1.2 Direct versus Representative Democracy and Debates on Reform

EDEXCEL 9PL0 · about 60 minutes · Write-in edition

Total Marks

Name: _____ Date: ____ / ____ / _____

Answer ALL questions. Short answer questions may be answered in notes or bullet points; for levels-marked questions write in full sentences and construct a developed argument. Timings: allow about 40 minutes for the 30-mark extended essay and about 30 minutes for the remaining questions.

1 Define 'representative democracy' as it operates in the contemporary UK political system.

(Total for Question 1 is 2 marks)

2 State two legal or constitutional constraints that limit the use of referendums as binding instruments of law in the UK, explaining each constraint and giving an example.

(Total for Question 2 is 5 marks)

3 Explain two reasons why turnout at UK general elections might fall, referring to political participation literature and the UK context since 1997.

(Total for Question 3 is 3 marks)

4 Evaluate the extent to which the UK faces a participation crisis, and assess the effectiveness of the proposed reforms of compulsory voting, e-democracy, wider use of referendums and lowering the voting age to 16 in addressing that crisis.

(Total for Question 4 is 30 marks)

5 Explain three criticisms of using referendums regularly in the UK as a form of direct democracy, giving one practical example or consequence for each criticism.

(Total for Question 5 is 6 marks)

6 Using the two short source extracts below about declining party membership and the popularity of online petitions in the UK, evaluate the claim that digital participation substantially replaces traditional party membership. Source A: 'Between 1990 and 2020 national party membership in the UK parties fell from several million to under a million, reducing parties ability to mobilise voters and diminishing local activism.' Source B: 'Online petitions on the government site have attracted millions of signatures collectively by 2022 and have led to dozens of parliamentary debates, suggesting digital channels can amplify public voice.' Using these sources, evaluate the extent to which digital participation substantially replaces traditional party membership.

(Total for Question 6 is 12 marks)

Mark scheme · 1.2 Direct versus Representative Democracy and Debates on Reform

Question 1

identifies that representative democracy involves electing representatives to make decisions on behalf of citizens	**B1**
development, e.g. mentions regular elections to the House of Commons and accountability via Parliament	**B1**

Answer: Representative democracy is a system where citizens elect representatives, such as Members of Parliament, to make laws and govern on their behalf, with accountability maintained through regular elections and parliamentary scrutiny.

Question 2

one accurate constraint, e.g. parliamentary sovereignty means Parliament can legislate contrary to a referendum outcome	**B1**
development of that constraint, e.g. referendums are advisory unless Parliament provides that they are binding	**B1**
a second accurate constraint, e.g. lack of constitutional codification means there is no entrenched procedure requiring respect for referendum results	**B1**
development of second constraint, e.g. Parliament can change law after a referendum unless a statute says otherwise	**B1**
a final small development or example, e.g. the 2016 EU referendum was advisory in law though treated as politically authoritative	**B1**

Answer: Any two of: parliamentary sovereignty, meaning referendums are normally advisory unless Parliament legislates to make their result binding; and the absence of a codified constitution or entrenched referendum rules, meaning there is no legal barrier to Parliament later changing the law even after a referendum result.

Question 3

identifies one plausible reason, e.g. voter apathy or disillusion with parties and politicians	**B1**
development or example, e.g. falling trust in politicians and low mobilisation in certain elections	**B1**
identifies a second plausible reason, e.g. structural barriers or perceived lack of meaningful choice	**B1**

Answer: Turnout can fall because of voter apathy or disillusion with parties and politicians, reflected in lower trust and weaker mobilisation, and because of structural factors such as a perceived lack of meaningful choice between major parties in some constituencies, which reduces the incentive to vote.

Question 4

Level 0 No relevant material.	**0**
Level 1 Limited knowledge of participation trends or reforms, with little analysis or evaluation. Judgement, if present, is unsupported or assertive rather than evidenced.	**1-7**
Level 2 Clear, accurate knowledge of participation evidence and reforms, with some developed analysis of how reforms might address problems. Evaluation is present but may be one-sided or rely on general claims.	**8-15**
Level 3 Detailed, accurate knowledge used to construct a sustained analysis of participation trends and the strengths and weaknesses of each reform, with balanced evaluation and some synthesis across reforms, leading to a reasoned judgement.	**16-23**
Level 4 Sophisticated, wide-ranging knowledge and analysis used to produce a tightly argued evaluation that weighs evidence of a participation crisis against the realistic effects, trade offs and feasibility of each reform, and reaches a well-substantiated, balanced conclusion on the overall extent of the crisis and the likely effectiveness of the reforms.	**24-30**

Indicative content:

- Evidence of a participation crisis: falling turnout in some UK general elections compared with mid 20th century peaks, long-term decline in membership of major parties since the 1990s, reduced trade union political influence, and a decline in traditional forms of local activism and canvassing.
- Qualification: turnout and participation are uneven rather than uniformly low, with spikes in engagement for disputed referendums or charismatic leaders; younger cohorts show different patterns of engagement such as social media activism and protest rather than party membership.
- Compulsory voting case for: could raise turnout quickly, increase the representativeness of electoral outcomes and reduce the bias of electorates towards older and more affluent voters.
- Compulsory voting case against: coerced voting may increase informal or uninformed ballots, could be resisted as illiberal in a liberal democracy, and implementation would require enforcement mechanisms and sanctions that raise practical and ethical questions.
- E-democracy case for: lowers costs of participation, enables quicker mobilisation, and can reach underrepresented groups through online registration, e-petitions and digital consultations; examples include large numbers of petition signatories and petition-driven debates.
- E-democracy case against: digital divides and misinformation risk entrenching inequalities, online engagement is often shallow or ephemeral, and cybersecurity and verification raise practical barriers to making e-democracy fully reliable and trust-worthy.
- Referendums case for: can boost engagement on specific issues, create high-profile moments of public involvement and increase the perceived legitimacy of major constitutional decisions.
- Referendums case against: risk of oversimplification, populist manipulation, weakening of parliamentary deliberation and the marginalisation of minority rights, as critics argued in the 2016 EU referendum.
- Lower voting age case for: enfranchising 16 and 17 year olds can embed voting habits early and ensure policies affecting youth are represented, with the Scottish experience in 2014 as a relevant example.
- Lower voting age case against: questions about political maturity and the need for civic education, though evidence from jurisdictions where 16 year olds vote suggests mixed but often positive effects on turnout among young people.
- Synthesis: different reforms address different aspects of the participation problem; compulsory voting is blunt and controversial but effective at raising turnout, e-democracy and lowering the voting age are incremental and can change patterns of engagement over time, and referendums address salience but carry risks to representative institutions.
- Conclusion: a nuanced judgement may argue that the UK faces important participation challenges rather than a single unified crisis, and a package of targeted reforms, improved civic education and measures to reduce inequality of access may be more effective than any single reform on its own.

Question 5

identifies criticism one, e.g. oversimplification of complex policy into a binary choice	**B1**
development or example of criticism one, e.g. the 2016 EU referendum reduced complex EU membership issues to leave or remain	**B1**
identifies criticism two, e.g. risk of majoritarian tyranny or undermining minority rights	**B1**
development or example of criticism two, e.g. referendums on socially sensitive issues can marginalise minority protections	**B1**
identifies criticism three, e.g. referendums may weaken representative institutions by shifting decision making away from Parliament	**B1**
development or example of criticism three, e.g. frequent referendums could incentivise politicians to avoid responsibility for hard decisions	**B1**

Answer: Criticisms include that referendums oversimplify complex policy into a binary choice, as critics argued happened in the 2016 EU referendum; that they risk majoritarian tyranny and can undermine protections for minorities on socially sensitive questions; and that regular use of referendums can weaken representative institutions by shifting decision making away from Parliament and encouraging politicians to outsource difficult choices.

Question 6

Level 0 No relevant material.	**0**
Level 1 Basic selection and paraphrase of source material with little or no analysis. Judgement, if present, is undeveloped.	**1-3**
Level 2 Clear use of the sources to support a partial evaluation, identifying strengths of the claim or weaknesses, with some analysis of the relationship between digital participation and party membership.	**4-6**
Level 3 Good evaluation that uses both sources to weigh the claim, analysing how digital participation differs from or complements party membership, and considering implications for mobilisation and representation.	**7-9**
Level 4 Perceptive and balanced evaluation that situates the sources in a wider evidence context, shows understanding of the limits of digital engagement for long term mobilisation and candidate selection, and reaches a supported judgement on the extent to which digital participation replaces traditional membership.	**10-12**

Indicative content:

- Use of Source A: falling party membership weakens parties ability to mobilise voters, run local campaigns, and recruit activists who perform essential grassroots functions, which digital signatures alone may not replicate.
- Use of Source B: online petitions can amplify issues and secure parliamentary debates, showing digital tools can increase visibility and participation on specific issues relatively quickly.
- Comparison: digital participation tends to be episodic and issue-specific, whereas party membership involves sustained commitment, volunteer activity, and candidate selection rights, so digital tools complement rather than substitute for deep organisational functions.
- Counterargument: large-scale digital participation can replace some mobilisation functions, for example quick recruitment for protests or funding drives, and can reach demographics that party branches struggle to engage, increasing overall political engagement.
- Consideration of quality: signatures do not always equate to informed engagement or long-term loyalty, so a million online signatures does not equal a million active, reliable party members who canvass and turn out votes.
- Evidence context: look beyond the sources to factors such as the role of social media in membership recruitment drives, the reduced resources of local parties, and the emergence of hybrid models where parties use digital tools to supplement membership activity.
- Judgement: a supported conclusion may argue that digital participation substantially supplements and sometimes replaces particular functions of party membership, especially mobilisation for single issues, but does not fully replace the sustained organisational, deliberative and candidate-selection roles that formal party membership fulfils.