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# CHAPTER THREE

# ELECTORAL SYTEMS& REFERENDUMS

This chapter is divided into two sections:

1. Electoral Systems
2. Referendums & initiatives

In the exam these themes are linked under one topic and you will be expected to answer questions on both themes.

## SECTION 1: ELECTORAL SYSTEMS

# KEY CONCEPTS

# What functions do elections serve?

Elections are held for the following reasons:

1. They allow for **representation**. Voters elect representatives to vote on their behalf.
2. They facilitate the **choosing of a government**, whether that is a national, regional or local government.
3. They ensure that governments have **accountability**. Every five years voters have an opportunity to decide whether they are satisfied with the government and to choose an alternative if they are not satisfied. This is the key principle of ‘*government by consent’*.
4. They give governments **legitimacy**. Parties which win and form governments can claim that they are fulfilling the will of the people.*Low turnout* in recent elections arguably undermines legitimacy.
5. They allow citizens to **influence policy.**Parties present themselves for election through their *manifestos,* which are statements of intended policies. Voters are choosing between different sets of policies when they vote in an election.
6. Through campaigns they **educate citizens** about the issues of the day and how their party intend to prioritise and tackle those issues.

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# What types of systems are there?

There are many different types of electoral systems around the world and the UK uses different systems for different elections.

* The **first-past-the post** system is used in general elections across the UK and in local elections in England and Wales.
* The **List system** is used in the elections to the European Parliament.
* The **Single Transferable Vote** (STV) is used in elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly, and local elections in Northern Ireland and Scotland. It is also used to elect Northern Ireland’s 3 Members of the European Parliament.
* The **Additional Member System** (AMS) is used for elections to the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Assembly and the London Assembly.
* The **Supplementary Vote** is used for all directly elected English mayors, notably the Mayor of London.
* The **Alternative Vote (AV)** is used in the leadership election for the Labour Party. It is a variant of the Supplementary Vote.

There are therefore four overall categories of electoral systems:

* **Plurality**: the first past the post system
* **Proportional**: STV and the List System
* **Hybrid**, or ‘Mixed’ systems: AMS; AV+
* **Majoritarian**: the Supplementary Vote system; AV

So how do these systems work, what are their advantages or disadvantages, and why have they been chosen for the different elections?

# The First-Past-The-Post System

This system is arguably the simplest to use/ understand and is used in the UK general elections. It takes its name from a horse-racing term, meaning that whoever wins the most votes wins the race. It is a **plurality system**. A candidate does not need an absolute majority (i.e. more than 50% of the votes) to win: they simply need one more vote than their nearest rival (or a plurality of the votes). They may win on a relatively low percentage of the vote (even as low as 35%). In 2005 under this system the Labour Party won on just 35% of the vote.

The First Past the Post is simple because it only requires the voter to register an ‘X’ on the **ballot paper** for their chosen candidate. Each voter is allowed only one vote. Candidates are listed by name in alphabetical order on the ballot paper along with the names and logos of the party they represent.

**Advantages:**

* It is a simple system which is **easy** to use
* It produces a **speedy** result because the papers are easy to count. In the last six elections the constituency of Sunderland South has been the first to declare, usually in under an hour after the polls close.
* It usually provides a **clear** result and a majoritarian government.

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* This arguably allows for **strong and stable government**. However, in 2010 it produced a relatively unusual result of a hung parliament. This is where no party had an overall majority and a coalition was formed between the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats. The system, in fact, favours two party politics and, with the apparently increasing fragmentation of British politics, it is possible that a hung parliament will be a likely electoral outcome again in the future.
* There is arguably a **clear link between the constituency and the MP.** The MP represents the whole constituency
* Smaller, **more extreme parties**, such as the BNP, **stand little chance of electoral success.**

