

AS Government & Politics

# UK Elections & Electoral Reform

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Guidance  
to tasks





# Guidance to tasks

## General advice

- Each examination board works to a common framework of Assessment Objectives (AOs):
  - AO1: Knowledge and understanding of political concepts/theories/ institutions and processes
  - AO2: Analysis and evaluation
  - AO3: Communication and coherence
- In order to maintain a tight focus on the demands of the question, it is good practice to reflect to the wording of the question throughout your answer. You should develop a habit of using the wording in the first line of each paragraph.
- Related to this, you should always devote a separate paragraph to each point you make. Writing short, focused paragraphs helps the examiner to spot and reward your arguments.
- The easiest way to explain the significance of an argument or explanation is by providing an example of it from your recent political knowledge. This will, in addition, add further depth to your response.
- Try, where possible, to keep your examples no earlier than 2001. Sometimes you may have to go back to 1997, but bear in mind how much has happened since then!
- Identify how changes in the UK political system over time either add weight to or detract from particular arguments. For example, the last round of elections in Scotland and Wales, and for the mayor of London, all included features which increased scepticism regarding the desirability of replacing FPTP with an alternative system.
- Extended questions require a wider range of points. You should always write a telling conclusion that considers issues such as relative significance and/ or linkage between points.



# Task 1.1

## In the style of AQA Unit 1: People, Politics and Participation

### 1 Explain the term *elective dictatorship* used in the extract. (5 marks)

This example of a part (a) question tests AO1. You should spend about 5 minutes on this question, aiming to write around 80 words. Try to identify 2–3 points which you can develop and illustrate from your own knowledge. You must make direct reference to the source in your response.

The source suggests elective dictatorship is a combination of a system where representatives are elected, yet power rests with a narrow elite. Some commentators, including Lord Hailsham, suggest the UK has an elective dictatorship as the electoral system provides the executive with an overall majority, even without an overall majority of votes. For example, Labour received 35% of the popular vote, yet won 55% of the seats in Parliament. It thus has the power to pass whatever legislation it likes, so long as its MPs remain loyal. In this way, Parliament is unable to hold the executive to account.

### 2 Using the extract and your own knowledge, explain two advantages of the type of representative democracy found in the UK. (10 marks)

The breakdown of the marks is AO1, 4; AO2, 4; AO3, 2. You should aim to spend just over 10 minutes on this question, writing about 160 words. The examiner will expect you to identify the two advantages and also provide a full explanation of them. Remember to illustrate your answer using specific examples from your own knowledge.

The extract refers to the ability of MPs in the House of Commons to vote on a motion of censure and holding regular elections as two advantages of representative democracy. You need to explain how each of these illustrates the type of representative democracy in the UK, noting the last time a successful motion of censure was passed, and the changed arrangements for both the length of Parliament and removing a government since May 2010.



# Task 1.2

## In the style of Edexcel Unit 1: People and Politics

**1 To what extent does a participation crisis exist in the UK today?**

*(25 marks)*

This part (c) question tests three different Assessment Objectives: AO1 (8 marks); AO2 (9 marks); AO3 (8 marks). In practice, this means the examiner is looking for you to present a well-argued, balanced response, with a good range of points and supporting examples. Your conclusion should attempt to present a hierarchy of relative significance. You should plan to spend 20–25 minutes on this, and aim to write about 400 words.

Arguments that a participation crisis does exist in the UK today might include:

- Turnout in all elections in the UK is low. No UK election has experienced turnout higher than 70% since the 1997 general election.
- Turnout among particular sectors of the population is critically low. Refer to turnout among voters aged 18–24 in areas with high levels of unemployment or poverty.
- Membership of major political parties, and activism within them, is in decline.
- The public identifies less strongly with political parties than in the past.

Arguments which challenge this view, and which suggest there is no real participation crisis in the UK:

- Evidence from the Power Inquiry and 2010 Citizenship Survey suggests that about 50% of the population engages in some form of voluntary activity on a regular basis.
- Membership of campaign groups has increased significantly during the period in which membership of political parties has fallen. This supports the view that people are still participating in politics, but via other means.
- The large number of participants in demonstrations against the war in Iraq in 2003 and over the proposed increase in university tuition fees in 2010–11 suggests that a strong sense of civic activism remains.



# Task 2.1

## In the style of Edexcel Unit 1: People and Politics

### 1 Giving an example, provide a definition of primaries. (5 marks)

This question tests AO1, and is therefore concerned with knowledge and understanding of the key features of primaries. The examiner will expect you to provide 2–3 features, supported by relevant examples. Failing to provide examples could limit you to a maximum of 3 marks. You should aim to spend about 5 minutes answering the question, and write in the region of 80 words.

The main features of primaries are:

- They are a way for parties to select candidates for elections, as in the case of the Conservative primary in Totnes in 2009.
- Participation depends on internal party rules, but the Conservative Party primaries are open to all eligible voters.
- The coalition government announced in May 2010 that it would pay for primaries to be held in 200 safe seats before the next general election, in order to enhance voter choice in these cases.

### 2 Explain the methods used to increase participation in the UK political system. (10 marks)

This example of a part (b) question predominantly tests AO1, but also awards 3 marks for AO2, so is concerned with knowledge and understanding of the main methods, and your ability to identify the most commonly used and most successful methods. You should aim to spend about 10 minutes answering the question, and write in the region of 160 words. Try to provide 5–6 methods, with an example of when they were used.

Some of the methods you may refer to might include:

- Increased use of referendums since 1997, for example over devolved powers for Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, London and the northeast.
- Introduction of citizens' juries, for example over future use of genetically modified foods.
- Formal consultations on proposed legislation, for example Scottish e-consultations, and introduction to the legislative process at Westminster of a public reading stage.
- Use of citizens' initiatives, as outlined under the Lisbon Treaty and in the coalition's *Our Programme for Government*.



- Use of e-petitions with the Scottish Parliament and the terms of the 2009 Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act.
- Experiments designed to boost voter turnout, such as making postal voting easier and trialling electronic voting.



## Task 2.2

### In the style of OCR Unit F851: Contemporary Politics of the UK, Section B

**1 Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of making greater use of referendums in the UK.** (30 marks)

The balance between the three Assessment Objectives is 12:12:6. The examiner expects you to be able to write a focused, balanced analysis of the arguments for and against making greater use of referendums in the UK. You will need to make direct reference to the experience of the UK since 1997 in order to support your arguments. You should spend 25 minutes on this question, and aim to write about 400 words.

Some points in favour of greater use of referendums could include the following:

- They increase participation in decision-making, for example over levels of council tax or the structure of the State, as with devolution votes in Scotland in 1997 and the northeast in 2004.
- They overcome flaws in the mandate theory; for example, neither the Conservatives nor Liberal Democrats included a promise to replace FPTP with AV in their respective manifestos, but holding a referendum on the issue would give the coalition the legitimacy to do so.
- They perform a valuable citizenship function, by educating voters about specific issues during referendum campaigns.
- They can help break political deadlock between established political parties, for example providing popular consent for GFA 1998.

Some points against greater use of referendums could include the following:

- They undermine parliamentary sovereignty, as they reduce Parliament's control over decision-making and its power to unmake legislation — as the 1997 and 1979 referendums respectively illustrate.
- The legitimacy of the result can be undermined by low turnout. Without a designated quota of the electorate required to approve a proposal, new laws can be introduced with a simple majority of a very low turnout. Only 34% of registered voters turned out to vote for the creation of the post of mayor and of an assembly for London in 1998.
- The result can be influenced by the way questions are worded, as illustrated by the controversy over the wording of the question used in the vote on



northeast devolution and the (abandoned) proposed referendum on Scottish independence.

- Inequalities in funding can unduly influence the electorate's decision. The example of private referendums on UK endorsement of the Lisbon Treaty and Brian Souter's campaign in Scotland illustrate this argument at its most extreme, while concerns over government expenditure in the run-up to the campaign also adds weight to this argument.



# Task 3.1

## In the style of OCR Unit F851: Contemporary Politics of the UK, Section A

**1 Using the sources and your own knowledge, discuss the view that the current system for electing MPs should be retained.** (28 marks)

The AO breakdown is 12:12:4. You have to refer directly to both the sources and your own knowledge. Failing to refer to both is likely to lead to a ceiling of 8 marks being imposed on AO1 marks. You should spend 20–25 minutes on this question, and aim to write 350–400 words.

