

PREPARING FOR A LEVEL POLITICS: DIRECT DEMOCRACY



Task 1 – Reading and thinking about Democracy

- **Read the following slides, have a go at answering any questions in red/fill in gaps**
- **There are tasks for you in the later slides**

TYPES OF DEMOCRACY

- **Democracy** is a system of government where those in power are chosen by the people and *accountable* to them. The citizens are able to make decisions about what the laws should be and how their country should be run.
- **Representative Democracy** is also called *Indirect Democracy* and is what we have in the UK. In Representative Democracy citizens vote in occasional elections to choose a local representative (an MP) who will speak and vote for their interests at the national Parliament, which makes laws on behalf of the citizens.
 - Research how often **General Elections to the House of Commons in the UK** have to be held: _ _ _ _
- In **Direct Democracy** the citizens make the decisions themselves, not relying on representatives to do it for them. So citizens have to engage politically quite regularly, not just every few years at an election time. The UK *isn't* a Direct Democracy – we mostly rely on MPs to make political decisions for us. *But* we do use some methods for voters to make some decisions instead of MPs, and this has become more common in recent decades.

More about Direct Democracy

- *Direct Democracy* is a system where the public make decisions themselves, they do not act through others.
- This process of decision making is continual, decisions are made regularly each year, not just every few years at a General Election.
- A historical example is Athenian Democracy (see cover pic of where Athenian citizens met to debate and decide things)
- A more contemporary feature of direct democracy is *Referendums*.
- Decisions are reached on a *majoritarian* basis meaning the decision reached is based upon which side wins, e.g. Brexit
 - Research: What % of those who took part in the Brexit referendum voted to Leave the EU: _ _ _
- The UK also now has an option for citizens to *Recall* (sack) an MP who has been found guilty of serious wrongdoing
- It can also involve *Citizens Assemblies*, where a randomly chosen group of people are tasked with researching and debating a difficult issue, and then to come up with recommendations to put to the government, or to all the people in a referendum.

REFERENDUMS

- Referendums and **initiatives** are common when important political and constitutional issues are at stake: **can you give a non-Brexit example/e.g?** _____
- They usually ask a Yes/No question and normally only one question is asked **e.g?** _____
- In the UK Parliament and government determine if a referendum will be held and what the question will be.
- Referendums *can* be binding upon a government (so they have to do what the majority of the people vote for) – *but* referendums are not binding in the UK.
Why? - because Parliament is sovereign meaning has the final say in all decisions, so referendums can only be advisory to MPs.

INITIATIVES & E-PETITIONS

- This is in contrast to *INITIATIVES* which occur in several US states (e.g. California, Colorado) where the people themselves call for a referendum. There is a minimum number of signatures required to force one to be held.
- In 2010, an initiative for the legalisation of marijuana in California was rejected. **Can you find any recent examples of initiatives?**
- **Can you think of any reasons why using initiatives to decide on laws could be problematic?**
- However in the UK we do have *e-petitions* (TGGS students started on one on climate change) - [Petitions - UK Government and Parliament](#) –
note 3 or 4 current petitions that have lots of signature, sign some yourself if you wish (but don't tell me which you've signed, that's private!)

RECAP of referendums

- They are a popular vote on an issue of public policy
- They are examples of direct democracy
- They may be either binding or advisory (in the UK they are affected by *Parliamentary Sovereignty*).
- Some countries use initiatives – referendums demanded by citizens

Referendums: Some UK examples

- In the UK we are increasingly becoming a consultative democracy (e.g. with e-petitions) but we do have aspects of *direct democracy* through referendums. Some have been at National level (all UK citizens can vote), others only affect particular regions of the UK
 - 1975 (UK and Europe) National
 - 1979 (Scotland and Wales Devolution) Regional
 - 1997 (Scottish Parliament / Welsh Assembly) Regional
 - 1998 (Northern Ireland Good Friday Agreement peace settlement) Regional
 - 2011 (Changing the voting system to AV) National
 - 2014 (Scottish independence) Regional
 - 2016 (EU referendum) National

We also hold some more local referendums

- 1998 - London Mayor and Assembly
- 2000-2022 – many councils have held votes on whether to have a Mayor directly elected by their citizens. e.g. 2002-4 - Torbay Mayor
- 2008 - Manchester congestion charge
- 2012 – Mayors for English cities, e.g. Bristol
- 2015-22 – 100s of very local referendums on village housing/development plans

WHY ARE REFERENDUMS HELD?

- Referendums have been held in the UK for several reasons, which include:
 - To fulfil pledges made in party manifestos. Labour in 1997 promised in their election manifesto (published promises) to hold a referendum on a Mayor for London. Conservatives promised one on leaving the EU in their 2015 manifesto.
 - To provide legitimacy for major constitutional changes. Devolution of power 1997 to Scotland and Wales so they got their own parliaments was such an event.
 - As part of the agreement for a coalition government, e.g. between the Conservative and Liberal Democrats in 2010 → Voting Reform Referendum 2011
 - To settle an internal party dispute over a controversial issue. It was alleged that the national referendum in 1975 over continued EEC (=EU) membership was more concerned with disputes inside the Labour Party than wider public concerns.
 - At local levels referendums are held for a multitude of reasons to solve issues ranging from planning proposals, locally elected mayors, schooling, and transport issues. At local levels some referendums can be triggered by petitions.
 - In response to pressure to hold a referendum, e.g. Conservative Prime Minister Cameron was pressured by his MPs, newspapers like the Daily Mail, and fear of Nigel Farage's UKIP Party to hold the Brexit referendum.

Research Qs

- Why was a national referendum called for the first time in 1975?
- What organisation regulates (sets the rules for) referendums and why is this important?
- What demands are there for a referendum at the moment? How likely is it this will happen?
- What would you hold a referendum on, if you had the power to decide what to put to the people?

Task 2 - Research 2 Referendums

Research one national and one regional referendum from the list on slide 8. For each:

- Why was the referendum called?
- What was the question?
- How many voted? Percentage turnout?
- How many voted yes/no? (%s)
- What happened as a result?

You can also use a Politics Review article on Brexit to help you as this has lots of helpful information - [Task 2 Politics Review EU referendum explained.pdf](#)

Understanding the Brexit Referendum

- Task 3 – Watch this Channel 4 documentary on the Brexit Referendum - [Brexit: A Very British Coup?](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K1111111111) ([youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com))



FINAL TASK...

- Task 4: Read the debate article for and against the use of referendums – [Task 4 Politics Review Article on Referendums Debate.pdf](#)
- and create a visual billboard-style page or mindmap on the pros and cons, highlighting which side you most agree with.