**Disadvantages**

* The biggest disadvantage is that they system is ***not proportional***. The seats which parties win in Parliament do not reflect their overall share of the vote. For example, in 2010 the Liberal Democrats won 23% of the vote, but gained only 9% of the seats (57 seats) and in 2015 the Liberal Democrats polled 8% of the vote and 0.1% of the seats (8 seats). UKIP polled 12.6% of the vote but gained just 1 seat. Again in 2015, the SNP polled 50% of the votes in Scotland, but won 56 of the 59 seats. The Conservatives polled 40% of the vote, but gained over 50% of the seats.
* It is therefore **unfair to smaller parties** (e.g. UKIP, the Green Party, and the Liberal Democrats) and their voters. For this reason the Liberal Democrats advocate a change in the voting system to a proportional system. They favour the STV (see below).
* It creates a **winners bonus.**This is the feature in which the winning party gains an exaggerated number of seats. In 2005 Labour won 355 of the 646 seats (or just over of the 50% seats) on 35% of the vote. In 2015 the Conservatives won just over 50% of the seats on 40% of the vote.
* **Tactical voting** often occurs under the first past the post system. This is where voters cast a ballot not for their preferred candidate, as they have no chance of winning, but for a candidate from another party who might stand a greater chance of defeating their least favourite candidate. For example, Labour voters in Solihull often vote for the Liberal Democrats in the hope that they might defeat the Conservative candidate, knowing that a Labour candidate has no chance of winning in Solihull. As a result, between 2005 and 2015 Solihull was represented by a Liberal Democrat.
* For those voters, whose candidate was not elected in their constituency, their votes have been wasted. **Wasted votes** also occur when a candidate has surplus votes (more than one vote above their nearest rival).
* **Safe seats** arise under the first past the post system. This is where a candidate has such a large majority that it is impossible that they will lose their seat. In General Elections in the UK, the predominance of safe seats leads parties to concentrate their efforts on a hundred or so **marginal seats**.

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* **Electoral deserts** are another feature. This is where, in regions of the country, parties are unable to win many, if any seats. Scotland is now an electoral desert for the Conservatives, Labour and the Liberal Democrats, who only have one seat each.
* The first past the post system **favours two party politics.** The Conservative and Labour Parties have the most to gain by retaining this system.

# Proportional systems

The greatest contrast with the first past the post system is proportional systems. These systems deliver *proportionally* the number of seats for a party that their share of the vote would suggest. Thus, in 2010 when the Liberal Democrats gained 23% of the votes they would have received 23 % of the seats in Westminster (about 150 seats, rather than the 57 seats they actually won).

Exam questions often ask candidates to compare the advantages and disadvantages of the two types of system. A feature of all proportional systems is that they require larger ***multi-member constituencies***. These are constituencies that cover a much larger geographical area, so there are fewer of them, but which return four or five representatives each.

Some observers argue that this is a ***disadvantage*** because it destroys the clear link between a single MP and their constituency. Others argue that having multi-member constituencies is an ***advantage*** because several parties would be represented among the four or five MPs in each constituency. They might add that under the first past the post system how can a Labour voter be properly represented by a Conservative MP? Multi-member constituencies mean that each constituency is more likely to have MPs from different parties, so a Labour voter is more likely to have access to a Labour MP and a Conservative voter is more likely to have access to a Conservative MP, etc. Some observers also feel that the strong MP/constituency link with voters is a myth: many people do not know who their MP is.

**The Advantages of Proportional Systems:**

Many of the disadvantages of the first past the post system are avoided using proportional representation. For example:

* Proportional systems deliver roughly the proportion of seats according to the proportion of votes. In the 2003 elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly, using the STV system, Sinn Fein secured 23% of the first preference votes and won 24% of the seats. The SDLP got 17% of the first preference votes and 18% of the seats.
* They are therefore fairer to smaller parties
* There is no winners’ bonus
* There are no electoral deserts
* There is no point in tactical voting.
* There are no wasted votes: all votes count

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* There would be no truly safe seats

**The Disadvantages of Proportional Systems:**

* They are **more complicated** and more difficult to understand than the first past the post system
* They take **longer to count**
* They produce coalitions which some feel are less stable forms of government. ***Rainbow coalitions*** (coalitions which involve many different parties, as in Italy) are certainly less stable than ***grand coalitions*** (coalitions between the two largest parties of opposing ideologies, as in Germany – Germany has a recent history of stable and successful grand coalitions).
* Smaller, **more extreme parties have a greater chance of electoral success**.
* Arguably, they **weaken the MP/constituency link**

HARD STUFF

Another **disadvantage of proportional systems** has been voiced by the former Conservative leader, William Hague. He argues that proportional systems take the power away from the electorate to *choose* a government. This is because they rarely result in single party government and, as a consequence, once the votes have been counted it is up to the parties to negotiate coalition deals. Which parties form part of the government therefore depends on which parties can negotiate a deal, rather than on which party the voters prefer.

In the UK two proportional systems are used in different elections.