The examiner expects you to write a balanced, analytical response, well supported by relevant, recent examples. You should write a brief conclusion which gives a clear verdict and explanation.



## Task 3.2

### In the style of Edexcel Unit 1: People and Politics

**1 What are the main features of the first-past-the-post electoral system?**  
(5 marks)

The main features could include:

- Single-member constituencies.
- One vote per elector.
- Candidate needs a simple majority of votes in his or her constituency to win the seat.
- The government is formed by the party or parties with an overall majority of seats.

**2 How does FPTP affect party representation in the House of Commons?**  
(10 marks)

- It exaggerates support for the largest parties...
- ...and penalises smaller parties.
- Most parties which contest the election do not end up with representation in the Commons.
- Historically, it has tended to support a two-party system.
- However, during the last 25 years a more complex picture has emerged, with increased representation for nationalist parties at the expense of Labour and Conservative.
- It can lead to parties having no or few representatives in large areas of the country, for example Conservatives in Scotland and Labour in the southeast.



# Task 4.1

## In the style of AQA Unit 1: People, Politics and Participation

- 1 Explain what is meant by the term 'deviation from proportionality'.  
(5 marks)**

The deviation from proportionality (DV) is the difference between the percentage of seats won by a party and the percentage of votes it receives. When the overall DV is worked out, it is possible to create a figure for the electoral system as a whole. Plurality systems such as FPTP tend to have a higher DV than proportional systems.

- 2 Using the source and your own knowledge, identify and explain two strengths of proportional systems which have been used in the UK since 1997.  
(10 marks)**

Relevant points might include:

- Proportional systems tend to reflect voters' preferences more accurately than FPTP (source).
- They frequently result in a greater number of women and members of ethnic minorities being elected.
- They lead to a more consensual style of politics.
- Fewer votes are wasted.



## Task 4.2

### In the style of OCR Unit F851: Contemporary Politics of the UK, Section A

**1 Why would some people claim that the UK's experience of proportional electoral systems has not been a success?** *(30 marks)*

The balance between the three Assessment Objectives is 12:12:6. The examiner expects you to be able to produce a focused analysis of the arguments adversely criticising the use of PR in the UK. You will need to make direct reference to the experience of the UK since 1997 in order to support your arguments. You should spend 25 minutes on this question, and aim to write about 400 words.

Arguments that it has not been a success might include:

- It has preserved some of the worst features of FPTP, including the creation of governments which lack a majority of popular votes — as in Wales in 2003 and Scotland since 2007.
- It has put greater power in the hands of party bosses, as with the selection of candidates under closed-list PR for European Parliament elections.
- The selection of the government has been taken out of the hands of voters, as indicated by the backroom deals which took place after the 2007 elections in Wales.
- Turnout remains low across all the elections where PR has been used.
- Voter confusion in Scotland when STV and AMS were used on the same day led to an increased number of spoiled ballot papers.
- Elections to the Greater London Assembly and the European Parliament have seen the BNP gain seats; the latter party would be denied this under FPTP.



## Task 5.1

### In the style of AQA Unit 1: People, Politics and Participation

**1 Explain the term tactical voting referred to in Source A.** (5 marks)

Tactical voting occurs when a supporter of party A votes for the candidate of party B in order to stop party C winning the seat. The extract illustrates how this occurred in certain constituencies, largely to prevent Conservative victories. In Cheadle, the tiny vote share received by the Labour candidate, and the failure of the Conservatives to win one of the key target seats, suggests that Labour voters voted Liberal Democrat to prevent the Conservative candidate claiming the seat.

**2 Using Source A and your own knowledge, explain why tactical voting has become an important influence on how people vote.** (10 marks)

Points to consider might include:

- Weakening class alignment and party identification have loosened ties between voters and parties.
- Specific campaigns organised by several parties, for example that aimed at defeating Neil Hamilton in Tatton in 1997, or that in Weston-super-Mare in 2010.
- Growing disillusionment with both main parties.
- Impact of national and international events on local behaviour; for example, in Manchester Withington in 2005 and 2010, voters who were unhappy with the then government's approach to Iraq gave their support to Liberal Democrat candidate John Leech, who went on to win and retain the seat.
- Emergence of informal 'voteswapping' networks across constituencies.



## Task 5.2

### In the style of OCR Unit F851: Contemporary Politics in the UK, Section A

**1 Using Source A, Source B and your own knowledge, discuss how far social factors are still important influences on voting behaviour. (28 marks)**

Arguments which suggest social factors are still important are as follows:

- Support for the Conservatives by women across all classes suggest gender was important in 2010 (Source B).
- The importance of age. Older voters more likely to vote, and more likely to vote Conservative.
- The Conservative Party is still the most popular party among its 'natural' supporters in the AB bracket, while Labour is still the most popular among DE voters.

Arguments which suggest social factors are no longer important:

- Party dealignment and the rise of issue voting.
- Rise of tactical voting.
- Labour lost support among all classes in 2010, while the Conservatives were the most popular party across all social classes apart from DE.



# Task 6.1

## In the style of OCR Unit F581: Contemporary Politics of the UK, Section A

### 1 Discuss the importance of the media during election campaigns.

(30 marks)

Arguments which suggest the media play a significant role include:

- Every election since 1979 has been won by the party enjoying the support of the majority of newspapers.
- Long-term readers of a newspaper with a particular political standpoint are more likely to stay loyal to that newspaper's preferred party than voters who do not regularly read such a newspaper.
- The televised leaders' debates arguably had an impact on the result in 2010, preventing Gordon Brown from launching any kind of comeback, while David Cameron's failure to achieve a decisive victory across the three debates contributed to his party's failure to achieve an overall majority.
- The impact of the media has grown in line with decreasing partisan support for the main parties.

Arguments which suggest the media do not play a significant role:

- The media have merely a reinforcing role on voter opinions.
- The media tend to follow, rather than shape, public opinion. The media's shift in position in 1997–2010 is therefore driven by commercial necessity rather than a desire to influence voter behaviour.
- In spite of the Conservative party's near-monopoly of media support, levels of support for the party actually *fell* during its 2010 election campaign.
- Similarly, after the immediate clamour for Nick Clegg following the first debate (which boosted Liberal Democrat support to 31%), the party's support had fallen back to 23% by election day 2010.



## Task 6.2

### In the style of AQA Unit 1: People, Politics and Participation

**1 Use the data in the extract and your own knowledge to explain why turnout varies throughout the UK.** *(10 marks)*

The AO weighting is 4:4:2, so you must retain a tight analytical focus on the question. You should spend about 10 minutes on this question, aiming to write around 160 words.

Points which you might choose to make could include:

- Relative affluence of the constituency.
- Extent to which individual votes are likely to make a difference (that is, is the seat a safe or marginal one?)
- Party allegiance (Labour finds it harder to get out its vote than the Conservative Party).
- Problems with electoral administration (for example, postal ballots not being sent out, polling stations closing with voters still queuing to get in).
- Perceived difference between the parties (perhaps explains historically higher turnout in Northern Ireland).

**2 'The campaign is largely insignificant in determining the result of the general election.' How far do you agree with this view?** *(25 marks)*

The AO weighting is 11:8:6, so you should try to make reference to theories about voting behaviour, as well as drawing on actual examples from different campaigns. You should spend about 25 minutes on this question, aiming to write around 400 words.

A question such as this can be difficult to structure, so you should try to:

- Write a couple of paragraphs explaining why you think the statement in the question is correct (remember: two paragraphs = two reasons). These might include:
  - Levels of support for the main parties do not tend to change significantly during the campaign.
  - Limited impact of the media on voters.
  - Voters are therefore influenced by longer-term factors, such as class or the performance of the leaders.



- Write a couple of paragraphs explaining why you think the campaign is not insignificant. These might include:
  - The impact of the televised debates.
  - The role of the media.
  - The number of undecided voters at the start of the campaign appears to be growing.
- Provide a conclusion, which might set the relative importance of campaigns against longer-term factors such as class or ethnicity.