1.12 The SNP, Plaid Cymru and Classifying the UK Party System

Total Marks

EDEXCEL 9PL0 · about 65 minutes · Write-in edition

Name: _____ Date: ____ / ____ / _____

Answer ALL questions. Short answer questions may be brief but must be clear. For levels-marked questions, write a developed response using accurate political knowledge, examples and precise terminology. The two final questions are levels-marked extended responses. Write full sentences for the two levels-marked questions (the 12-mark source-based and the 30-mark essay).

1 State how many Westminster seats the SNP won at the 2015 UK general election and name the year in the prompt.

(Total for Question 1 is 1 mark)

2 Explain two arguments in favour of describing Scotland as a dominant-party system for a period, citing the 2015 election in your answer.

(Total for Question 2 is 5 marks)

3 Explain two effects of the SNP's 2015 Westminster landslide on UK-wide politics, naming the 2015 election in the prompt.

(a) Explain one parliamentary effect of the SNP winning 56 of 59 Scottish seats in the 2015 general election. **(2)**

(b) Explain one political or strategic effect of the SNP surge on UK government policy or party strategy after 2015. **(2)**

(Total for Question 3 is 4 marks)

4 Evaluate the view that the UK no longer has a two-party system.

(Total for Question 4 is 30 marks)

5 Source for use with Question 5: The extract below is from a 2016 commentary on UK party structure. Source A: 'Following the 2015 general election the UK electoral map showed deep regional variation: the SNP dominated Scottish seats, Labour held urban heartlands in northern England and Wales, while the Conservatives were dominant in England generally. Some analysts argued this confirmed a move from a simple two-party contest to a geography-driven multi-party reality, with centre-left and centre-right struggles playing out in different parts of the UK.' Using Source A, analyse two ways in which regional parties such as the SNP and Plaid Cymru complicate the classification of the UK party system.

(Total for Question 5 is 12 marks)

6 Analyse the extent to which the UK party system can be classified as two-and-a-half party rather than simply two-party, giving examples and referring to the UK context since 2010.

(Total for Question 6 is 12 marks)

Mark scheme · 1.12 The SNP, Plaid Cymru and Classifying the UK Party System

Question 1

states '56 seats' and that this was at the 2015 general election cao	**B1**

Answer: The SNP won 56 of the 59 Scottish Westminster seats at the 2015 UK general election.

Question 2

identifies one argument, e.g. SNP dominance in seat share in 2015 showing near-hegemonic control of Scottish Westminster representation	**B1**
develops that argument, e.g. suggests that dominance allowed SNP to set the Scottish agenda and act as a near single-party voice for Scotland	**B1**
identifies a second argument, e.g. sustained electoral success in Scottish Parliament elections and local government as evidence of dominant-party characteristics	**B1**
develops second argument, e.g. sustained control of institutions enables policy continuity and marginalises rivals	**B1**
additional development or example linking back to 2015 and its aftermath	**B1**

Answer: One argument is that the SNP's near-total capture of Scottish Westminster seats in 2015 gave it a dominant parliamentary voice for Scotland, enabling it to shape debates and act as the primary representative of Scottish opinion at Westminster. A second argument is that the SNP's repeated electoral success in Scottish Parliament and local elections shows sustained dominance that marginalises rivals and allows policy continuity, reinforcing the dominant-party character. Both points are supported by 2015 seat outcomes and subsequent electoral performance.

Question 3

(a) identifies an effect, e.g. reduction of Labour representation from Scotland and change to party balance in Westminster	**B1**
(a) development, e.g. this weakened Labour's overall parliamentary strength and altered the geographic base of UK party support	**B1**

(a) Answer: One parliamentary effect was the sharp reduction in Labour MPs from Scotland, which weakened Labour's overall Commons numbers and shifted the geographic base of UK party support, making Westminster politics more dominated by English constituencies.

(b) identifies an effect, e.g. increased salience of Scottish issues or Conservative strategy adjusting to Scottish nationalism	**B1**
(b) development, e.g. UK parties changed campaigning or policy priorities to respond to the loss of Scottish seats	**B1**

(b) Answer: A strategic effect was that UK party leaders and the government placed greater emphasis on policy positions that appealed to English and UK-wide voters, and rival parties adjusted campaigns to try to win back Scottish voters, recognising that the electoral map had changed after the SNP surge.

Question 4

Level 0 No relevant content.	**0**
Level 1 Basic, limited knowledge of UK party developments with little or no developed analysis or evaluation. Responses are mainly descriptive or assertive without substantiation.	**1-6**
Level 2 Clear knowledge of changes in UK party politics with some developed analysis. Evaluation is present but partial or one-sided, relying on limited examples or lacking sustained judgement.	**7-12**
Level 3 Detailed and accurate knowledge used to construct a sustained analysis addressing the extent and limits of the view. Evaluation weighs evidence on both sides with a reasoned judgement, though development may be uneven across AO1, AO2 and AO3 strands.	**13-18**
Level 4 Sophisticated, wide-ranging and accurate knowledge used to construct a tightly argued evaluation that integrates conceptual discussion of party-systems, precise evidence (including electoral data and examples like the Lib Dems, SNP and Plaid Cymru), and a clear, balanced final judgement on whether the UK still has a two-party system.	**19-30**

Indicative content:

- Arguments that the UK no longer has a two-party system: the rise and temporary prominence of the Liberal Democrats (2010 coalition) and the SNP's 2015 landslide show that more than two parties can exert national influence; the fragmentation of party competition on issues such as Brexit produced multiple significant parties (UKIP, Brexit Party, Liberal Democrats) in vote terms.
- Use of evidence: 2010 coalition showed third party influence in government; 2015 SNP result (56 of 59 Scottish seats) and strong Westminster presence gave a third-party bloc with real parliamentary power; post-2015 volatility in third-party fortunes undermines a simple two-party label.
- Arguments for continued two-party character: Conservatives and Labour have continued to dominate UK-wide vote shares and historically alternate in government; at many general elections most seats are contested primarily between these two parties and FPTP tends to produce two-party outcomes in many English constituencies.
- Electoral system and measurement issues: classification depends on whether one focuses on vote share, seat share, or government formation; FPTP amplifies two-party outcomes in seats even when vote shares are more fragmented, so the two-party idea retains analytical purchase in terms of governance.
- Regionalisation and complexity: regional parties produce subnational party systems (Scotland and Wales) that are not captured by a single UK-wide two-party model; party-system classification may need to be multi-level, recognising England-dominated two-party contests alongside Scottish and Welsh multi-party dynamics.
- Evaluation and judgement: a strong conclusion might argue the UK no longer fits a simple two-party label unambiguously, because regional parties and episodic third-party surges have produced moments and areas of multi-party competition, but also that two-party features persist nationally due to FPTP and sustained Conservative-Labour dominance, so the best view is that the UK is partially de-aligned from strict two-party norms but not fully transformed into a stable multi-party system.
- Credit answers that locate nuance and make a supported judgement, for example arguing the UK has moved towards multi-party competition in some respects and periods, while retaining important two-party institutions and outcomes in others.

Question 5

Level 0 No relevant content.	**0**
Level 1 Limited identification of how regional parties affect party classification, with minimal use of the source. Points are general and underdeveloped.	**1-3**
Level 2 Some analysis of two ways regional parties complicate classification, using the source to support at least one point, but development is partial.	**4-6**
Level 3 Clear analysis of two distinct ways regional parties complicate classification, using the source and additional knowledge to develop both points.	**7-9**
Level 4 Detailed, well-supported analysis of two ways regional parties complicate classification, integrating the source with wider, accurate knowledge and reaching a supported conclusion.	**10-12**

Indicative content:

- Regional dominance alters the national two-party narrative: the SNP's sweep of Scottish seats in 2015 and Plaid's regional presence show that UK-wide party competition can be fragmented by geography, so national seat totals mask regional one-party dominance.
- Regional parties change parliamentary arithmetic and strategy: a large regional bloc like the SNP can hold the balance of power in hung Parliaments and reshape policy priorities, demonstrating the limits of a pure two-party model when devolved nation parties hold concentrated seat blocks.
- Regional parties produce different party systems within the UK: political competition in Scotland or Wales may function as a separate party system where nationalist parties are central actors, so describing the UK as one uniform two-party system ignores subnational variation.
- Source A supports the geography point by describing the 2015 map and regional variations; use of the source to show empirical change in seat distribution strengthens analysis that classification must account for territorial concentration.
- Counterpoint: national vote shares may still show two main parties overall, so regional parties complicate but do not entirely overthrow two-party arguments; explain how vote-seat translation and the first-past-the-post system amplify regional concentration.
- Conclusion might argue regional parties complicate classification significantly, making simple two-party labels inadequate at least in representation terms, though the dominance of two large parties in terms of UK-wide vote share means the two-party idea retains some analytical value.

Question 6

Level 0 No relevant content. **0**

Level 1 Basic knowledge of the two-and-a-half party concept with limited analysis or examples. **1-4**

Level 2 Clear explanation of the two-and-a-half party thesis with some evidence or examples, but analysis of its extent is partial. **5-8**

Level 3 Detailed, balanced analysis using accurate evidence from since 2010 to assess how well the two-and-a-half model fits the UK party system, reaching a supported judgement. **9-12**

Indicative content:

- Explain the two-and-a-half party model: two major parties plus a third smaller party that is nationally relevant but not fully equal, often the Liberal Democrats in traditional accounts or a regional party in modified accounts.
- Evidence for the model since 2010: Liberal Democrats were a significant third force in 2010, entering coalition with the Conservatives; their national vote share and seat count in 2010 suggested more than a minor party status.
- Counter-evidence: post-2010 the Lib Dem collapse in 2015 and the SNP surge in Scotland complicate the model; the third party's national role weakened, replaced by regionally dominant parties, calling into question a single stable 'half' party.
- Argument that the 'half' may be regional: the SNP's 2015 performance made it a powerful parliamentary third party, but its strength was territorially concentrated, so calling the UK two-and-a-half parties may misrepresent the territorial nature of the third party.
- Consider vote-seat distortion and first-past-the-post: the system can magnify or reduce third-party influence, so classification depends on whether analysts focus on vote shares, seats, or government influence.
- Judgement could be that the two-and-a-half label has some descriptive value for certain periods, especially 2010-2015, but the post-2015 landscape with regional parties and fluctuating third-party fortunes means the model is less stable as a general characterisation.