# The Single Transferable Vote system

This is the system favoured by the Liberal democrats.It allows for smaller parties, sometimes representing minority groups, to gain a fairer proportion of seats in a legislature. This is why it is used in Northern Ireland for the Northern Ireland Assembly elections, as the Catholic minority (represented by Sinn Fein and the SDLP) would otherwise be massively underrepresented. They are also used in elections to the European Parliament and local elections. The underrepresentation of Catholics in Northern Ireland led to the start of ‘the Troubles’ in Northern Ireland in the 1970s in which Catholic (Republican) and Protestant (Unionist) terror groups fought a bitter sectarian (religious) war. In trying to reach a peaceful solution, politicians agreed that the STV system would allow sufficient representation of Catholics in all levels of government in Northern Ireland.

The system works by voters numbering their preferred candidates in order of preference (1, 2, 3, 4 etc.). This is called **preferential voting.**They can list as many candidates as they like, and they can choose candidates from different parties (**split ticket voting**), because they might like an individual candidate from a party for which they would not normally vote. Parties can also field as many candidates as they like for each constituency.

A formula (**the Droop quota**) is used to calculate which of the candidates win the seat. The quota provides a **threshold** (the number of votes a candidate needs to be elected to represent the constituency). The threshold will vary depending on the number of seats available in the constituency and the number of voters. All the first choice votes are counted. If a candidate reaches the threshold they are elected and any surplus second preference votes are distributed to other candidates. If no candidates are elected the candidate with the fewest votes is eliminated and their second preferences are redistributed. This process is repeated until all the four or five seats are filled. As you can see, this is quite a long and complicated process, and this is sometimes seen a ***disadvantage*** of this system.

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VOTER CONFUSION

The complication of using different electoral systems became evident in the elections to the Scottish Parliament and to Scottish local authorities in 2007. Both sets of elections were held on the same day. For the Scottish Parliament, voters were required to use the AMS system (see below), while for the Scottish local authorities voters were expected to use the STV system (see above). Presented with two ballot papers, voters were thrown into confusion, with some thinking they could use just one ballot paper for both elections. This led to 148,000 wasted ballot papers with the margin for some winning candidates being smaller than the number of invalid votes for that constituency.

# The List System (also known as The Regional List System)

This is a proportional system which has two variants: the Open List System and the Closed List System. In the **Open List System** voters are given a ballot paper which lists all the candidates for the parties in their constituency. They rank the candidates in order of preference on the ballot paper by numbering them 1, 2, 3, etc. They can again choose as many candidates as they wish. This system then used the **D’Hondt formula** to calculate the winning candidates in a multi-member constituency.

In the **Closed List System**, used in English, Scottish and Welsh elections to the EU Parliament, electors vote for the *parties*, not the candidates. The parties have lists of preferred candidates in order of priority and they assign candidates to the seats according to their priority list. So, if they win three seats in a constituency, those three seats will go to the three candidates at the top of their list.

In the European Parliament elections Britain is divided into 11 **regions**, or constituencies, each returning between 3 and 10 MPs. The UK returns 73 Members of the European Parliament (MEPs). These include 3 Northern Ireland MEPs who are elected using the STV system.

# Hybrid (or Mixed) Systems

These systems provide a degree of proportionality and so are **more proportional** than the First Past the Post System, but are less proportional than the STV and List systems. They include **the AMS system**, as used in elections to the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly, which provides a proportional regional ‘top-up’ to the number of representatives.

The **Additional Member System (AMS)** uses a combination of the first past the post and the regional list systems. Every voter has two votes: one for a constituency representative and one from a party list, from which a regional representative will be chosen. The D’Hondt formula is used for calculating the regional ‘top-up’ element of this system. For example, Scotland has 129 Members of the Scottish Parliament (MSPs). Of these 73 are constituency MSPs, elected by the First Past The Post System and 56 are regional MSPs, elected from 8 regions using the Regional List System. The parties are therefore allocated a number of additional members (regional MSPs) in order to make the overall result more proportional.

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Similarly, in the Welsh Assembly there are 60 Assembly Members (AMs). Forty of them are constituency AMs and twenty of them are regional AMs.

**Advantages**

* The AMS system provides some proportionality in the overall result, thereby helping smaller parties succeed.
* It allows for the possibility of single-party government. Since 2011 the SNP have formed a majority government in the Scottish Parliament.
* It allows voters a wider choice. They can split their ticket and vote for different parties for the constituency and the region.

**Disadvantages**

* There is some confusion over the lack of distinctiveness over the roles of constituency and regional representatives. In effect there are two classes of representatives. For example, in Scotland if a constituent has an issue, do they see their constituency MSP or a regional MSP?
* Although there is greater proportionality, the system is not as proportional as the STV or List systems.

