

Government and Politics

Edexcel: A Level

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Task 2: Read the following information on democracy and answer the questions at the end.

What is democracy?

Definition Consent: Assent or permission, in politics, usually implies an agreement to be governed or ruled.

Democracy is an answer to the question: who rules? Most political systems throughout history have been based either on rule by one person (monarchies, empires, and dictatorships) or rule by a small group of people (elites and oligarchies). Democracy, on the other hand, is rule by the demos, or the people as a whole rather than by any section, class, or group within it. As such, it was a revolutionary idea and was largely spoken about in critical language until the twentieth century. Democracy means giving power to the people. In its simplest sense, democracy is 'people power' and involves the concept of popular participation.

In order to think about whether a political system is democratic or not, we need to establish some criteria to judge it by.

1. **Participation:** Before a decision is made, all have an equal and effective opportunity to make their opinions known to others about which decision should be made.
2. **Voting equality:** When a decision is made, every member must have an equal and effective opportunity to vote, and all votes must be counted as equal.
3. **Understanding:** Each person must have equal and effective opportunities for learning about the relevant alternative choices and their likely outcomes.
4. **Agenda setting:** Each person must have the opportunity to decide how to set the agenda and what to place on the agenda so that past decisions are always open to be revisited.
5. **Universal:** All adults should have the same rights, as citizens, that are necessary for participation, voting equality, understanding, and setting the agenda.

Legitimacy

Democracy is of central importance in politics because it provides the basis for legitimacy, the right to rule, and so is the key to political stability. Democracy provides those in power with the legitimate right to rule and places an obligation on the people to obey the law in at least three ways.

In the first place, it does so through **consent**. Citizens implicitly invest political authority with a 'right to rule' each time they participate in the political process. Democracy thus underpins **legitimacy** by expanding the opportunities for effective political participation, most importantly through the act of voting, but also through activities such as joining a political party or pressure group and have a chance to serve in public office.

Secondly, democracy ensures that political power is widely dispersed, each group having a political voice of some kind or other. As such, it gives rise to a process of compromise, conciliation, and negotiation that allows people with different interests and preferences to live together in conditions of relative peace and order. Finally, democracy ensures that the political system fairly reflects the views of the people.

Types of Democracy

The task of understanding democracy is made more difficult by the fact that democracy comes in such a variety of shapes and forms. However, the two main types of democracy are:

1. Direct democracy
2. Representative democracy

Direct Democracy

Direct democracy is associated with the origins of democracy itself, which are usually traced back to Ancient Greece, and notably to its pre-eminent city state, or polis, Athens. From about 500 to 322 BCE a form of democracy operated in Athens that has served ever since as the model of 'classical' democracy. Athenian democracy, however, was a very particular form of democracy, quite different from the forms that are found in the modern world. In particular, it relied on the participation of all citizens in open assemblies which made all the key decisions.

The key features of direct democracy are:

- Popular participation is direct in that people 'make' policy decisions- they do not merely choose who will rule on their behalf.
- Popular participation is immediate in that the people 'are' the government—there is no separate class of professional politicians.
- Popular participation is continuous in that people engage in politics on a regular and ongoing basis- all decisions are made by the people.

Athenian democracy was built upon three important institutions:

1. The Ecclesia, or Assembly, which was the main governing body. Any citizen could attend, debate, and vote on all major decisions such as declaring war, foreign policy, making and revising laws. Decisions were made by majority vote. In the Assembly, all citizens had the rights that are necessary for participation, voting equality, understanding and setting the agenda. However only the very best speakers, such as Demosthenes, could hold the attention of the demanding crowd so a small elite of the best orators often dominated the Assembly.
2. The Boule, or Council, was made up of 500 men and met every day to do the hands-on work of running the state. Council members were chosen by lot and only served for a term of one year. Drawing by lot, or sortition, was seen as more democratic than elections because it could not be affected by money or popularity, and would not lead to a professional class of politicians separate from the people.
3. The Dikasteria, or popular courts, made up of 501 jurors chosen each day by lot from male citizens over the age of thirty resolved court cases brought by the people. The principle can still be seen as active in the UK, where juries are randomly selected from those between 18 and 70, who are on the electoral register. The aim is to ensure a justice system that is fair, democratic, and independent.

