a politician to vote in a way that suited the objectives of a pressure group.

Insider Groups

For some groups it is relatively easy to apply influence and pressure. These groups have direct access to the decision-makers themselves, usually government ministers or senior civil servants. This type of group is normally regarded as being acceptable to the political establishment and is therefore granted a level of access not given to others. Such groups may be asked for their views on policies that are being formulated by the government. This has the effect of allowing non-elected individuals the opportunity to influence the policy decisions of government. The Police Federation may be an example of an insider group. That is not to say however that an insider group will always be in full agreement with the party in power. The thing that sets this type of group apart from the rest is the fact that they will be unlikely to become involved in any activities that would cause difficulties or embarrassment to the government. Their extensive network of contacts within the corridors of power, sometimes known as the 'old boy network' means that there is no need for them to take to the streets in protest. They play by the rules, not criticising ministers or disclosing confidential information.

Direct Action

Groups that take direct action are believed to have gone beyond the normally accepted rules. Instead of simply trying to convince the decision makers to alter their policies using tactics such as letter writing and lobbying, they attempt to physically change or disrupt the implementation of political decisions. An example of this is the self styled **eco-warriors**. They try to convince the public and politicians that a reduction in the use of fossil fuels and fewer cars on the roads is preferable to the continued building of new roads for even more cars. By attaching themselves to trees or tunnelling underground in areas where permission has been granted to build new roads, they manage to delay the process of clearance and building. This type of dramatic action normally manages to attract a lot of media attention and has meant that the police have had to develop new and safe methods to deal with the increasingly sophisticated tactics of these protesters.

Sabotage

Some groups resort to disturbing, and in some cases life threatening, acts of arson and attack. Animal liberation and anti-vivisection organisations have, for example, broken into places like animal research establishments and mink farms and set the animals free. Others have set light to such premises and threatened those who work there with violence. Similar things have been done by anti-abortion groups to clinics and their staff.

Practice Assessment

The following is similar to the type of questions that you will be expected to answer when you sit your assessment:

Time allowed: ½ hour

Question:

Explain what the main differences in the UK are between political parties and pressure groups.

In your answer you should:

- Describe the main differences between political parties and pressure groups regarding their aims and methods of operation.
- With a pressure group that you have looked at in mind, explain how it tries to influence the government.

Differences between political parties and pressure groups

We can see now that there are a number of fundamental differences between parties and groups; they are as follows:

- Parties seek political power, whilst groups concentrate on applying pressure on those in power. This means that parties put forward candidates to stand for election, pressure groups don't.
- Parties put themselves before the voters at election times; the party in power can then be removed, if it is no longer popular. Pressure groups don't stand for election and so it is difficult to gauge their popularity; they are not subject to the same democratic scrutiny.
- Groups tend to concentrate on a single issue, whereas parties offer a comprehensive manifesto covering all, or at least most, of the important policy areas.
- Some groups last for only a short period of time. These ad hoc groups disband when the cause they are fighting for is either resolved, or lost. Most parties last for a very long time.

Electoral systems: The UK Parliament elections

The Commons

The House of Commons is the most important part of the UK Parliament; unlike the Monarchy and Lords, its members are democratically elected. Members of this assembly are known as Members of Parliament (MPs).

An unfair advantage

MPs are elected approximately every four years. It is up to the Prime Minister to decide when a UK general election will take place. This puts the party in government in a very favourable position, as it can plan its election campaign well in advance, without telling the other parties the election date until closer to the time. It also means that it can choose a time when it thinks that it is popular, and therefore more likely to win.

The First-Past-The-Post (FPTP) electoral system

- In a UK general election, the country is divided into 646 geographic areas, known as constituencies.
- Each constituency returns (elects) one MP to parliament.
- In order to decide who that MP will be, an election takes place in each constituency.
- Schools, community centres, town and village halls, and other suitable venues are used to hold the election.
- The official responsible for running the election in each constituency is known as the 'Returning Officer'.
- Voters in each constituency must choose one person from a list of names that appear on the ballot paper that they have been given. They do this by marking an X beside their choice.
- Most of the candidates will belong to a political party, and the name of their party will appear with their name. Independent candidates may also appear on the ballot paper.
- At the end of election day, the votes are counted in each constituency and the candidate who received the greatest number of votes is declared, by the Returning Officer, to have been 'duly elected as Member of Parliament' for the constituency.
- The others win nothing, but can try again at the next election.

This type of election is like a horse race, where there can only be one winner. That is why it is described as a 'first-past-the-post' election.

Lost votes. There is a popular myth that says that the votes of those who didn't vote automatically go to the winning party. This is not true; if you don't vote, the vote is lost.

After the results are declared

The political party that wins the greatest number of seats is asked by the Monarch to form the UK Government. A party needs to win 324 seats to gain an outright majority. The seats won by each of the parties in the 2005 UK Parliamentary general election were as follows:

Party	Seats won
Labour Party	356
Conservative Party	198
Liberal Democrats	62
Democratic Unionist Party	9
Scottish National Party	6
Sinn Fein	5
Plaid Cymru	3
Social Democrat and Labour Party	3
Others	4

The table above shows that the Labour Party won the 2005 election convincingly; they went on to form the third consecutive Labour executive; a first for the Party. The Conservatives came second and therefore formed Her Majesty's Official Opposition.

