1.5 First Past the Post: Operation and Impact on UK General Elections: 30-minute Pack

EDEXCEL 9PL0 · about 30 minutes

Total Marks

Name: _____ Date: ____ / ____ / _____

Answer ALL questions. Write full sentences for extended responses (questions worth 6 marks or more). Spend approximately 30 minutes on this pack.

1 Explain the distinction between safe and marginal seats and their impact on party strategy under First Past the Post in UK general elections.

(Total for Question 1 is 6 marks)

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2 Evaluate the view that First Past the Post should be replaced for UK general elections.

(Total for Question 2 is 24 marks)

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Mark scheme · 1.5 First Past the Post: Operation and Impact on UK General Elections: 30-minute Pack

Question 1

defines a safe seat as a constituency where one party regularly achieves a large majority	**B1**
defines a marginal seat as a constituency where the result is frequently close and small swings can change the winner	**B1**
explains that parties concentrate resources and campaign effort on marginals rather than safe seats	**B1**
explains the consequence that some areas receive more attention and policy promises because they are electorally competitive	**B1**
explains that safe seats can lead to lower turnout or intra-party selection battles, reducing accountability	**B1**
gives a brief contemporary example or consequence, e.g. targetting marginals in 2017 and 2019 campaigns	**B1**

Answer: A safe seat is one where a party routinely wins by a large margin, while a marginal seat is decided by a small number of votes and can change hands with modest swings. Under FPTP parties focus money, time and high-profile visits on marginal seats to maximise seat gains, meaning policy offerings and campaign intensity concentrate on a limited set of constituencies. Safe seats may see lower turnout or less active campaigning and can produce less electoral accountability. Parties targeted marginals heavily in the 2017 and 2019 campaigns, reflecting this strategic focus.

Question 2

Level 0 No relevant content.	**0**
Level 1 Basic, limited knowledge of FPTP and potential alternatives. Answer may be descriptive with little analysis or evaluation and few, if any, contemporary examples.	**1-6**
Level 2 Clear, accurate knowledge of FPTP features and at least one reform alternative, with some developed analysis about likely effects. Evaluation is present but may be one-sided or lightly supported with examples.	**7-12**
Level 3 Detailed knowledge and analysis of FPTP and multiple alternative systems, using well-selected contemporary examples (for example 2015, 2017, 2019 outcomes). Evaluation weighs benefits and disadvantages and begins to reach a sustained judgement.	**13-18**
Level 4 Sophisticated and balanced evaluation integrating accurate, wide-ranging knowledge of FPTP mechanics and plausible alternative systems, using precise examples and considering political feasibility, effects on party system, government stability and voter accountability, to reach a clear, well-supported judgement.	**19-24**

Indicative content:

- Arguments for replacing FPTP: it produces high disproportionality between national vote share and seats (e.g. UKIP 2015, Liberal Democrats 2015), marginalises nationally dispersed smaller parties, and encourages tactical voting and concentration on marginals rather than nationwide policy outreach.
- Replace-advantages: more proportional systems would better reflect voter preferences, increase representation for smaller parties and under-represented groups, reduce wasted votes and potentially increase turnout and legitimacy.
- Arguments against replacing FPTP: it tends to produce single-party majority governments which can provide clear accountability and stable government; alternatives can produce coalition or minority governments which some argue reduce decisive government; FPTP ensures local constituency representation through single-member MPs.
- Replace-disadvantages: more proportional systems can weaken the link between a single MP and a defined constituency, can empower small parties disproportionally through coalitions, may produce greater executive instability or fragmented party systems, and may be less understandable to some voters.
- Political feasibility and recent history: the 2011 AV referendum rejected a reform, and major parties with current advantages under FPTP may resist change; reforms require wide political consensus and public legitimacy to be durable.
- Evidence to weigh: 2015 and 2019 outcomes that show both benefits of FPTP for decisive majorities and costs in terms of representation; the SNP example shows how regional concentration is rewarded while dispersed parties pay a penalty.
- A strong conclusion should reach a balanced judgement, for example arguing that while FPTP has democratic costs in representation and fairness, it also provides clear lines of accountability and government formation; whether it should be replaced depends on the relative value placed on proportionality versus single-party government stability and the political feasibility of reform.

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