Representative democracy

Representative democracy is the dominant form of democracy in the modern world because it solves the problem inherent in direct democracy that only a small percentage of people can or want to spend their time learning about, debating and voting on political issues. Representative democracy is a way of voters electing a small group of representatives who work full time on getting informed, debating and voting on political issues on behalf of the people. In a representative democracy, people acquire the power to make political decisions by a means of competitive struggle for the people's vote. Those who win elections can claim they 'represent' the people and the legitimate right to govern.

The key features of a representative democracy are:

- Popular participation is indirect- the public do not exercise power themselves; they choose (usually by election) who will rule on their behalf.
- Popular participation is mediated- the people are linked to government through representative institutions.
- Popular participation in government is limited- it is infrequent and brief, being restricted to the act of voting every few years.

Whereas direct democracy is based on the principle of popular participation, representative democracy operates on the basis of popular control- ways of ensuring that professional politicians represent the people and not themselves. This is the role of elections and relies on the most basic level on the people exercising their right to vote.

The basic condition for representative democracy is the existence of democratic elections. These are elections that are based on the following rules:

-Freedom, fairness and regularity: voters can participate freely and express their own views.

-Universal suffrage: all adults can vote and there is voting equality, based on the principle of one person, one vote.

-Party and candidate competition: voters have a choice and effective opportunities for learning about the relevant alternative choices and their likely outcomes.

Historically in the UK, mass participation in representative democracy has been limited to voting in the **general election** to select MPs and in local elections to select local councillors. However, the number of opportunities for participation has increased with voters, depending on where they live, now also able to vote in a wide range of elections including:

- Elections in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland for the devolved governments since the first elections in 1998.
- Elections for the London Mayor and Greater London Authority since 2000.
- Elections for metro mayors, such as the Mayor of Greater Manchester, since 2017.
- Elections for Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) since 1979, which came to an end with the 2019 European Parliament Election.
- Elections for Police Crime Commissioners who make sure that local police meet the needs of the community, since 2012.

Advantages of Direct Democracy / Disadvantages of Representative Democracy

In the Athenian model, democracy meant putting power in the hands of ordinary people, giving them time and information so they would come up with effective solutions to the problems of the day and doing it frequently to increase understanding and participation.

Genuine democracy

Direct democracy is the only pure form of democracy.

This is because it ensures that people only have to obey the laws that they make themselves. Popular participation in government is the very stuff of freedom: it is how the people determine their collective destiny, their 'general will'.

Representative democracy always means that there is a gulf between government and the people.

This can lead to political apathy because citizens feel powerless when they want to make a change. Governments therefore govern in the name of the people, but, in practice, the people may have little meaningful control over government. This certainly appears to be a common attitude in the UK.

Personal development

Direct democracy creates better informed and more knowledgeable citizens.

In this sense, it has educational benefits. Direct and regular popular participation in government encourages people to take more interest in politics and to better understand their own society- both how it works and how it should work.

In representative democracy, with votes taking place infrequently, people can literally switch off from politics.

As a result, effective political understanding decreases. This reduces the ability of people to learn about the relevant alternative choices and their likely outcomes, which are necessary for effective participation and voting equality.

End of professional politics

Direct democracy reduces, or removes, the public's dependence on self-serving professional politicians.

This increases public trust, political understanding and the development of long-term solutions while decreasing corruption, which means that decisions will have real legitimacy in the eyes of the people.

Representative democracy places too much faith in politicians, who are always liable to distort public opinion by imposing their own views and preferences on it.

