5.15 Comparative US/UK Democracy and Participation

EDEXCEL 9PL0 · about 70 minutes · Write-in edition

Total Marks

Name: _____ Date: ____ / ____ / _____

Answer ALL questions. Short answer questions may be brief but should use full sentences where asked. The two extended, levels-marked questions (the 12-mark source-based and the 30-mark essay) require well-structured, developed responses using accurate comparative knowledge, examples and evaluation. Time guidance: approx 70 minutes for the whole pack.

1 Explain two ways in which voter registration in the United States can act as a barrier to participation, giving specific mechanisms or regulations.

(Total for Question 1 is 4 marks)

2 State two consequences of the US Electoral College for the geographic focus of presidential campaigns, with brief explanation.

(Total for Question 2 is 4 marks)

3 State two reasons why turnout trends since 2000 might be described as a participation crisis in the USA but not to the same extent in the UK, giving brief explanation for each reason.

(Total for Question 3 is 5 marks)

4 Explain one strength and two limitations of using turnout statistics alone to judge whether the USA suffers a greater participation crisis than the UK. Develop each point and give a concluding sentence weighing the strength against the limitations.

(Total for Question 4 is 7 marks)

5 Evaluate the extent to which the USA suffers from a greater participation crisis than the UK.

(Total for Question 5 is 30 marks)

6 Using the two short extracts below, analyse the similarities and/or differences in how campaign finance regulation affects participation in the USA and the UK.

Source A, US context: "Since Citizens United (2010) and subsequent rulings, independent political expenditure by corporations and groups has grown sharply; candidates still raise large sums, and donors with greatest resources exert disproportionate influence over visibility and messaging. This uneven funding environment is argued to increase political inequality and reduce the relative voice of less wealthy citizens."

Source B, UK context: "UK law imposes spending limits on national and constituency campaigns, and requires reporting of donations above set thresholds; while parties can accept large donations, the regulatory framework aims to limit the direct influence of money on electoral outcomes and to preserve fairness between candidates."

(Total for Question 6 is 12 marks)

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7 Explain two reasons why pressure group pluralism might be stronger in the United States than in the United Kingdom.

(Total for Question 7 is 6 marks)

Mark scheme · 5.15 Comparative US/UK Democracy and Participation

Question 1

identifies one barrier, e.g. requirement to register in advance in many states	**B1**
develops that point, e.g. registration deadlines and documentary ID requirements can reduce turnout among mobile or disadvantaged voters	**B1**
identifies a second barrier, e.g. state-by-state variation including voter ID laws and purges of rolls	**B1**
develops that point, e.g. inconsistent rules, roll purges and differing ID standards can confuse and deter eligible voters	**B1**

Answer: One barrier is that many US states require voters to register in advance, with deadlines and documentary ID or proof of residence requirements, which can suppress turnout among those who move frequently, are low income or lack ID. A second barrier is the wide state variation in rules, including strict voter ID laws and periodic purges of voter rolls; this patchwork can lead to eligible voters being removed or deterred, and creates confusion that reduces participation.

Question 2

one accurate consequence, e.g. focus on swing states	**B1**
brief development, e.g. candidates target resources at competitive states with many electors	**B1**
a second accurate consequence, e.g. neglect of safe states	**B1**
brief development, e.g. voters in safe states receive less campaigning and may feel less influential	**B1**

Answer: Consequences include a heavy focus on swing states where the outcome is uncertain and electoral votes can be won or lost, so campaigns concentrate resources there; and neglect of safe states, where voters receive less campaigning and may feel their participation is less influential on the national result.

Question 3

one accurate reason, e.g. lower turnout in US midterm and non-presidential elections compared with UK general election turnout	**B1**
development, e.g. US turnout often lower due to registration barriers and off-cycle elections	**B1**
a second accurate reason, e.g. greater socio-economic turnout gap in US	**B1**
development, e.g. unequal turnout linked to registration, ID laws and political alienation	**B1**
links to UK context, e.g. easier online registration in Great Britain (eligible citizens still had to apply in 2024) and high-profile general elections support higher turnout	**B1**

Answer: Reasons include: US turnout is often lower, especially in midterm or local elections, partly because of registration barriers and off-cycle scheduling which reduce participation; and the US shows a larger socio-economic turnout gap, with poorer and younger citizens less likely to vote, linked to registration, ID laws and political alienation. By contrast the UK has easier online registration in Great Britain (eligible citizens still had to apply in 2024) and regular high-profile general elections that tend to produce higher turnout.

Question 4

identifies a strength, e.g. turnout statistics provide an objective measure of electoral participation	**B1**
develops the strength, e.g. they allow cross-national comparison over time and across election types	**B1**
identifies a limitation, e.g. turnout ignores other forms of participation such as protests, contacting representatives or digital engagement	**B1**
develops the limitation, e.g. a country with low electoral turnout may have high non-electoral engagement that the statistic does not capture	**B1**
identifies a further limitation, e.g. differences in electoral systems and compulsory or automatic registration make raw turnout comparisons misleading	**B1**
develops the further limitation, e.g. US registration hurdles and election scheduling distort turnout comparisons with the UK where registration is easier	**B1**
provides an evaluative concluding sentence weighing strengths against limits	**B1**

Answer: Turnout statistics are a useful, objective indicator and permit cross-national time series comparison, but they miss non-electoral participation such as protests, volunteering or contacting representatives. They are also affected by institutional differences, since US registration barriers and off-cycle elections lower turnout compared with UK online registration, making raw comparisons potentially misleading; overall turnout is informative but must be supplemented by broader measures to judge relative participation crises.

Question 5

Level 0 No relevant content.	**0**
Level 1 Basic, limited knowledge of participation trends in the USA and UK with only generalised analysis and little evaluation. Examples, if present, are vague or inaccurate.	**1-7**
Level 2 Clear, accurate knowledge of participation evidence and some analytical links between causes and effects; evaluation is present but may be one-sided or underdeveloped, and some key comparative factors may be omitted.	**8-15**
Level 3 Detailed, accurate knowledge and analysis of both US and UK participation issues, with balanced evaluation and contextual examples; judgement is reached but may lack full synthesis across institutional and social factors.	**16-23**
Level 4 Sophisticated, wide-ranging knowledge used to construct a tightly argued evaluation that compares institutional, cultural and socio-economic drivers of participation in both countries, weighs evidence and reaches a clear, well-supported judgement on the extent of the crisis in each country.	**24-30**

Indicative content:

- Evidence that the USA suffers more: lower and more variable turnout in US midterm and local elections, especially among younger and lower-income groups; registration barriers, voter ID laws, roll purges and off-cycle elections create administrative hurdles; Citizens United and weak federal campaign finance limits create perceptions of unequal influence which may depress participation and political trust.
- Evidence that the UK suffers less: generally higher turnout in UK general elections, easier online registration in Great Britain (eligible citizens still had to apply in 2024), and statutory spending and donation controls that limit the most extreme influence of money in direct campaigning, supporting a more level playing field for voters.
- Counter-evidence and qualifications: UK turnout has fallen in some elections and certain demographic groups are disengaged; UK party selection and centralised party control can reduce meaningful choice locally; large donations and influence via media remain important in the UK despite formal limits.
- Comparative institutional analysis: US federalism, separation of powers and multiple access points strengthen pressure group pluralism but also create fragmentation that can alienate voters; UK centralised government channels participation differently and may make electoral influence clearer for citizens at the constituency level.
- Cultural and socio-economic factors: differences in political culture, civic education, inequality, and social capital influence participation independently of institutions; both countries show socio-economic gradients in turnout and political engagement.
- Evaluation of reforms and remedies: US reforms like automatic registration, early voting expansion, and small donor matching could reduce the gap; UK reforms to increase internal party democracy and local engagement could improve participation further, showing both countries have addressable problems.
- Judgement: a balanced conclusion might argue that on key electoral measures the USA has a deeper, more institutionalised participation problem due to registration barriers and campaign finance structures, but that the UK also faces significant participation challenges, so the USA suffers a greater crisis in some respects while the UK has its own distinct deficits; answers should weigh evidence and reach a supported comparative judgement.

Question 6

Level 0 No relevant content.	**0**
Level 1 Basic identification of one or two simple similarities or differences, with limited use of the sources and little analysis.	**1-3**
Level 2 Clear use of the sources to identify several similarities or differences, with developed analysis linking regulation and participation, but limited evaluation or contextual depth.	**4-8**
Level 3 Detailed, well-focused analysis driven by the sources that explains how differing regulatory regimes shape patterns of participation and political equality in the USA and the UK, considering effects, qualifications and real-world implications.	**9-12**

Indicative content:

- Source A describes a largely deregulated US post-Citizens United environment with growing independent expenditures, which can increase political inequality by amplifying wealthy voices and private groups relative to ordinary citizens, thereby discouraging participation or creating perceptions that individual votes matter less.
- Source B describes UK spending and donation rules intended to limit unfair financial advantage, which can help preserve a more level playing field between candidates and reduce perceptions of money-driven outcomes, potentially supporting broader participation.
- Similarity: both contexts acknowledge that money matters for visibility and messaging, affecting which issues and candidates reach voters, so campaign finance influences participation in both systems by shaping information and perceived responsiveness.
- Difference: the scale and legal framing differ, with the US allowing greater independent corporate and group expenditure that can distort voice, whereas the UK regulatory framework places caps and reporting requirements designed to contain that distortion, although large donations still have influence via access or media impact.
- Analytical point: in the US the prominence of outside spending may lead to greater political inequality and a participation problem among less wealthy citizens, whereas in the UK formal caps may mitigate, though not remove, the link between wealth and influence; enforcement and loopholes are important qualifiers in both systems.
- Contextual evidence: reference to Citizens United (2010) as a legal turning point in the US; reference to UK spending limits and donation reporting rules as of mid 2020s and their effect on campaign administration and transparency.
- Evaluation: consider countervailing points, such as the UK limits being evaded via national campaigning and media influence, or US reforms at state level to increase transparency and small donor matching that may reduce inequality; conclude by weighing which system better contains moneyed influence and how that affects participation.

Question 7

identifies one reason, e.g. constitutional separation of powers creates multiple access points in the US	**B1**
develops that reason, e.g. groups can lobby Congress, the presidency, state governments and the courts	**B1**
identifies a second reason, e.g. powerful financial incentives and legal protections for interest activity in the US	**B1**
develops that reason, e.g. campaign contributions, PACs and judicial advocacy increase groups' influence and encourage pluralist mobilisation	**B1**
provides comparative link to UK, e.g. UK's more centralised government and tighter party control reduce the number of effective access points	**B1**
further development or example, e.g. UK lobbying is more focused on Whitehall and party HQs, limiting pluralist competition	**B1**

Answer: Pluralism is stronger in the US because the constitutional separation of powers gives pressure groups multiple access points to influence policy at federal and state level and through the courts, and because the US political finance and interest group environment, including PACs and large-scale donations, provides strong incentives and resources for group mobilisation. In the UK, a more centralised executive and tighter party control concentrate access and can limit pluralist competition.