Not proportional representation

Under this type of electoral system, the proportion of people in the country that voted for each party is unlikely to be reflected in the proportion of seats taken by each party. The House of Commons is therefore an inaccurate reflection of the nation's party political support.

In the 2005 election, the percentage of the UK electorate that voted for each of the three biggest parties was as follows:

Party	UK share of the vote
Labour Party	35.3%
Conservative Party	32.3%
Liberal Democrats	22.1%

This table shows that the Labour Party achieved only 3% more of the vote than the Conservatives, and yet won 157 more seats. The Liberal Democrats won over one-fifth of the popular vote, and yet were only able to take 62 of the 646 seats in Parliament.

The table below shows:

- the number of seats won by the three main parties
- the percentage of seats won by these parties
- the percentage of the popular vote won by each party
- the number of seats that these parties would have won, had the result been based on the popular vote.

Party	Seats won	% of seats won	% of popular vote	Seats that would have been won
Labour	356	55.1%	35.3%	228
Conservative	198	30.6%	32.3%	208
Lib-Dem	62	9.5%	22.1%	142

This table shows that, if some kind of proportional representation system had been used, Labour would not have managed the threshold 324 seats needed to achieve an outright majority. The Conservatives would have come a close second, and the Lib-Dems would have taken more than double the seats that they have. It is also interesting to note that, under these circumstances, the Conservatives and Lib-Dems would be able to work together and make it virtually impossible for Labour to govern.

Turnout

Turnout was 61.3%. This was 2% higher than on the previous general election. This means that 61.3% of those people in the UK entitled to vote, turned out to vote; the concern, of course, is that in this representative democracy, 38.7% didn't. This means that over one-third of the electorate took no part in electing their MP, or choosing the government.

Previous elections

The table below shows the number of seats won by the three biggest parties in the 1997, 2001 and 2005 general elections:

Party	1997	2001	2005
Labour	419	413	356
Conservative	165	166	198
Lib-Dem	46	52	62

This data shows that Labour, whilst still far in the lead, is losing seats at each election. The Conservatives and Lib-Dems are gaining seats.

A clear winner

Whilst not providing proportional representation, the first-past-the-post system normally provides the country with a party that has won a decisive election victory. Under these circumstances, there can be no doubt as to who has won, and this can then enable the victorious party to provide strong leadership. It won't have to share power with any other party. Some see this as being a good thing because indecisive election results can mean that parties may have to cooperate and compromise; they may even have to work in coalition, in other words, form a joint executive and share power.

Advantages and disadvantages of FPTP

From what we have studied, you can see that there are a number of advantages and disadvantages to this type of electoral system; they are as follows:

Advantages

- The system is simple for people to understand and participate in.
- Normally there is a clear winner, and therefore no need for coalition government.
- It often provides strong government with a healthy majority.
- One MP for each constituency is said to create a clear link between parliament and the people, and this is good for democracy.

Disadvantages

- This system suits the two leading parties, and maintains the two-party system, at the expense of the other parties.
- The majority of voters are unlikely to have voted for the winning party.
- The percentage of seats won by each party is unlikely to be similar to the percentage of votes received.

Student/Pupil Activity

Electoral systems: First Past the Post

Individual activity

Results of the UK General Election in 2001:

Political Party	Votes won	Seats won	Seats that would have been won if based on % of votes
Labour Party	40.7%	413	268
Conservative Party	31.7%	166	209
Liberal Democrat Party	18.3%	52	121

Using the above information, what can you conclude about the fairness of the first past the post electoral system?

Electoral systems: The Scottish Parliament elections

The new Scottish Parliament first sat in 1999. Members of this assembly are known as Members of the Scottish Parliament (MSPs). There are 129 MSPs, and they are elected every four years, on a specified date. This means that everyone knows well in advance, when the next election will take place.

Proportional representation

A number of electoral systems have been designed to try and achieve proportional representation (PR). PR means that the proportion of votes given to each party will be reflected in the political make-up of an assembly.

The Additional Member System (AMS) electoral system

This is a mixed system where a voter has two votes:

1. Some of the seats in the parliament are elected using the first-past-the-post system. There are 73 single-member constituencies and every constituent can vote for one individual who may become a constituency MSP.
2. Another 56 seats are allocated to additional members, using a party list system.

First Ballot

- Scotland is divided into 73 parliamentary constituencies.
- Each constituency returns one MSP to the Scottish Parliament.
- Voters must choose one person, from a list of candidates, and place an X against his, or her, name.
- Most candidates will belong to a political party, but one or two may be independents.
- The candidate who gains the greatest number of votes becomes the constituency MSP, and will then be entitled to sit in Holyrood (the Scottish Parliament in Edinburgh).

This is the first-past-the-post element of Scottish Parliamentary elections.

Second Ballot

- Before an election, each political party is asked to provide the authorities with a list of candidate names; numbered in order of preference; one list for each of eight regions, which correspond to the regions used for European Parliament elections that we will study later.
- In the second ballot paper, voters are given a list of political parties to choose from.
- The names of some independents may also be included.
- Voters must place an X against the name of one of the parties.