It therefore amounts to 'government by politicians', acting only in the name of the people. It is argued that this political class will not be socially representative of the wider public (in terms of age, gender, wealth, ethnicity) is interested in furthering their own objectives over those of the people and is more interested in winning elections than arriving at long-term solutions. In the UK, this is increasingly a widely held attitude: in 2019 63% of the people felt the political system was rigged to the advantage of the rich and powerful.

Legitimate government

Direct democracy ensures that rule is legitimate, in the sense that people are more likely to accept decisions that they have made themselves.

When citizens make political decisions directly, they have to take responsibility for them- there is no one else to blame. This helps to ensure political stability and legitimacy for decisions.

Representative democracy in the UK is experiencing something of a crisis.

Voter turnout remains low and people feel increasingly disengaged from politicians, political institutions, and processes. Overall satisfaction with the system of governing in the UK has been on a downward trend from 36% in the first Hansard Audit in 2004 to 25% in 2019.

Advantages of Representative Democracy / Disadvantages of Direct Democracy

The strength of representative democracy is that it places ultimate power in the hands of the public- the power to decide who governs- while leaving day to day policy making in the hands of experts (professional politicians). It is therefore based on a compromise between the need for 'government by the people' (popular participation) and the need for 'government for the people' (government in the public interest). As representative democracy usually operates through the mechanism of elections, its effectiveness is therefore based on the extent to which the electoral process gives the people control over government.

Direct democracy is only achievable in relatively small communities, especially in the form of government by mass meeting.

Such a form of democracy is widely considered to be quite unworkable in modern political conditions. Athenian citizens devoted a great deal of time and energy to political activity. They were also able to meet in a single place. How can such a high-level of face to face interaction be achieved in societies that are composed of tens and hundreds of millions of people?

Representative democracy is the only form of democracy that can operate in large, modern societies like the UK.

It is therefore a practical solution to the problem of popular rule. This does not mean that representative democracy cannot be complemented by aspects of direct democracy.

Division of labour in politics

One of the drawbacks of direct democracy is that it means politics is a job for all citizens, restricting their ability to carry out other duties and activities.

The answer in ancient Athens was simple but deeply undemocratic: foreigners and slaves did the bulk of the work, and women looked after family life. The 'citizens' of Athens constituted only a minority of those who lived within the city state and so rights were by no means universal. The groups excluded from political participation and voting equality included women, men classified as 'immigrants', slaves, who made up at least three-fifths of the population of Athens.

Representative democracy is more efficient because ordinary citizens are relieved of the burden of day to day decision making.

They simply have to choose who they want to govern them.

Government by experts

Direct democracy is not a sensible way to make complex decisions.

This is because many of the big issues facing the UK don't have easy or clear solutions.

Representative democracy places decision making in the hands of politicians who have better education and greater expertise than the mass of the people.

They can therefore govern for the people using their superior understanding to act in the public interest.

Political stability

Direct democracy can engage people too much, which may create deep divisions in society.

In cases where direct democracy creates clear winners and losers over a political choice, it will be very hard for the losers to see the political choice as legitimate.

Representative democracy maintains political stability by helping to distance ordinary citizens from politics, thereby encouraging them to accept compromise.

A certain level of apathy is helpful in maintaining political stability. The more involved in decision making citizens are, the more passionate and committed they may become.

Questions

1. Explain the difference between direct and representative democracy.
2. What do you think are the main two advantages and disadvantages for direct democracy and why?
3. What do you think are the main two advantages and disadvantages for representative democracy and why?
4. Give an example of direct and representative democracy in UK politics today.
5. In what ways could the system be reformed to increase democracy and participation?
6. To what extent do you think that the UK political system is having a participation crisis? Structure your extended answer as below:

Arguments for: Yes, there is a crisis:

Arguments for: No there isn't:

Your thoughts:

Task 3: Read the following information on the role of the media in politics and answer the questions at the end.

How does the media influence politics?