# Majoritarian Systems

These systems require a candidate to win a majority of votes: i.e. over 50% of the votes. They include the Supplementary Vote and The Alternative Vote, both of which operate in a similar way. **The Supplementary Vote** system is used in London Mayoral elections and the **Alternative Vote** is used to elect the leader of the Labour Party.

Electors have two votes: a fist and a second preference candidate. In **the Supplementary Vote** (SV) if no candidate wins a majority of votes on the first ballot, all but the two top candidates are eliminated and the other candidate’s second preference votes are redistributed (which means the winner will eventually receive more than 50% of the vote).

In **the Alternative Vote**(AV) variant if no candidate wins a majority of votes on the first ballot, the candidate with the least number of votes is eliminated and their second preference votes are redistributed among the other candidates. This process is repeated until one candidate secures more than 50% of the votes.

**Advantages**

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* This system ensures fewer wasted votes
* Candidates must win a clear majority of support and therefore can claim greater legitimacy.

**Disadvantages**

* The winning candidate may not enjoy the most first-preference votes, but simply be the least unpopular candidate.

## 2. EXAMPLES OF CALLS FOR ELECTORAL REFORM IN THE UK

**The Jenkins Commission (1998), Blair’s reforms, and the AV referendum (2011)**

The issue of electoral reform in Britain is not new, but attempts at reform (at least for general elections) have never been successful. In the 1920s there were several debates in parliament over the matter of electoral reform with, at different times, the STV and the AMS systems being proposed. However, the House of Commons and the House of Lords could never agree with each other as to which system should be adopted.

More recently, in the mid-nineteen nineties, Blair’s New Labour proposed electoral reform. This was because until the 1997 general election they had endured 18 years in opposition and some observers began to suggest that Labour would never win an election again under the First Past the Post system. Blair approached Lord Jenkins, a senior Liberal Democrat and an ardent proponent of electoral reform, to chair a commission into the issue. To his surprise, Blair’s New Labour Party won a landslide victory in the 1997 general election under the First-Past-The-Post system. Blair still went ahead and established **the Jenkins Commission**. It took a year to undertake a study of different electoral systems and make recommendations for a new electoral system in Britain. To the surprise of many, Jenkins proposed an entirely new system, which he devised and which is not used anywhere in the world. He called it the ‘AV plus’ system and it combined elements of the Alternative Vote System and the Regional List system. Constituency MPs would be elected using the AV system and regional ‘top-up’ MPs using the List system. It arguably had the advantage of being relatively simple to understand whilst still delivering a degree of proportionality.

While publicly Blair welcomed the report, which was published in 1998, the Labour Party had lost its enthusiasm for electoral reform after winning the 1997 general. It proved that Labour could still win under the First-Past-The-Post system. The Labour manifestoes of 2001 and 2005 continued to make reference to their willingness to explore new electoral systems, but, to Jenkins’ disappointment, his proposals were quietly dropped.

However, Blair did introduce some significant electoral reforms for **‘second order’** elections (elections, other than general elections, which are considered secondary by many voters and which consequently have lower turnout such as local elections). In establishing the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly he introduced the Additional Member System. Under Blair, Scotland saw the introduction of STV for its local elections. Elections in Northern Ireland also used the STV system, while elections to the European Parliament adopted the List System.

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The final episode in the history of electoral reform in Britain occurred in 2011 with the **referendum on AV**. This was held as, in the negotiations which led to the formation of the coalition government in 2010; the Liberal Democrats made it a condition of the ‘Coalition Agreement’ that there should be a referendum on electoral reform. The AV system was a compromise, but as it often secures seats for the least unpopular candidates the Liberal Democrats felt it might offer some advantage to them.

The AV referendum was only the second nationwide referendum held in the UK  
 and the first that was not merely consultative (in other words the results were agreed to be binding on the government). There was cross party support for both campaigns. All registered electors had the opportunity to vote and turnout was low at 42%. The result was a ‘no’ vote with 68% voting ‘No’ and 32% voting ‘Yes’. Criticism has been made of the fact that the money spent on the ‘No’ campaign was far higher than the money spent of the ‘Yes’ campaign.

The referendum seemed to seal the fate of electoral reform in the UK for the foreseeable future. However, the disproportionate results of the 2015 general election (see Chapter 2) have opened the debate yet again. Smaller parties, such as the Green Party, UKIP and, now, the Liberal Democrats have renewed calls for an overhaul of the UK electoral system.