- The total number of additional member votes cast for each of the parties in a region is calculated.
- This total is then divided by the number of Constituency MSPs that each party won in a region in the first ballot, plus one to make sure none is divided by zero.
- The party with the highest total after this division gains the first of the seven Additional Member places. The second – through to the seventh – Additional Members are then allocated in the same way, but each new Additional Member gained by a party is not included in the calculation. An independent candidate is treated as if he was a **single member party**.
- 56 regional MSP seats are available, seven for each of the eight regions.

This is the party list element of the Scottish Parliamentary electoral system.

A proportionately representative outcome

The combined numbers of MSP seats allocated to each party will, using this system, be quite proportional to the number of votes given to each party. The people in the Scottish Parliament may therefore accurately reflect the views of the Scottish people.

Not a clear winner

Whilst ensuring proportional representation, the AMS system may not provide a single party with a decisive election victory. In the 1999 and 2003 Scottish elections, Labour won the largest number of seats, but not a clear majority. It is for this reason that they had to find a coalition partner: the Liberal Democrats. This is a power-sharing agreement that, some would say, does not provide the type of strong government that a clear winner under FPTP can give.

The Scottish General Election 1999

This was the first ever opportunity for the Scots to elect members to a Scottish Parliament. Polling day took place on the 6th of May 1999. Subsequent elections will take place every four years. The Scottish Press reported the results, concentrating on the following:

- Many of the papers talked about voter apathy, saying that the weather was bad throughout Scotland and that this may have contributed to a low turnout of around 59% on both ballots.
- Of the 129 MSPs, 48 (37%) were women. Only 20% of MPs in the House of Commons were women. None of the MSPs were from ethnic minority groups.
- Labour, whilst having the greatest number of seats, did not achieve an outright majority.
- Labour suffered humiliation in Falkirk West where the sitting Labour MP Dennis Canavan having been rejected as an official 'New Labour' candidate stood as an Independent and won convincingly.
- The Scottish Socialist Party having gained 7% of the Glasgow vote managed to win a seat for their leader Tommy Sheridan through the second ballot.
- The Conservatives were now able to re-enter Scottish politics thanks to the Additional Member System; they had no Scottish MPs at this time. They didn't win any seats in the first ballot.
- The Green's strategy of only putting up candidates for the 2nd Ballot paid off. Robin Harper won a seat.

National Vote share/seats:

	1 st Ballot		2 nd Ballot		
	%	Seats	%	Seats	Total Seats
Labour	39%	53	33%	3	56
SNP	29%	7	28%	28	35
Conservative	16%	0	13%	18	18
Lib Dem	14%	12	15%	5	17
Others	3%	1	11%	2	3

The other candidates were:

- Dennis Canavan: Independent 1st Ballot.
- Robin Green: Green 2nd Ballot.
- Tommy Sheridan: SSP 2nd Ballot.

Scottish General Election Results 1999 and 2003

Party	6 May 1999 MSPs Elected	1 May 2003 MSPs Elected	Change
Labour Party	56	50	-6
Scottish National Party	35	27	-8
Conservative and Unionist Party	18	18	No change
Liberal Democrat Party	17	17	No change
Scottish Green Party	1	7	+6
Scottish Socialist Party	1	6	+5
Independents	1	3	+2
Scottish Senior Citizens Unity Party	Not formed	1	+1
MSPs for Scottish independence	37	41	+4
MSPs for Scotland remaining within the UK	92	86	-6

- Labour took six less seats than four years ago. This meant that, once again, they did not achieve an outright majority.
- The SNP came second again and, as before, became the official opposition. They did particularly badly, losing eight seats.
- Both the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats held on to their 18 and 17 seats.
- The Greens did very well, having gone from a single seat to now having seven. Their strategy of appearing only on the second ballot papers worked even better than four years before.
- The SSP also did very well, despite high levels of negative coverage in the Scottish media.
- The independent, Dennis Canavan, held his seat in Falkirk West. Two others now join him. Margo MacDonald, who had left the SNP, and retired doctor Jean Turner, who campaigned over the closure of Stobhill Hospital.
- A new political party also won a seat. John Swinburne became the first MSP to represent the Scottish Senior Citizens Unity Party.

No clear winner

Whilst providing proportional representation, the additional member system normally provides Scotland with a winning party that hasn't achieved an outright majority. Under these circumstances, the winners have to find another party prepared to join in coalition. This then means that power has to be shared with a **junior partner** in government. In 1999 and 2003, the Liberal Democrats were prepared to take this role, but at a price. Their leader in Scotland was made Deputy First Minister within the Scottish Executive, and policy compromises had to be made on both sides. This situation obviously doesn't help to provide the strong leadership that FPTP can. You will notice that the Liberal Democrats were only the fourth most popular party in both elections, and for this reason, may have been given a disproportionate amount of power.

Advantages and disadvantages of AMS

From what we have studied, you can see that there are a number of advantages and disadvantages to this type of electoral system; they are as follows:

Advantages

- The system is proportional; each party gets the percentage of seats that it is entitled to.
- Small parties and independent candidates stand a much better chance of winning seats.
- Voters are more inclined to vote for small parties and independents, knowing that theirs will not be wasted votes.
- Having two votes provides the opportunity to vote differently in each ballot.
- This system is less favourable to the two main parties and helps to diminish the power of the two-party system.

Disadvantages

- The system is more difficult to understand and participate in.
- There is more likelihood of coalition government.
- A strong Executive may not result from this type of election.
- List MSPs have no clear link with constituencies.
- This system could be used by extreme political parties to gain seats.

Practice Assessment

The following is similar to the type of questions that you will be expected to answer when you sit your assessment:

Time allowed: 1/2 hour

Question:

Scottish Parliamentary Election 2003

Share of votes by party

Party	Number of seats won	Share of seats won	Share of votes won
Labour Party	50	38.8%	31.95%
Scottish National Party	27	20.9%	22.35%
Conservative Party	18	14.0%	16.05%
Liberal Democrat	17	13.2%	13.6%
Green Party	7	5.4%	6.9%
Scottish Socialist Party	6	4.7%	6.45%

Using only the above information how useful is the additional member system in providing proportional representation?

Note: Four individuals also won a seat in this election:

- Dennis Canavan. MSP for Falkirk West
- Dr Jean Turner. Save Stobhill Hospital Party
- John Swinburne. Scottish Senior Citizens Unity Party
- Margo MacDonald. Scottish Independence MSP

Electoral systems: The Scottish Local Authorities elections

Councils

There are 32 local authorities in Scotland. Every council is legally required to provide a range of services, such as school education, social services, and refuse collection. These are called statutory requirements because they are **mandatory**; they must be done. It is up to each council to decide what other services it will provide; these services are not legally required and so are called **discretionary**. It's at the discretion of a council to decide whether to provide them. The Scottish councils are listed below:

1	Aberdeen City Council
2	Aberdeenshire Council
3	Angus Council
4	Argyll and Bute Council
5	Clackmannanshire
6	Dumfries and Galloway
7	Dundee City
8	East Ayrshire
9	East Dunbartonshire
10	East Lothian
11	East Renfrewshire
12	City of Edinburgh
13	Falkirk
14	Fife
15	City of Glasgow
16	Highlands
17	Inverclyde
18	Midlothian
19	Moray
20	North Ayrshire
21	North Lanarkshire
22	Orkney Islands
23	Perthshire and Kinross
24	Renfrewshire
25	Borders
26	Shetland Islands
27	South Ayrshire
28	South Lanarkshire
29	Stirling
30	West Dunbartonshire
31	Western Isles
32	West Lothian

Councillors

Each of the 32 local authorities is run by a group of councillors. There are over 1,000 Scottish councillors and they are democratically elected every four years, during the Scottish Local Authority elections. Each councillor is elected to serve a **ward**, a smaller district within a local authority area. To stand for election, a candidate used to have to be at least 21 years old. Decisions about the running of a local authority are debated, and then voted on at meetings of the full council. Smaller groups of councillors are also organised to meet as committees, each responsible for a specific area of council work, such as education or planning. Councillors hold elected, and therefore temporary, positions.

Duties of councillors

Councillors have a number of different duties; they are as follows:

- Attend frequent full council, committee, and even sub-committee meetings.
- Hold local surgeries. In order to hear the views and opinions of local people, and to help them with problems related to issues like housing and education. Councillors regularly make themselves available in places like local community halls.
- Attend party meetings. Councillors are often members of a political party; this means that they attend a number of meetings of the local branch of their party. They may also attend party conferences and debates.

Political parties

Most councillors belong to a political party; those who do not are known as **independents**. Within each of the local authorities, the political party with the greatest number of councillors elected forms an administration. In this way a council will be described as being, for example, Labour, Liberal Democrat or SNP controlled. Some council elections don't provide an outright winner, and so two parties may have to form a **coalition**. Councillors vote for one person to head the council; this person is known as the **Leader of the Council**. The Leader holds a powerful position and can recommend councillors for membership of powerful council committees; he/she can also hire and fire some council staff. The ruling party forms a **group executive**, which runs on similar lines to a government's cabinet.

Elections

Councillors were elected using the first-past-the-post system. This often led to one party achieving a dominant position within a council, and the others being virtually powerless. The votes of those who had voted for the smaller parties were regarded as **wasted votes**.

The McIntosh Commission

In 1998, the McIntosh Commission was appointed to examine the implications that the creation of the new Scottish Parliament would have for Scottish local government. It had to consider how councils could become more responsive and democratically accountable to the local people that they served, and also consider the implications of the use of PR, which was going to be used the following year, to elect MSPs.

In 1999, the Commission reported to the Scottish Parliament. It recommended that PR should be introduced to local government elections, and that a review should be set up to identify the most appropriate electoral system for Scottish local government.

Recommendations

The Commission recommended that a system of PR that was able to meet the following five criteria should be adopted:

1. Proportionality provided.
2. The councillor-ward link maintained.
3. Fair provision for independent candidates.
4. Allowance for geographical diversity.
5. A close fit between council wards and natural communities.

The Commission recommended that either **Additional Member System**, **Single Transferable Vote**, or **Alternative Vote Plus**, should be used to replace the **First Past the Post** system that was being used at the time.

In the report, the Commission said that:

- 'As far as is practicable, every vote should count, and that councils, in their composition, should reflect the range and balance of views within the communities they serve.'
- 'Substantial and widespread support for the view that a move to some form of proportionate representation would be beneficial for local government. It was seen as especially undesirable where one party has an overwhelming dominance which does not in fact reflect the proportion of the total vote given to it.'

It was clear therefore that the Commission didn't think that the use of FPTP in Scottish local authority elections was providing results where:

- every vote counted
- a range of local views was being served
- no one party dominated.

The Commission recommended that the change to some form of PR be introduced for the Scottish local authority elections in 2002. This didn't happen.

Representation

The following extracts from a newspaper article, illustrated the concerns that many had about the type of people being elected as councillors:

Meet Eric Jackson. He's white, middle-class and 55. He is, in other words, the archetypical Scottish councillor. There are hundreds like him. New figures released yesterday showed that, despite recent cross-party efforts to encourage more women, young people and ethnic minorities to run for elected office, the profile of the average councillor barely changed at the last local elections. If anything, council chambers have become older and more male dominated since the last vote four years ago.

The average age of councillors is 55, compared with 53 in 1999. Only 1% are under 30, compared with 2% in 1999, and 34% are over 60, against 30% previously. While women make up 52% of the population: they represent just 21.8% of the country's 1222 councillors, compared to 22.6% in 1999.

Ethnic minorities were equally under-represented, Making up 2% of the population, but only 1% of councillors, although this was an increase on 1999's 0.5%.

Councillors tended to come from well-off backgrounds, with seven in 10 having managerial or professional occupations. About 86% were homeowners, compared with 62% of the population, and nine out of 10 owned a car. A third had a degree.

The Executive is trying to open up local government to a wider variety of people through the new local governance bill going through the parliament. It will change the voting system, reduce the age for candidates from 21 to 18, and try to open up access.

Tom Gordon
Local Government Correspondent

The Herald
Saturday 6 December 2003.

The new Scottish local government electoral system

Changes to the system came about as a result of the Scottish Parliament passing the Local Governance (Scotland) Act 2004.

The elections to the 32 councils will continue to take place every four years, at the same time as those for the Scottish Parliament. The first time that the new electoral system for local authorities will be used will be 3 May 2007.

The single transferable vote (STV) electoral system will be used, and this has meant that two important changes will occur in the way that local democracy happens in Scotland.

The multi-member ward system

New electoral areas will replace the existing council wards with multi-member wards. The new wards will be bigger and voters will be able to elect three or four councillors, rather than one per ward, as happened before. The number of councillors in a local authority won't change.

The boundaries of the 32 local authority areas won't change.

The Single Transferable Vote

This system works in the following way:

- There will be a separate election for each electoral ward.
- Voters will not now mark their ballot paper with a cross.
- Voters will now mark their first choice of candidate with a '1'.
- Their second and subsequent choices are then marked with a '2' and so on.
- Voters can make as many, or as few choices as they wish. There may be only one person that a voter wishes choose. A voter can, however, make as many choices as there are candidates.
- If a voter's first choice is not elected, the vote may then be transferred to his/her second choice.
- This process continues until all a voter's preferences have been used, or all of the seats have been filled.
- The three or four candidates (depending on the ward) who have won the most seats will become the councillors for that ward.
- People of 18 years and over can stand as candidates.

The likelihood of coalition

The introduction of the STV system will make it much more likely that no one party will win a clear majority of council seats, and therefore run the council. Coalitions have always been a part of local authority politics, but in places like the west of Scotland, the old FPTP system favoured the Labour Party, so much so that some councils were sarcastically called **one-party-states**.

Proportional representation and the Liberal Democrats

The Liberal Democrats have long argued the merits of PR. They were keen advocates of its use in the Scottish Parliamentary elections and, having joined in coalition with Labour in the Scottish Executive, insisted that it should form the basis of any changes made to the local authorities electoral system. Like many of the other smaller parties, they are likely to benefit from the introduction of PR at this level of government.

Counting the votes

Some concern has been raised about whether the authorities will be able to count the votes speedily, and accurately. On polling day the results of three different elections will have to be calculated, each having used a different voting system:

Constituency Votes	Scottish Parliament
List Votes/Additional Members	Scottish Parliament
Single Transferable Votes	Scottish Local Authorities

Electronic counting systems are being considered as a way of minimising the time that it will take to declare the results, and the mistakes that tired counters may make.

The above table also demonstrates the problems that might arise simply because many people will not understand the three different electoral systems that they are expected to participate in. Thankfully, having studied this unit, you will be able to tell them.

Advantages of STV

The introduction of this system to Scottish local authority elections may provide the following benefits:

- Voters have much more choice, many more votes and the ability to prioritise their votes.
- Fewer votes are wasted; instead they are transferred to the voter's next choice of candidate.
- Parties can put forward more candidates in each ward, up to the number of seats available. This may encourage them to field candidates that represent previously under-represented, or excluded groups within local communities, such as women, young people, and people from minority ethnic groups.
- Voters can choose candidates from different parties, or, if they wish only to vote for one party, show their preferences regarding its candidates.
- The results will be more proportional than the previous FPTP system.
- Independent candidates should do better, as should the smaller parties.
- One-party domination of local authorities is less likely to happen.

Disadvantages of STV

- The system is less easy for voters to understand: how to vote, and how the results are calculated.
- Some may not have enough knowledge of the candidates to be able to make a rational choice.
- Some may have preferred the previous system in which one vote was cast.
- The new system is unlikely to provide clear winning parties.
- Some see coalition government, at local like every other level, as being weak government.
- The chances of extreme parties winning seats are increased.

Northern Ireland

Northern Ireland is a province of the United Kingdom, it uses the Single Transferable Vote system for three of its elections:

- Local council elections
- Northern Ireland Assembly elections
- European Parliamentary elections.

Student/Pupil Activity

Electoral systems: Single Transferable Vote

Group activity

The following questions should be discussed in groups of three to four. Each group should elect one person (using the FPTP system) to feedback the decisions made.

1. Why do you think that it is important for local authorities to have a range of different types of councillors, rather than the majority being middle-aged, middle-class men?
2. What reasons can you give for the so called: 'one-party states' being seen as such a bad thing for local democracy?

Electoral systems: The EU Parliament

The European Parliament is the democratically elected, legislative body of the European Union (EU). The people elected to this assembly are called Members of the European Parliament (MEPs). They are elected every five years. The parliament is based in Strasbourg, France, but MEPs also travel to Brussels, Belgium. MEPs are elected from all of the member states of the EU. There are 25 member states just now (2006) with two more to join next year: Romania and Albania; more will follow later. There are currently 732 MEPs and when more states join the EU, the limit will be set at 750. The Parliament currently represents approximately 450 million citizens. The number of seats allocated is dependent on the size of its population.

Seats allocated to each member state now, and from 2007:

	2004	2007
Austria	18	18
Belgium	24	24
Bulgaria		18
Cyprus	6	6
Czech Republic	24	24
Denmark	14	14
Estonia	6	6
Finland	14	14
France	78	78
Germany	99	99
Greece	24	24
Hungary	24	24
Ireland	13	13
Italy	78	78
Latvia	9	9
Lithuania	13	13
Luxembourg	6	6
Malta	5	5
Netherlands	27	27
Poland	54	54
Portugal	24	24
Romania		36
Slovakia	14	14
Slovenia	7	7
Spain	54	54
Sweden	19	19
United Kingdom	78	78

History. The European elections in 2004 made history by being the greatest simultaneous trans-national elections ever to have been held, with almost 400 million people being entitled to vote.

No uniform system

There is not one uniform method of voting used throughout the union. We will therefore look specifically at how the UK organises EU elections. All member states must, however, use one of two types of proportional representation: **party list** or **single transferable vote**. The majority of member states organise their election on a national basis, the country being treated as a single electoral area, as if it was one constituency. The UK, Belgium, France, Ireland and Italy, divides into a number of electoral regions. Each of these regions is entitled to a different number of seats:

Location	Seats
Scotland	7
Northern Ireland	3
Wales	4
England: North East	3
Yorkshire and the Humber	6
North West	9
East Midlands	6
West Midlands	7
Eastern	7
South West	7
London	9
South East	10

It should be noted that Northern Ireland uses a different electoral system from the rest of the UK.

The Regional List electoral system

The election in the United Kingdom of MEPs is conducted using a regional list system.

- Each political party provides a list of candidate's names, for each of the electoral regions.
- If a party wins any seats, the people on the list, in the order that their names appeared, will fill them.
- Each constituent has one vote.
- A constituent can vote for a party, or for a candidate who is standing independently for election.
- The share of votes won by each party determines the number of MEPs that it will have.
- The first seat is won by the party, or individual, with the greatest number of votes.
- The rest of the seats are allocated in the same way, but, when a party has one or more seats, their votes will be divided by that number of seats, plus one.
- Elections take place every five years, the next being in 2009.

European Election 2004: United Kingdom Results

Party	Seats won	Votes won	Seats won %
Conservative Party	27	26.7%	36%
Labour Party	19	22.6%	25.3%
UK Independence Party	12	16.1%	16%
Liberal Democrat Party	12	14.9%	16%
Green Party	2	6.3%	2.6%
Scottish National Party	2	1.4%	2.6%
Plaid Cymru	1	1.0%	1.3%

(Northern Ireland results excluded)

Turnout: 38.2%

The following information can be taken from the above results:

- Turnout was very low, at only 38.2%
- The Conservatives won the greatest number of seats. Notice that the percentage of the seats won by them was almost 10% higher than the votes they won.
- Labour, the party in government in the UK, came second; they too got a greater percentage of seats than their share of the vote.
- UKIP, a party that want the UK to pull out of the EU came third. The percentage of votes won almost matches their share of seats.
- The Lib-Dems got a bigger share of seats than the percentage of votes that they won.
- The Greens got a much smaller share of seats than the percentage of votes they won.
- The SNP got a bigger share of seats than the percentage of votes that they won.
- Plaid Cymru got a percentage of seats close to the votes won.