The media has been recognised as politically significant since the advent of mass literacy and the popular press in the late nineteenth century. Until the post-war period, the print media as the most important way that the public could access the news, current affairs or views that helped explain the world they lived in. Newspapers are privately owned, free from government control and able to clearly express their partisan views by supporting a political party or taking a clear position on an issue of public importance. This gives rise to the criticism that a small number of press barons (newspaper owners) could exercise very real influence on public affairs.

After WWII, the press faced competition in the form of the broadcast media with the birth of television. The key difference here was that the broadcast media was expected to be impartial by considering a broad perspective and ensuring that a range of views was appropriately reflected. This means that the broadcast media, unlike the press, cannot support a particular party or express a view on current affairs or matters of public policy.

Since 2000, the acceleration of technological change has transformed the media, with a vast array of television channels, the 24-hour news cycle, the internet with its abundance of sources for news and information (many of which are free) and social media. This is changing way that the public is accessing the news. In particular, the focus falls on the importance of television as the key source of political news and information in competition with online news sources, the rising importance of social media and the continued decline in the readership of the print media.

By its nature, much of politics, policy making, and public consultation is lengthy, dull, and not a natural fit with an increasingly diverse and highly competitive media world which has to produce stories 24 hours a day. The competition in the media leads to a disproportionate focus on negative stories, about the private lives of politicians and the worst elements of party politics, in the drive for more consumers. Critics argue that this has cheapened political communication and trivialised politics rather than providing the analysis and reporting that will inform the public about political news. It raises the question on whether such media communication is creating an increasingly negative attitude toward both politicians and political institutions in the UK, leading to apathy and disillusionment, and ultimately lower voter turnout.

The print media

The traditional print media has been struggling in the UK, with the decline in the circulation of printed papers leading to a collapse in revenue. The overall readership of the print media declined from £21.9 million in 2010 to 10.4 million in 2018; an overall fall of 52.5%. Within that fall, The Sun and the Daily Mail remain the two best selling daily newspapers while roughly 1 in 4 newspaper readers uses daily free sheets, like the Metro and Evening Standard, which can be picked up at train and bus stations.

The consequences for the industry have been clear. For example, the Independent newspaper ceased all print editions to become online only in 2016, while 238 local newspapers shut between 2005 and 2017. While this seems to signal a real decline for print media, the average daily readership for newspapers in the UK shows that papers still have considerable reach. The market remains dominated by a small number of daily papers and in many ways the range of newspaper choice is closely linked to the British class system.

- The readership of The Guardian, The Times, The Telegraph, and the Financial Times is mostly drawn from the higher socioeconomic classes.
- The Mail and Express draw their readership from across all groups.
- The Sun, Daily Mirror, and the Daily Star draw most of their readership from the working classes.
- 58% of those over 65 used printed newspapers as a source of news, while this figure dropped to 20% for those in the 16 to 24 category. This does not make for good news for the printed press in the long term and suggests that a decline in readership will be a permanent feature of the future in the industry.

Issues facing the print media

It is not simply the case that the decline in the readership of printed newspapers means the end of the print industry. Rather, it means its transformation. Major newspapers have adapted and moved online and there is also a close relationship with social media.

The other big issue facing the print media is declining trust, which has been particularly problematic since 2011. During the coalition government between 2010-2015, a long running scandal about the use of private detectives by newspapers and their possible illegal activities to acquire news stories exploded. In 2011, The Guardian reported that the News of the World had hacked the mobile phone of the murdered Millie Dowler. This led Prime Minister at the time, David Cameron, to call an inquiry under Lord Leveson into the culture, ethics, and practices of the press due to the public revulsion at what had happened. The Leveson Report was published in 2012 and called for stronger regulation of the press by a new independent body backed by legislation. This new body has not been set up, it was argued by the print media to be too close to state control of the press so the print media instead operates a system of self-regulation.

