

# STUDENT GUIDE

NEW EDITION

With  
exam-style  
questions  
and model  
answers

PEARSON EDEXCEL A-LEVEL

# Politics

UK government and politics

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# Content Guidance

## UK politics

### ■ Democracy and participation

Democracy refers to a society where the people have real influence over the political decisions that will affect them, either directly or through representatives. It also means that government is accountable to the people. The key features of any democracy, as the term is generally understood, are as follows:

- The people have influence over political decision making.
- The government is accountable to the people.
- There are free and fair elections so that the government is granted **legitimacy**.
- Different beliefs, political parties and political associations are tolerated.
- The media are free and independent.
- The rights of citizens are legally guaranteed.
- There are legal limits to the powers of government, established by a constitution and an independent judiciary.

**Legitimacy** The idea that a government has a right to govern, normally granted through elections, implying that it has the consent of the people.

## Representative and direct democracy

### Direct democracy

**Direct democracy** is a system where the people themselves make important political decisions. The modern form involves the use of referendums. The main features of a direct democracy include:

- The people make decisions directly.
- Government acts on the instructions of the people.
- The process is continuous and ongoing.
- The people make decisions based on single issues.
- The people must be educated and engaged in the issues and the process.
- People are organised individually rather than as part of a group.
- Decisions will be based on majoritarian outcomes, though with some protections for minorities.

**Direct democracy** A form of democracy where people make political decisions directly instead of their elected representatives.

Table 1 Arguments for and against direct democracy

Arguments for	Arguments against
It is the purest form of democracy. The people's voice is clearly heard.	It can lead to the 'tyranny of the majority', whereby the winning majority ignores the interests of the minority.
It can avoid delay and deadlock within the political system.	The people may be too easily swayed by short-term, emotional appeals by charismatic individuals.
The fact that people are making a decision gives it greater legitimacy.	Some issues may be too complex for the ordinary citizen to understand.

## Representative democracy

In contrast to direct democracy, representative democracy refers to a system where the people are represented by others, either through elected officials and bodies, or through representative groups, like parties or pressure groups. The main features of representative democracy include:

- Decisions will be made by elected bodies, such as a parliament.
- The process relies on regular elections.
- Different groups will offer choices to the people.
- The people vote for a programme of options, rather than individual issues.
- Political activity will be organised via groups, rather than individually.
- The government must act based on what it believes to be in the best interests of the nation.
- The government must answer to the people, through elections.
- The public should be engaged and informed during election campaigns but do not need to be so well informed at other times.
- The process demands little from the people in between elections.

## Representative and direct democracy compared

### *The similarities between representative and direct democracy*

In both representative and direct democracy, the following similarities can be identified:

- Popular consent is important.
- There is an active role for the people.
- The decisions of the government derive from the people.
- The actions of the government are accountable to the people.
- The public must be informed and engaged in political matters.
- The processes will be governed by constitutional laws and rules.

### *The differences between representative and direct democracy*

The following differences can be identified:

- With direct democracy the people themselves make political decisions, while with representative democracy decisions are made by members of elected bodies.
- With direct democracy decisions are made by referendum whereas with representative democracy decisions are made by government and elected assemblies.
- With direct democracy the people decide on single issues while in representative democracy people choose between full political programmes at elections.

### *Advantages and disadvantages of representative and direct democracy*

Table 2 An assessment of representative democracy

Advantages	Disadvantages
Representatives may have expert knowledge and experience which the general public do not possess.	Elected representatives may be more interested in party politics than in the national interest. In general, parties may exercise too much control over their elected members.
Representatives are likely to be more rational and less likely to be swayed by emotional appeals.	There is no guarantee that representatives, whether elected or not, accurately reflect the views of those whom they claim to represent.
Representatives are democratically accountable and therefore should behave in a responsible way.	The UK electoral system produces a highly unrepresentative result.

