

BONUS KEY TOPIC DEBATE: HOW DEMOCRATIC IS THE UK?

The nature of democracy in the UK needs to be judged in terms of whether there is real political equality for all to equally participate in the political process and how far that participation allows for the people to exercise popular controls over politicians.

Elections and participation

- ✓ Elections are the key method for citizens to have popular control of government and hold politicians to account, and so are crucial to democracy in the UK. Elections in the UK are free, fair and regular, with electoral fraud being extremely rare, and are overseen by the Electoral Commission. The public and political parties respect the results of these elections and in general the process of voting is relatively simple; voters just need to give a name and address at a local polling station and can vote. The vote is based on the principle of political equality, with the universal suffrage and the secret ballot ensuring the adult public of the UK can vote in a range of elections.
- ✗ Arguably, the system for determining who can vote is illogical, with 16- and 17-year-olds able to vote in Scottish and Welsh elections while you have to be 18 to vote in the general elections. At the same time, there have been issues with the number of people missing from the electoral register and the low levels of voter turnout, which is more pronounced in certain groups in society, undermining legitimacy. Critics argue that the potential introduction of Voter ID laws may reduce turnout even further. It also remains the case in the UK that the House of Lords is unelected, restricting popular control and accountability while critics of first-past-the-post feel it makes votes unequal.

Group politics

- ✓ Elected politicians recognise the importance of group politics and there are multiple access points for groups to engage in ongoing dialogue and consultation with elected politicians over political decisions between elections. Group politics encourages political participation in the political system and disperses power across society, and ensures there is a channel of communication for minority groups in society. The arrival of internet technology and social media has made it easier for groups and individuals to express their views and participate in politics.
- ✗ Group politics in the UK is seen to be politically unequal, amplifying the voice of the wealthy, well organised and strategically important groups at the expense of other groups in society. This concentrates power, rather than dispersing it, and can lead to democracy being undermined by giving too much unaccountable influence to core insider groups to shape the policy-making process in their own interest rather than the public interest. Concerns remain that pressure groups are internally undemocratic and the use of tactics that break the law by some groups undermine the fabric of democracy.

Civil liberties

- ✓ In order for individuals to be free to participate effectively and equally in the political process, democracy must be built on respect for basic rights and liberties. In the UK, the introduction of the Human Rights Act 1998, the Freedom of Information Act 2000 and the Equalities Act 2010, has created a strong legal framework to protect rights while public organisations and parliament have shown respect for human rights and a wider human rights culture has developed amongst groups and individuals.
- ✗ Successive governments have introduced legislation to curtail human rights in the UK particularly in relation to national security issues. There is a growing debate about the role of Judicial Review, the Human Rights Act and the European Court of Human Rights in UK democracy. Critics have argued that the balance has been tilted too far in favour of rights and the courts, limiting the ability for efficient and effective government to deliver in the public interest.

Key Debate Summary: How democratic is the UK?

FOR	AGAINST
✓ Elections in the UK are free, fair and regular, delivering popular control and accountability ✓ Group politics disperses power across society and provides a key channel for political participation so groups and individuals can express the strength of their views. ✓ Human rights are well protected in the UK, providing citizens with the freedom to participate in democracy.	✗ There are considerable problems with who can vote, the numbers of people on the electoral register as well as voter turnout. ✗ Group politics acts as a potential threat to democracy by concentrating power, with decision making hidden behind closed doors reducing accountability. ✗ Rights have been breached by successive governments and there has been a growing debate about the balance between rights and effective government in the public interest.