Broadcast media

The broadcast media includes both television and radio, with television remaining a key source of news for the British public as well as helping people to understand the political issues of the day. The broadcast media began in the UK as a state-sponsored service funded by a licence fee paid for by views and listeners. The BBC was set up to operate at arm's length from the government so it could be seen as free of political interference. Under the BBC's charter, it is expected to sustain citizenship and civil society, which obliges the BBC to give 'information about, and increase understanding of, the world through accurate and impartial news' and 'to promote understanding of the UK political system.'

Although the BBC monopoly was broken in the 1950s, there was only a slow increase in the number of commercial channels and radio stations, and these commercial stations had a statutory obligation to provide balanced political coverage, monitored by an independent authority. Since 2017, the BBC and all commercial stations are monitored by OFCOM (The Office of Communications), which is an independent regulator for communication services.

During the early years of television, the very small number of channels meant that most British families got their news at the same time and in the same way by watching or listening to the news together. In this way, a sense of national political culture was created and it was hard to avoid the news because it was not possible to switch over to another channel when it was on. Since the 2000s and the explosion of different channels and stations to choose from and the different ways to access the news- TV, radio, phone, laptop, desktop, and tablet- everyone can watch or listen to what they want. This means that people who are apathetic about politics can avoid political news and programming entirely, reducing the levels of political engagement and voter turnout in the UK.

Despite the huge increase in channels and stations, the broadcast media remains dominated by a small handful of broadcasters. The OFCOM review in 2019 of those adults who used television as a source of news found out that:

- The BBC, ITV, and its variants (STV in Scotland etc.) and Sky News were by far the most significant players.
- Within this small band of stations, the BBC remains by far the most popular broadcaster with 76% using BBC One for news. Within that, 55% of adults in the UK watch the BBC One News each week; however, this figure is down from 65% in 2010.

While it appears that the BBC is losing viewers to competition from online sources, the BBC has transferred online and it the most used website and app in the UK for news, exceeding the number of monthly reads of either The Sun or the Daily Mail. In 2019 election campaign, the role of the BBC website was very clear, accounting for 28% of all

time spent on news sites during the campaign, while the Mail Online made up 21%. This suggests the BBC has become a news platform across multiple media channels.

Broadcast media and election campaigns

The importance of the broadcast media explains why the overwhelming focus of national election campaigns is on television coverage.

Manifestos are launched, policy statements are made, and meetings and rallies are held. Leading politicians give frequent interviews and visit factories, hospitals, and schools across the UK to raise their public profile. They do this not only to hear from members of the public, but, crucially, in the hope of gaining television exposure, with speeches that are tailored, and events timed and carefully staged for this purpose. The soundbite takes centre stage, with short, clear, and memorable phrases such as 'Get Brexit done' and 'Strong and Stable' taking the place of meaningful communication and answering the question. The fixation on the private lives of politicians, the confrontational interview approaches adopted by TV journalists and the constant repetition of soundbites irrespective of the question contributes very little to educating and informing the public. This 'dumbing down' of politics has encouraged a general distrust of politicians and the political process, increasing disillusionment and apathy.

One of the key effects of the dominance of television in election campaigns is the growth of celebrity politics, with media coverage focusing far more on party leaders rather than their parties. Television has undoubtedly altered the style of election campaigning, helping in the process, to elevate personality and image over policies and ideas. The result is that electoral success, such as the Tory victory in 2019, is claimed as a personal mandate for the party leader and used to increase the power of the Prime Minister over their cabinet, party, and Parliament.

What are opinion polls?

Opinion polls are an attempt, through sampling, to test either the opinions of the public on a certain issue or their voting intentions, with the key opinion polls in the UK politics focusing on voting intentions in general elections. The key type of polling used in the UK are:

- Voting intention polls to gauge how people intend to vote at any one time.
- Policy issue polls that assess people's views on issues that might relate to social policy or politics, such as views on the NHS, fox hunting, or Brexit.
- Private polls that are commissioned by political parties, individuals, and companies, where the results are only selectively released to the public, if at all.
- Exit polls which are conducted as voters leave the polling station. Exit polls show greater levels of accuracy than other types of polling.