Table 3 An assessment of direct democracy

Advantages	Disadvantages
It gives legitimacy to political decisions if the people themselves make them.	Issues may be too complex for people to judge.
It is a decisive form of decision making and avoids excessive debate within the political system.	The people may be swayed in their judgement by emotional appeals and false claims and information. They may not have enough information to make a rational decision.
Decisions made by the people cannot be overturned by political leaders.	Representatives are democratically accountable for their decisions, which helps to make them act responsibly. The people cannot be held accountable to themselves.

### The case for reform of representative democracy

UK democracy is largely representative in nature. However, there are a number of problems with the system of democracy. This is sometimes described as a **democratic deficit**. The main problems associated with democracy in the UK include:

- The House of Lords is unelected.
- General elections produce unrepresentative outcomes. Governments may achieve an overall majority of the seats in parliament, but they never achieve a majority of the total votes.
- Some parties, such as the Liberal Democrats and the Green Party, are under-represented because of the electoral system, while others, such as Conservatives, Labour and SNP are over-represented.
- The system of devolution has led to an imbalance of representation across the UK.
- There is a lack of government accountability between elections and accountability to Parliament is weak.

Table 4 summarises the UK's democratic deficit and shows the positive and negative aspects of representative democracy in the UK. It also shows the proposals that have been made to address these.

Table 4 Representative democracy in the UK assessed

Democratic feature	Positives	Negatives	Reform proposals
Elections	Nearly all over 18 can vote. There is little electoral fraud and strong legal safeguards exist to prevent fraud.	In general elections, the first-past-the-post system distorts support for parties and produces an unrepresentative House of Commons.	Reform the electoral system and introduce some form of proportional representation.
Parliament	The House of Commons can hold the government to account.	The House of Lords is unelected.	Introduce an elected second chamber.
Distribution of power	Devolution has spread power away from London to the national regions.	Devolved governments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have varying powers.  England has no form of devolved representation, other than for some cities.	Grant further powers to devolved governments.  Create English devolution.

### Democratic deficit

A flaw in the system where not enough democratic input occurs for those elected or in decision making.

### Exam tip

Use examples to illustrate the points you make in exam answers. This is especially important in questions about direct democracy and referendums. Examples of referendums can be found on page 30.

### Knowledge check 1

Identify the following:

- a pressure group that represents the concerns of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) citizens
- the name given to those elected to the Welsh Parliament
- the name given to those elected at local government level
- the subject of the national referendum held in the UK in 2011

# Source questions

## Paper 1

### Question 1: Democracy and participation

It is hard not to see the growth in lobbyists, think tanks and corporations as damaging to the UK's system of democracy, though some might argue they enhance it by offering advice and evidence to governments that need their expertise. As lobbyists seek to influence politicians to favour their clients with special exemptions — offering premium seats at sporting and cultural events for the chance to harangue a minister into granting contracts or introducing favourable legislation, or presenting research based on dubious sources, often commissioned from think tanks who share similar views or receive funding from those same clients — we see special interests gaining at the expense of the public. Can we really say these groups are providing top quality research and acting in the best interests of the public?

We know this work happens, but it is obscured and hidden from public view, making it almost impossible to effectively scrutinise just what is happening and who is persuading our elected officials. There may be a register of firms that lobby, but is this enough? Party leaders seem more interested in finding favourable policies from key think tanks than listening to their party membership or the public and we must question why such groups exist and why they wish to exert such influence of key public figures.

When corporations threaten to leave the country if they do not get government grants and threaten the loss of jobs if there is any hint of greater scrutiny or taxation, can we say that the country is being run for the people or simply for the special interests who are seeking to exploit the people our politicians are supposed to represent? Perhaps the biggest indictment is the way in which so many figures in politics go on to find lucrative jobs with those same companies they rewarded while in office. It may not be illegal, but it undermines the very essence of a functioning democracy and it is, at the least, immoral.

A political commentator writing in 2021

Using the source, evaluate the view that group activity is a major threat to the UK's democratic system.