It can be seen that a number of the parties got a greater percentage of seats than the percentage of votes they won. Lots of small parties, who each received a share of the votes less than 1%, didn't win seats. The bigger parties took their share. Interestingly, the BNP, an extreme right-wing party, won 4.9% of the vote, but no seats.

Political groups

In the Parliament, MEPs don't sit with all of their fellow countrymen/women; they sit with other members of their own political party, within a larger grouping of like-minded members from other countries. UK Labour MEPs, for example, usually sit with the **Socialist** group, and Conservatives with the **Christian Democrats**. There are seven of these multi-national political groups, and a further group, made up of members who do not wish to align to any of the other groups. The groups are as follows:

Political group	Abbreviation
European People's Party (Christian Democrats) European Democrats	EPP-ED
Party of European Socialists	PES
European Liberal, Democrat and Reformist Party	ELDR
European United Left/Nordic Green Left	EUL/NGL
Greens/ European Free Alliance	Greens/ EFA
Union for Europe of the Nations	UEN
Europe of Democracies and Diversities	EDD
Non-attached	NA

All of the political groups consist of members from more than one country, and this means that they are able to pursue causes that don't relate to only one member state.

Friction. David Cameron, only a few days after becoming leader of the Conservatives, made his position on Europe clear, by insisting that his MEPs withdrew from membership of the European People's Party (Christian Democrats) European Democrats; a grouping that he considered to be too integrationist.

Advantages and disadvantages of the UK system to elect MEPs

Advantages

- UK members elected to the EU Parliament represent a region within the country.
- Each UK region gets a number of MEPs proportionate to its population.
- The system is relatively proportional; each party getting a number of seats based on its total votes.
- It is easy for people to understand how to vote.
- A party, other than that in government, can win the greatest number of seats.

Disadvantages

- The percentage of votes won by a party may not be reflected in the seats that it wins. Parties can get more, or less than they actually deserve.
- It may not be easy for people to understand how the votes are counted, and results calculated.
- Elections take place every five years; a longer period than the other electoral systems we have studied.
- Some voters would prefer to vote for a named party candidate, rather than just a party.
- Just over one-third of the electorate bother to vote in this election.

Student/Pupil Activity

Electoral systems: Regional list system

Individual activity

UK results of the European Elections 1999 and 2004

Party	Seats won 1999	% votes won	Seats won 2004	% votes won
Conservative Party	36	33.5%	27	26.7%
Labour Party	29	26.3%	19	22.6%
Liberal Democrats	10	11.9%	12	14.9%
Green Party	2	5.9%	2	6.3%
Plaid Cymru	2	1.7%	1	1%
Scottish National Party	2	2.5%	2	1.4%
UK Independence Party	3	6.5%	12	16.1%

Using the above information, what trends in party popularity can you identify?

Alternative electoral systems

We now know that four different electoral systems are used in Scotland. The first-past-the-post system, used in UK parliamentary elections, gives us only one vote, every four or five years; we never know quite when. Our choice is also limited to one candidate.

The party that wins the greatest number of seats takes power and leaves all other parties powerless, and all of the votes that they received wasted. Parties with strong support across the country may win fewer seats than they actually deserve.

This is perhaps why alternative electoral systems have been introduced to the other elections that take place in Scotland, and elsewhere in the UK. Maybe someday the FPTP system used to elect MPs will also be replaced with an alternative, which offers an element of proportional representation.

Let us now compare the four systems that we have studied, looking specifically at:

- where each system is used
- how each system works
- the level of proportionality provided by each system
- the outcome of the use of each of the systems.

Where each system is used

Electoral system	Used by	To elect
First-Past-The -Post	UK Parliament	MPs
Additional Member System	Scottish Parliament	MSPs
Single Transferable Vote	Scottish Local Authorities	Local Councillors
Regional List System	EU Parliament (UK elections)	MEPs

How each system works

First-Past-The-Post	The UK is divided into constituencies, each of which elects one MP. Voters in each constituency can choose one person from a list of names. The person who gets the greatest number of votes in a constituency, wins the seat, and becomes an MP. The votes given to all of the other candidates are, in effect, worthless.
Additional Member System	This is a mixed system where the voter has two votes. In the first ballot voters choose one person from a list of candidates. In the second ballot voters have one choice from a list of parties and independent candidates. From the results of these two ballots a calculation is made to determine how many seats in the Scottish Parliament are given to each party, and if any independents have won a seat.
Single Transferable Vote	Each local authority area in Scotland is divided into wards. Voters are given one ballot paper with a list of candidates. Voters mark their first choice with a '1' and their second and subsequent choices with a '2' and so on. They may make as many, or as few, choices as they wish. If a voter's first choice is not elected, the vote may be transferred to his/her second choice. The process continues until all a voter's preferences have been used, or all of the three or four Councillor's seats have been filled.
Regional List System	The UK is divided into regions. Each party provides a list of candidate's names for each of the electoral regions. Each constituent has one vote. If a party wins any seats, the people on the list, in the order that their names appeared, will fill them. Independents can also stand for election. The share of votes won by each party determines how many MEPs that it will have. The first seat is won by the party, or independent, with the greatest number of votes. All other seats are allocated in the same way.

The level of proportionality provided by each system

First-Past-The-Post	Under this type of electoral system, the proportion of people in the country that voted for a party is unlikely to be reflected in the proportion of seats that it gains. The House of Commons is therefore an inaccurate reflection of how the nation actually voted. In the 2005 General Election the Labour Party achieved only 3% more of the vote than the Conservatives, and yet won 157 more seats. The Liberal Democrats won over one-fifth of the popular vote, and yet were only able to take 62 of the 646 seats in Parliament.
Additional Member System	The combined numbers of MSP seats allocated to each party will, using this system, be quite proportional to the number of votes given to each party. The people in the Scottish Parliament may therefore accurately reflect the views of the Scottish people.
Single Transferable Vote	The results will be more proportional than when the FPTP system was used for local authority elections. The Liberal Democrats have long argued the merits of PR. They were keen advocates of its use in the Scottish Parliamentary elections and, having joined in coalition with Labour in the Scottish Executive, insisted that it should form the basis of any changes made to the local authorities electoral system. Like many of the other smaller parties, they are likely to benefit from the introduction of PR at this level of government.
Regional List System	The system is relatively proportional; each party getting roughly the number of seats that it deserves, based on the percentage of votes won.

The outcome of the use of each of the systems

First-Past-The-Post	Whilst not providing proportional representation, the first-past-the-post system normally provides the country with a party that has won a decisive election victory: a clear winner. Under these circumstances, there can be no doubt who has won, and this enables the winning party to provide strong leadership. It won't have to share power with any other party. Some see this as being a good thing because indecisive election results can mean that parties may have to cooperate and compromise: they may even have to work in coalition, in other words: form a joint executive and share power.
Additional Member System	Whilst ensuring proportional representation, the AMS system may not provide a single party with a decisive election victory. In the 1999 and 2003 Scottish elections, Labour won the largest number of seats, but not a clear majority. It is for this reason that they had to find a coalition partner: the Liberal Democrats. This is a power-sharing agreement that, some would say, does not provide the type of strong government that a clear winner under FPTP often provides.
Single Transferable Vote	The introduction of the STV system will mean that it will be less likely that one party will win a clear majority of council seats, and therefore run the council. The number of coalition run councils will probably therefore increase, as will the number of council seats taken by smaller parties and independents.
Regional List System	The results of the 2004 election showed that a number of the parties got a greater percentage of seats than the percentage of votes they had won. Lots of small parties, who each received a share of the votes less than 1%, didn't win seats; the bigger parties took their share. The BNP, an extreme right-wing party, won 4.9% of the vote, but no seats.

Debate over electoral reform

For as long as there have been elections, there have been arguments about how they should be organised: what is the best system to use, and what should it provide? These arguments normally centre on the following considerations:

- **Democracy:** Will it provide the ability for the **will of the people** to be expressed? Remember that democracy means **rule by the many**. Will it simply enable one section of society, whose interests are served by one party, to take control of the legislative and executive functions of government, thus leaving the rest of society with no real political voice?
- **Representation:** Will it enable the views of all sectors of society to be fairly heard, or will the dominant majority voice have more than its fair say, and always get its own way?
- **Proportionality:** Will seats won by parties and independents reflect the proportion of people who voted for them, and will the seats taken by women, young people and other groups also be proportionately allocated?
- **Participation:** Will a sufficient proportion of those eligible to vote, actually turn out to cast their vote in an election, or will they consider it pointless, and help to increase the already high level of voter apathy?
- **Effectiveness:** Will an election system provide effective government and good legislation? Will it give us a strong executive, and/or an assembly with a large majority, able to pass law without frequently having to compromise with opposition parties? Will it give us weak, but more thoughtful, government, that has to negotiate with others?
- **Simplicity:** Will voters understand what they have to do, how the system works, and how the results are calculated?

The need for reform

Existing electoral systems change, and new ones have to be introduced when new assemblies and parliaments are created. There is never a time when everyone is happy with the way things are. There is always a demand for electoral reform. In the United Kingdom the Electoral Reform Society is a pressure group, which tries to encourage government to make electoral systems fairer. The problem, of course, is in deciding what is, and isn't fair. Now that different versions of proportional representation have been introduced to local government, Scottish Parliament, and EU parliamentary elections, there is some pressure on the UK Parliament to switch to a system of PR. What should not be forgotten is that, whilst the House of Commons uses the FPTP system, the other two parliamentary bodies, the House of Lords and the Monarchy, are unelected institutions.

Student/Pupil Activity

Debate over electoral reform

Group activity

The following task should be undertaken in groups of three to four. On completion of the task, each group should choose one student to feedback the decision that has been made, and the reasons for the group having reached this decision.

Task

Using the information that you have examined about the four alternative electoral systems, and the considerations that have to be made, decide which of the four is the most preferable.

Resource Information

Political parties and pressure groups

Books

Simpson, D. (2005) *Access to Politics – Political Parties*. Hodder & Stoughton.

Cooney, F. & Fotheringham, P. (2002) *UK Politics Today* (2nd Edition). Pulse Publications.

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