Recently, Exit polling has enjoyed a higher level of accuracy than the pre-election voting intention polls. The main difference between an exit poll and standard voting intention polls is that exit polls do not aim to measure how many people will vote for each party but aim to show how many seats a party will win. Exit polls showed that David Cameron would win a majority in 2015, that Theresa May would lose her majority in 2017, and that Boris Johnson would win a large majority in 2019.

The positive impact opinion polls have on UK democracy

There are number of key benefits to opinion polls in a democracy, built around increasing the quality of political communication within society. Opinion polls are particularly important because voting in elections is such an imperfect way of measuring public opinion. A vote for a party is seen as giving support for the party's manifesto, yet most voters are unaware of the fine print in the manifesto. A good example here would be the Poll Tax, which was a flat rate tax set by local authorities to be paid by every adult to replace local rates, a tax calculated on the rental

value of your house. It was included in the 1987 Tory manifesto, but when the policy was introduced, it was deeply unpopular and faced huge backlash. A vote for a party can hardly be seen as agreeing to the whole manifesto.

Opinion polls plug this gap by providing an additional way of measuring the views of the public in order to keep parties on their toes by reminding them about what voters care about and think. There are give key benefits of opinion polls to democracy:

Political parties and governments use these opinion polls to help inform their decision-making process because they provide a sense of the mood and thoughts of the population, without holding an election or referendum. As a result, governments can introduce or amend legislation and make decisions that they feel a large number of the public will support. Opinion polls allow political parties to design manifestos and policies that are in tune with public opinion.

- The 2017 Labour manifesto chimed with policy issue polls that showed that the public backed renationalising the railways, freezing the retirement age, and building thousands of council houses.

- The 2019 Tory manifesto chimed with policy issue polls with its focus of 'Get Brexit Done' and increased spending pledges on the police, NHS, and education.

Opinion polls can encourage political participation and inform public debate. Where the media reports a close contest, as in 2017, this is more likely to encourage voters to turnout. The voting intention polls were reported by the media as being close in 2010, 2015, and 2017, and all these elections showed an increase in turnout on the previous election.

Opinion polling gives people who do not usually have access to the media an opportunity, to be heard of letting only politicians, parties, or media companies speak on their behalf. This is particularly important where the public's view may be out of step with the views of the political classes. Between 2016 and 2019, the political parties in the UK frequently found themselves out of step with the public over Brexit in policy issue polls.

The public, media, and politicians all get access to accurate measures of public attitudes and voting intentions. It stops the government from misrepresenting public opinion and gives credible sources to opposition parties, the public, and the media to challenge the government. Newspapers and pressure groups often commission polls as part of their wider investigations into ongoing political issues.

- In 2012, the Coalition Government was forced to reverse a 3p rise in tax on fuel in response to pressure from motoring groups, industry leaders, and backbench MPs that was backed up by private polling figures.

Political leaders can use polls to trace their level of electoral support between elections both for themselves and their party as well as understanding the impact of major events on public opinion. The polling on the Covid-19 crisis has enabled the party leaders to see the impact of their handling of the situation on perceptions of their leadership and their parties.

The drawbacks of opinion polls in democracy

There a number of major issues for opinion polls within democracy, which can all be tied to the issue of accuracy of voting intention polls in gauging public opinion and predicting the outcome of elections and referendums. This is not really a question of how statistically accurate polls are because the general accuracy of polling from 1942 onwards across countries has remained stable and this is an issue more for pollsters than the general public.