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## SECTION 2: REFERENDUMS& INITIATIVES

This section explores referendums in the UK (although some reference to referendums abroad is made where relevant). The section discusses whether the ***wider use*** of referendums in the UK would enhance democracy. This is a question often asked in the exam.

## STUFF YOU NEED TO KNOW

### Referendums

**Referendums** are a vote on a single issue. They are also known as **plebiscites** (meaning ‘a vote of the common people’) and are a form of direct democracy. It is only in the last quarter of the twentieth century that they have become more frequently used in the UK. In fact, many politicians regard them with suspicion. Clement Attlee, the Labour Prime Minister between 1945 and 1951, described them as “a device so alien to all our traditions” and “a tool of demagogues and dictators”. (Demagogues are political leaders who appeal to citizen’s populist prejudices rather than rational argument.) Margaret Thatcher agreed with Attlee.

Abroad they are used much more widely. In Switzerland there have been referendums on euthanasia and in Eire (2015) there was a referendum on same sex marriage, both ***moral issues***. In the UK, referendums have been used mostly on ***constitutional issues*** or ***where a government has been divided on an issue***.

Since 1973, the UK government has held twelve referendums. Most have been regional and just two of these have been referendums across the whole of the UK. ***The first UK-wide referendum was in 1975 on the question of whether the UK should remain within the European Economic Community***. The referendum was called by the Labour Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, who was facing a divided Cabinet. Rather than confront his Cabinet, he opted to put the question to the people. On a turnout of 63%, 67% said ‘Yes’ and 33% said ‘No’. This was an example both of a referendum on a constitutional issue, but it is also an example of a referendum where a government was divided on an issue.

***The second UK-wide referendum was in 2011 on the question of whether the AV system should replace the First-Past-The-Post for elections to the House of Commons.*** On a turnout of 42%, 32% said ‘Yes’ and 67% said ‘No’. Again, this is both an example of a referendum on a constitutional issue and a referendum where a (coalition) government was divided on an issue.

Currently there is a proposed referendum on whether the UK should remain within the EU. This is likely to take place before the autumn of 2017.

Regional referendums have included the following (the % of the winning vote is in brackets):

* 1973: should Northern Ireland remain within the UK? ‘Yes’ (99%)

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* 1979: should there be a Scottish Parliament? ‘No’ (51%)
* 1979: should there be a Welsh Assembly? ‘’No’ (79%)
* 1997: should there be a Scottish Parliament?‘Yes’ (74%)
* 1997: should there be a Welsh Assembly? ‘Yes’ (50.3%)
* 1998: should there be a London Mayor and a London Assembly? ‘Yes’ (72%)
* 1998: support for the Good Friday Agreement? ‘Yes’ (71%)
* 2004: should the North East have a regional assembly? ‘No’ (78%)
* 2011: should the Welsh Assembly have further legislative powers? ‘Yes’ (63%)

## 2. EXAMPLES OF REGIONAL REFERENDUMS

**The experience in Scotland and Wales**

In 1979 there were two referendums on constitutional matters: whether Scotland and Wales should have their own devolved legislative assembles. The issue had arisen because of the rise in Scottish and Welsh nationalism since the 1960s. Jim Callaghan’s Labour government agreed to the referendums in exchange for SNP support in the House of Commons. However, the government insisted that the turnout for the referendum in Scotland should be at least 40%, otherwise, the government argued, the result lack legitimacy. (In regional referendums only registered voters living in the affected region are allowed to vote.)

Turnout was just 32.9%, so below the threshold, and the referendum was declared invalid. Of those who votes, 51.6 voted in favour of a devolved parliament and 48.3% voted ‘No’.

In Wales the vote was more resoundingly against a Welsh Assembly. 74.9% of the electorate voted against a Welsh Assembly and just 20.3 % voted in favour on a 59% turnout. Only 12% of Welsh voters therefore voted in favour of an Assembly.

However, neither of these referendums fully resolved the issue and nationalism in Scotland and Wales continued to gather support.

When Labour next came to office in 1997, Tony Blair offered to revisit the issue of devolved assemblies for Scotland and Wales. Referendums were held in 1997. In Scotland there were two questions facing voters:

* I agree that there should be a Scottish Parliament
* I agree that a Scottish Parliament should have tax-varying powers

74% of the Scottish voters agreed that there should be a Scottish Parliament and 26 % voted against on a turnout of 60%. On the question of whether the Scottish Parliament should have important tax-varying powers 63% voter in favour and 37% voted against. A Scottish Parliament was finally agreed and began working in 1999.

In Wales in 1997 voters were asked whether they agreed that there should be a Welsh Assembly. By a narrow majority the ‘Yes’ vote won: 50.3% ‘Yes’, 49.7% ‘No’. The turnout was 50.1%.

The introduction of legislative assembles in Scotland and Wales was part of a plan for wider constitutional reform by New Labour. They proposed that regional assemblies be created throughout England, too, and, as a result, a referendum was held in the North East in 2004 on whether a North East Regional Assembly should be established. The result was a resounding ‘No’: 78% voting ‘No’ and 22% voting ‘Yes’ on a turnout of 49%. Labour’s plans for further regional assemblies in England were shelved.

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In Scotland the creation of a Scottish Parliament did not diminish the enthusiasm of nationalists for greater independence. The SNP grew in strength and became the majority government in the Scottish Parliament in 2011. Their leader, Alex Salmond, pressed David Cameron for a referendum on Scottish independence and this was held in November 2014. Salmond wanted two questions to be put to the electorate in Scotland. The first was whether they wanted full independence for Scotland; the second was if they chose not to have full independence, did they want further devolved legislative powers: the so-called ‘Devomax’ option. Cameron insisted that the second question was confusing to the voters and that only the first question should be put, believing that the result would be a clear ‘No’ to independence. ***This issue of choosing the wording of the question illustrates how referendums are open to manipulation***.

The result was a narrow vote against Scottish independence. On a very high turnout of 84.6% the ‘No’ campaign secured 55.3% of the vote and the ‘Yes’ campaign secured 44.7%. Once again there were allegations that one side of the argument, the ‘No’ campaign, was better funded and therefore had an advantage. In this referendum ***16-18 year olds were given the vote*** and there is evidence that the issues engaged young people in a way that general elections often do not.

## 3. DEBATE

## *WOULD THE WIDER USE OF REFEREDUMS ENHANCE DEMOCRACY IN THE UK?*

Below are the key points often raised in this debate:

**Yes they would**

* Referendums are a form of **direct democracy** and this is more democratic than representative democracy because the people have a direct influence on the policy-making process. The debates leading up to a referendums educate citizens on the issues facing them
* They strengthen the mandate of a government and provide greater legitimacy for government policy
* They create more responsive governments as governments are given a clearer view the electorate hold on a given issue
* They reduce government power by handing decisions to the voters and this is healthy in a democracy

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**No they wouldn’t**

* Referendums are rarely legally binding and their results can be ignored by governments (as, for example, in the Scottish devolution referendum in 1979)
* The questions on the ballot paper can be manipulated to better ensure the desired outcome of the government (as, for example, in the 2014 Scottish independence referendum)
* They are only a ‘snapshot’ of fickle (changeable) public opinion. A referendum held today might have a different outcome in a month’s time.
* Some issues are too complicated to be reduced to a simple ‘Yes’ or ‘No’ answer. In the Scottish independence referendum there was a complex discussion about whether, technically, Scotland could continue to use the £ if it became independent.
* Some issues are also too complex for the voters to be expected to become adequately educated about them to make an informed decision
* They are usually only proposed when the government, which can determine the timing of referendums, believes it can win.
* They undermine the Westminster Parliament. Voters elect representatives (MPs) to make decisions on their behalf. They do not expect MPs to keep asking the electorate about what should be done. This was Margaret Thatcher’s response.

## 4. ADDITIONAL STUFF

## i) INITIATIVES

Initiatives are processes by which citizens can call a referendum. They are common in the United States. In the UK the coalition government established a form of initiative in 2010. This required that if 100,000 signatures are placed on the Cabinet Office website in favour of a referendum on a given subject, a debate is triggered in parliament as to whether the referendum should occur. This happened in the autumn of 2011, for example, when over 100,000 signatures called for a referendum on Britain’s future in the EU. At the time the issue was debated in parliament, but the ensuing vote rejected a referendum.

## ii) RECALL ELECTIONS

Recall elections are devices by which constituents can call for a by-election to unseat an unpopular representative before the end of their term in office. It is an idea supported by the Liberal Democrats who, in the last parliament, hoped to put forward legislation to implement this (though they did not gain sufficient parliamentary support). An issue with recall elections is that in marginal seats mischievous constituents from other parties might continually press for recalls.

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