(30 marks)

In your response you must:

- compare and contrast different opinions in the source
- examine and debate these views in a balanced way
- analyse and evaluate **only** the information presented in the source

The source is clearly critical of the role that groups play in the political process of the UK, though it does offer some of the arguments that people may put forward to defend group activity. The key thing though is to realise the question is not asking you about whether groups are good or bad, but it is asking you to evaluate how convincing you find the view that group activity is a major threat to the UK's democratic system. This should form the basis of the analysis as you explain the arguments, focusing on what is meant by 'major' and how convincing you find the arguments presented by the source. Your evaluation will come down to whether you think the view presented — that group activity is a major threat — is a convincing argument or not and how you emphasise that point.

### Student A answer

Group activity in the UK is clearly bad for democracy. As the source points out, 'lobbyists seek to influence politicians to favour their clients with special exemptions' while 'corporations threaten to leave the country if they do not get government grants' and 'party leaders seem more interested in finding favourable policies from key think tanks' which is bad for UK democracy. But it is not all bad though because the source also points out that groups are 'offering advice and evidence to governments', that they have 'expertise', that they carry out research and that group activity is regulated, so they might be a threat for democracy but they are not all bad.

Lobbyists are bad for democracy because they try to make politicians do things that are not in the public interest. As the source says they 'seek to influence politicians to favour their clients with special exemptions'. This is a threat because in a democracy politicians should be working for the public and doing what is right for everyone, not just what is right for a special interest, so this makes them a clear threat to democracy.

However, lobbyists do offer good things because the source says lobbyists are 'offering advice and evidence to governments'. This is a good thing because often lobbyists may know more than the government about things. For example, the government doesn't know much about making tyres so a lobbyist may offer advice to stop it passing rules on tyre making that would be bad for companies making tyres. So, lobbyists are not a total threat to democracy.

The source also says that 'corporations threaten to leave the country if they do not get government grants'. This is bad, because it would mean people would lose jobs and the government might lose tax money so the government might give in and give the companies extra money or special exemptions. This means corporations are bullying the government and forcing it to do things that corporations want that might not be good for the people, especially if it is a big business like Google who are not paying all the tax they should.

But maybe the corporations are actually 'acting in the best interests of the public'. The public might need the jobs and the corporation might have to move overseas or close down a factory if the

### 8–10 marks awarded (Level 2)

The student has used the source to select the key points and the answer has a clear structure, with an introduction, a series of two-sided points and a conclusion.

The A03 marks are almost totally missing as there are no clear judgements. It works through saying groups are good or bad, but it is never clear what the student's opinion is and how far they agree with the view expressed. At the end of each section there should be a clear and consistent judgement relating to the question.

The answer fails to address the question asked and simply explains, in a limited fashion, the key points raised by the source without evaluating the level of threat or how convincing the points are. This severely hampers its A02 marks.



government passed new regulations, so in a way corporations are acting in the interests of the people and helping the government to make good decisions. So that would make them good for democracy.

The source is also critical of think tanks because it says they are 'presenting research' which is 'dubious' and that means government will be making bad decisions because it is not basing it on accurate details. This means the government might make a mistake and do something that could be damaging to the public, so this would be bad for the people and therefore bad for democracy.

But just because some think tanks may be biased does not mean they all are and some of the research may be good and help make good decisions, like the tyre makers, so think tanks maybe can be a good thing in helping the government to make good decisions.

In conclusion, group activity is a major threat to democracy in the UK but it also has some good elements, so it is not all bad. That makes it probably about 50:50 and a major threat and major benefit to the UK so we should probably keep the good and the bad overall.

The A03 marks are almost totally missing as there are no clear judgements. It works through saying groups are good or bad, but it is never clear what the student's opinion is and how far they agree with the view expressed. At the end of each section there should be a clear and consistent judgement relating to the question.

The final conclusion offers a vague assertion that both sides have some merits, but it does not give a clear, reasoned judgement.

### 27–30 marks awarded (Level 5)

This is a strong Level 5 answer that clearly addresses all the AOs very well.

There are a range of views that are well chosen and understanding of how they relate to the question is clearly demonstrated across three key pairs of arguments. There may be easier or stronger points in the source, but the ones used are well selected.

### Student B answer

The source seems to be making a compelling case that group activity is threatening the UK's democratic system, especially by the influence such groups exert over politicians, the quality of the research they produce and the threats they make to politicians, all of which suggest they are undermining democratic principles. However, while the source makes a convincing case that group activity is threatening, it does not make a strong case for saying that group activity poses a major threat to the UK's democratic system. A major threat would be one that is about to cause the collapse of the political system, and the view portrayed is not convincing on this basis. Therefore, the view presented that group activity is a major threat to the UK's democratic system is not very convincing as it is not really a major threat.

One argument presented that might suggest group activity is a major threat to the UK's democratic system is the idea that 'lobbyists seek to influence politicians to favour their clients with special exemptions'. This suggests that lobbyists are using their abilities and access to the political process to secure benefits for private clients which may well come at the expense of the national interest. If this is the case, as could be suggested by the case of former PM David Cameron lobbying for grants and funding on behalf of Greensill, then trust in politicians and the process would be undermined which could prove to be a major threat. Certainly the Greensill case supports the later point in the source that many politicians go on to lucrative careers as lobbyists, raising further questions with regards to who the system is working for.

The student uses their own knowledge to help develop their A02 analysis, which helps boost their A01 marks as well. There is clear analysis of how the points raised by the source relate to the question and a discussion of how they may present a threat and how the alternative view may be more convincing, utilising the additional details to support and develop this analysis.

You can see that the judgement this student is making is clearly stated in the introduction, reasserted throughout the essay and clearly made again in the conclusion. At every stage, it is clear what this student's judgement is and they repeatedly justify it. It is useful to use the word 'therefore' to help reason any A03 judgements, as this student does.

Again, the student uses their own knowledge to help develop their A02 analysis, which helps boost their A01 marks as well.

However, while the view presented does suggest there is the possibility of a threat, it is far less convincing in suggesting it is a major threat. The source points out that there is a register of lobbying firms which shows there is some accountability for those that lobby and are lobbied for private interests, while the source also points out that some people are of the view that lobbyists provide evidence and expertise in areas where politicians need help. This is the more convincing view as politicians need the advice and some sense of the impact policy decisions might have. Cases where lobbyists argue for particular medical treatments, or the need for infrastructure or even the need to open up international travel to protect jobs and British trade as occurred during the Covid-19 lockdown, can provide perspectives that the government needs. Even if it is for self-interest, this lobbying does not guarantee such institutions will get what they want, as the Greensill case proved, with the company not being granted any of the financial benefits it sought. Therefore, while the source is able to make a case for the potential threat that group activity poses to the UK democratic system, it is not very convincing that such activity constitutes a major threat. ●

The student's judgement is clear.

Another view presented by the source which might suggest that group activity poses a potential threat to the UK's democratic system is that think tanks may be guilty of 'presenting research based on dubious sources'. A fundamental element of the UK's democratic system is the idea of an educated electorate that can make informed decisions, so if the research and data being provided by think tanks is flawed then this could certainly pose a serious threat to the public's ability to make informed decisions. This point was highlighted by London councils over the publication of the think tank Onwards' ideas for rebalancing the London economy, which they claimed ignored the issues of poverty inherent in London. As the government based much of its budget proposals for levelling up in 2020 on these ideas, this would seem to support the view in the source that this is a serious threat to the UK's democratic system. ●

Again, the student uses their own knowledge to help develop their A02 analysis, which helps boost their A01 marks as well.

However, this idea of think tanks providing misleading information does not constitute a major threat. While the source may ask the question 'Can we really say these groups are providing top quality research and acting in the best interests of the public?' it fails to answer it convincingly. Much of the work done by think tanks is based on top quality research to help inform government decisions, such as the work carried out by the Howard League for Penal Reform. Even where there is conflict, as mentioned with the levelling up agenda, it is often about differing opinions rather than quality evidence. The London councils' criticisms came mainly from work done by the Centre for London, another think tank. In this sense, the view provided that think tanks undermine democracy by presenting misleading information is a weak one, as it is more about interpretations and various think tanks presenting different views ●

Again, the student uses their own knowledge to help develop their A02 analysis, which helps boost their A01 marks as well.