The real issue is the failure to predict the right result. In three of the last eight UK elections (1992, 2015, 2017), the polls have predicted the result incorrectly, as well as incorrectly predicting the result of the EU referendum. The impacts can be analysed in the following ways:

The impact on parties. If voting intention polls help political leaders and parties make decisions, then incorrect polling can lead to getting those decisions wrong. It is also the case the political leaders and parties need to be responsive to policy issue polls, but also need to lead by making and winning arguments.

-When Theresa May made the decision on 17 April 2017 to call an election, the average Conservative lead over Labour in the polls was 17%. The final result was a 2.4% lead, with the Conservatives losing their majority in the

Commons. Had the polls been accurate, would the Prime Minister have called an early election?

-Would David Cameron have included the promise of a Referendum in his 2015 manifesto had it not been for the polls predicting another hung parliament (given that another Coalition with the Liberal Democrats would have made a referendum impossible)?

-In 1978, the Prime Minister, James Callaghan, saw private polls that showed Labour would not perform well enough in marginal seats to secure a majority so he put the election off until 1979, where he suffered a comprehensive defeat to Margaret Thatcher's Conservatives.

The impact on the media. The media becomes obsessed with voting intention polls, and reporting focuses on a 'horse race style' commentary on who is winning the race rather than focusing on interrogating the issues and the policies that would educate and inform the public. If the polls are wrong, this leads to the whole media narrative becoming shaped by inaccurate information.

The impact on the voter. Whether polls influence voting behaviour is a contested question. Some have argued that there is a 'bandwagon' effect, where information from polls can influence people to alter their view to come into line with the majority, and the 'underdog' effect, which will cause some people to adopt a minority view out of sympathy, but there is limited evidence to support either impact. It is also suggested that polling can lead to tactical voting, where voters use the polls to make a decision on who to vote for. This is widely rejected by polling companies, although it may have some local relevance in a constituency where the race is particularly close. The last impact is that where polling shows a close race, this is likely to lead to high turnout, while polls that predict an easy victory for one party might reduce turnout.

The impact on elections and referendums. The most important problem that faces opinion polls is that once they are published, they end up influencing the very facts that they are supposed to measure. This has led countries such as France, Spain, and Italy to ban all opinion polling in the period before an election.

The influence of the media

It is clear that politicians feel that the media has real influence over the voting behaviour of the public. This is exactly why political parties spend so much time and effort either befriending parts of the media or attacking them for their bias. To understand how bias may be at work, it is worth thinking about the different ways that bias can be exhibited.

What is bias?

Open bias is explicit and deliberately promoted. Most newspapers in the UK are clear about their political bias in favour of a particular party or policy. For example, The Sun newspaper clearly backed Boris Johnson and the Conservatives in 2019 and Brexit in the 2016 Referendum. **Hidden bias** is bias that is hidden behind the mask of neutrality and allegations of hidden bias are often aimed at the broadcast media. This type of bias is seen as more problematic due to the reach of the broadcast media and the obligation to demonstrate political balance. There are three main ways that hidden bias is perceived to be apparent.

1. Firstly, despite the need for balance, smaller parties and minority groups often argue that they are not given a fair hearing in the broadcast media.

-According to Loughborough University, in 2017, 67.1% of all politicians' appearances on TV were Conservative or Labour.

2. Secondly, individual programmes or broadcasters, are also perceived by some to exhibit bias.

-Under Boris Johnson in 2019, the Conservatives began boycotting the Today programme on Radio 4 over its alleged anti-Tory bias.

-Labour complained about the BBC's political editor Laura Kuenssberg's coverage of the Party and Jeremy Corbyn, and the BBC found she had inaccurately represented Jeremy Corbyn's views on shoot-to-kill policies in the aftermath of the Paris attacks in 2015.

3. Finally, the media is perceived to be part of the establishment and reflects the powerful interests in society: employers not employees, middle class not middle class, white not ethnic minority and men not women. The framing of political issues, where the media selects only certain stories and frames them in a particular way, helps shape what the public can think about, rather than just telling them what to think.

-It is argued that the 2010 and 2015 elections were framed in terms of austerity: debt was dangerous. Britain was broke and that there was no alternative to spending cuts. The narrative that the UK had maxed out its credit card under Labour during the global financial crisis of 2007-9 became the prism through which events, parties and policies were interpreted.

-During the course of the EU referendum, and subsequent Brexit debate, many Leavers argued there was an establishment pro-EU bias in the BBC's coverage by promoting more Remain voices on their news output. This led to the debates being interpreted through the problems Brexit would cause and the splits in the Tory party.

Print media bias

Newspapers are absolutely clear about their bias and political parties encourage that bias where it works in their favour. Back in 1995, there were extensive efforts by the Labour Party and Tony Blair to develop a close relationship with Rupert Murdoch, the owner of The Sun and The News of the World, and later Tony Blair became godfather to one of Murdoch's children. Blair clearly felt that The Sun and The News of the World, with their large readerships, could promote his leadership of the Labour Party and bring them electoral success.

The problem of newspaper bias is exacerbated by the nature of media ownership, with much of the press now concentrated in the hands of a few press barons. In 2018, just three companies dominated 83% of the national newspaper market, while if you take print and online readers into account, just five companies dominate over 80% of the UK market. This concentration has increased with further consolidation in 2019 and 2020. This gives huge power to the owners, such as Rupert Murdoch of News UK, to shape the media agenda and influence public opinion. It is also noticeable that a much larger slice of the print media supports the Conservative Party (63.95% of the market share in 2018) than the Labour Party (20.40% of the market share in 2018). If the print media really matter, this makes it more difficult for Labour to get public opinion on its side and win elections.

Broadcast media and bias

Unlike the press, the broadcast media, which is consumed on a vast scale, is regulated by OFCOM with the aim of ensuring that balance is shown between political parties, and impartiality is maintained in reporting the news. This lack of bias is further reinforced by the journalists working in the broadcast media, who feel neutrality is the central principle of their professionalism. Yet, political parties in the modern times are constantly alleging bias in the behaviour of the broadcast media. The Left have attacked the BBC for its pro-employers and anti-workers stance while the Right see the BBC as a liberal institution opposed to conservative values.

Broadcast media and influence: Does the UK media have real influence over public opinion and voting behaviour?

The broadcast media is seen to be incredibly influential as it is a key source of political information and news for the British public. Despite changes in technology, the broadcast media remains dominated by a small number of very influential media outlets, such as the BBC and ITV, with large audiences.

-Political parties tailor their policy announcements, statements, and public visits to get maximum visibility in the news cycle especially during campaigns. Speeches and policies are boiled down into memorable soundbites in order to become the headline or key video clip at the top of news shows.

-The influence of the broadcast media also means that both looking and sounding good on TV is crucial for modern political leaders. Michael Foot, the leader in 1983, was a brilliant public speaker but uncomfortable on TV and so his credibility was damaged, while both Blair's and Cameron's easy style was key to their success.

-Trust in broadcast media journalists remains high in comparison to the print media, suggesting a far higher level of influence.

Power of the broadcast media to influence politics is limited.

- It is constrained by its obligation to impartiality, its professional standards built on neutrality and its monitoring by OFCOM. This appears to limit the ability of the broadcast media to shape how people vote.
- Trust in the broadcast media has declined in general. For example, in YouGov polling, BBC journalists were trusted by 81% and ITV journalists by 82% in 2003 but that figure has fallen significantly since then, further limiting its influence. The decline is driven in part by the increasing belief among viewers and listeners that the broadcast media demonstrates bias in its output.

Task

1. Explain what role media plays in politics and what impact it has.
2. What are opinion polls and what role do they play?
3. What has the impact been of changing types of media?
4. Can the media work as part of a democratic society?
5. To what extent is there political bias among the media? Give examples.
6. The media has massive amounts of influence over the public. Discuss. Structure your extended answer as below:

For:

Against:

Your thoughts: