

Unit 2 Democracy, Active Citizenship and Participation

Chapter 9 Who holds power in the UK?

Exam practice question page 74

Power in the UK is ultimately held by the electorate. Discuss. (15 marks)

Sample answer: Political power in the UK is said to reside in parliament as it is the ultimate body that makes the law by which we are all governed. But who gave parliament its power?

In theory the electorate are all-powerful in the UK as they elect people to represent them in parliament and can, at elections, elect new people if they don't like what has happened in the last parliament.

In the UK we have a system of representative democracy whereby the views of the people are represented through those they elect. It would be impossible to have direct democracy where each decision was made by every individual citizen.

This theory of power held by the electorate can be challenged on several grounds; the nature of electoral system used in the UK favours a two party system and a number of seats are called safe seats, which means the same party wins the seat election after election, so it could be claimed that the electorate in those seats have little power. In other seats that are likely to change hands, called marginal seats, the parties put in a lot of effort to gain voters' support in these seats. However, even there, the ultimate power lies with those voters who are undecided or likely to switch from one party to another as they have the greatest impact upon the result. Some experts have claimed that the decision of a few thousand voters to vote or not to vote, and for whom they decide to vote, determines the outcome of a general election.

Others claim that bodies, such as pressure groups and the media, have real political power in the UK as they can influence those in power more than ordinary voters. Others would say that power is held by the political parties as they decide who stands for election and that today fewer and fewer people join political parties so power is in the hands of a small number of people.

In conclusion, in theory ultimate power does lie with electorate but, owing to our political system and electoral system, the reality is somewhat different.

Examiner comment: This response gains marks in the top band because:

AO1 There is a good knowledge shown of the power of the electorate. Good background information when challenging the assumption of the question.

AO2 It is a well constructed case making many valid points to support the case the candidate was putting forward, good questioning of the assumption of the question. More detailed case studies would have helped.

AO3 There is a good use of citizenship terminology and a well structured response.

Chapter 10 The citizen and political power in the United Kingdom

Exam practice question page 85

'The UK government provides too many services to its citizens'. Present a case for or against this point of view. (15 marks)

Sample answer: Throughout the 20th and 21st century governments in the UK have provided more and more services for UK citizens, all of which have had to be paid for out of taxation.

Many people believe we have moved from a welfare safety net, for those in need, to a welfare dependant society where everybody expects the government to solve their problems. When the Labour government was elected in 1997 it coined the phrase 'a hand up not a hand out' in regard to welfare payments. In 2012 the Conservative/Lib Dem coalition government is trying to introduce a new universal benefit system that ensures that people are better off in work than unemployed.

This essay makes the case that the state does provide too many services for its citizens and that UK citizens should accept more responsibility for themselves. Citizens of the United States of America take on far more responsibility for themselves than we do in the UK, they also have lower tax rates than we do and seem to have a more 'can do' attitude.

The basic services that a state should provide concern national defence and a justice system. Other things like transport, health, education and social services could all be provided by the private sector and people, who wish to use them, would have to pay. The argument made by many against this point of view is that there are some in society who are unable to provide for themselves and some the private sector would not cover. This is where the state could provide a safety net for those really in need. I believe that if people are made more responsible for their own actions they will ensure that the services they receive are the best value for money and the best quality; at the moment the public in the UK have little influence over those who provide public services.

Since 1979 there have been rapid changes in the UK regarding the provision of public services through privatisation. The former public utilities are now private companies, the state no longer own airlines or the railways. If this country wishes to develop a more market orientated economy and encourage small business one way is to cut taxation and to encourage people to be responsible for their own lives.

Examiner comment: This response gains marks in the top band because:

AO1 The response gives a clear view as to the conceptual nature of state provision so more examples of existing provisions would have helped develop some of the points.

AO2 The response, as required, makes a case for one point of view but it does try to balance points that undermine the case being made. Good conceptual understanding shown.

AO3 There is a good use of citizenship terms a well-constructed case that does lead to a clear conclusion based upon the evidence presented.

Chapter 11 Playing your part: how the citizen can get involved and make a difference

Exam practice question page 95

Critically assess why some pressure groups in the UK are more influential than others. (15 marks)

Sample answer: A pressure group is a group of individuals who share a common cause and wish to influence those in power. They differ from a political party in that they do not stand for election. Within the UK it can appear that some pressure groups are more influential than others, this can be due to a range of factors: their size, the nature of their cause, their political views, their status as a group, and the media support or the nature of their supporters.

Each of these factors can appear to influence the power of a specific group at a specific time. For example, many years ago it was believed that Trade Unions, with their mass membership, were very powerful and influential but today they appear to have little power or influence over government.

The size of a pressure group can, at times, work in its favour if those they wish to influence believe they represent a major section of public opinion. For example, the campaign to stop the selling off of forest land, managed by the Forestry Commission, brought together a coalition of pressure groups including bodies like the National Trust. They arranged for their supporters to petition parliament and write to MP's about what the government thought was a non-controversial issue. It led to a defeat in the House of Commons. Two other large groups in recent years, who took to mass protest, were unable to alter the government's views: the Countryside Alliance and the Stop the War Coalition were opposing the government of the day, but the government believed that giving in to this opposition would be politically damaging. Some causes, such as that of the Ghurkhas, which attracted a lot of media coverage and celebrity support and leadership via Joanne Lumley, did win over the government. Recently, a Trade Union was successful when it threatened strike action: the drivers of fuel tankers achieved their aims as they had the power to cause economic damage to the country.

In conclusion a number of criteria can impact upon the success of a pressure group but the nature of the cause and its timing can also be very instrumental as to whether the campaign is successful.

Examiner comment: This response gains marks in the top band because:

AO1 Good knowledge shown of a range of campaigns. Some of the cases studies could have been further developed.

AO2 Well developed case containing several valid points. The case studies could have been developed.

AO3 Good use of citizenship terms, well-structured case made and a conclusion based upon the evidence presented.

Chapter 12 Citizenship in action: citizens working together to bring about change

Exam practice question page 100

Examine the extent to which the Internet has changed the way in which citizens can make their voice heard and take part in the democratic process. (10 marks)

Sample answer: The development of the Internet has enabled citizen's access to a worldwide community of facts and information 24 hours a day almost as events happen. Traditionally, citizens have had to rely on the more traditional forms of media for information and would then have had to contact, by phone or post, a councillor or Member of Parliament in order to express their views. Every three, four or five years, when an election is held, a citizen is able to express their views through the exercise of their vote. With the development of the Internet all that has changed. Views can be expressed within minutes of an event happening and contact can be made in an instant, by email, with those you wish to influence. The growth of social network sites, such as Facebook and Twitter, enable campaigners to gather vast numbers of supporters in a short period of time and the degree of the interest in a campaign can be fundamental to its success. Pressure groups are able to mobilise vast numbers of people quickly and to apply pressure on those in power. The government recently tried to sell off parts of forest land, managed by the Forestry Commission and, within days, 100,000s of citizens emailed MPs who were against the sell off and it was then postponed. In the same way, the transfer of a rail company franchise, from Virgin to Great Western, triggered over 100,000 citizens to sign an on line petition demanding a debate in parliament.

In 2010, the government recognised the power of the Internet by establishing a government e-petition web site, where individual citizens can raise issues: if 100,000 citizens support the petition it is then considered for debate in the House of Commons. The first such debate concerned the UK and the EU.

It is clear that the Internet has empowered many more citizens to take part in the democratic process. Outside the UK, many of the uprisings linked to the 'Arab Spring' gained momentum owing to the Internet: currently in Syria there are citizen journalists who use mobile phones and the Internet to show pictures of events as they occur so that citizens can make up their own minds about events without the diluting effect of the governments or the traditional media.

Examiner comment: This response gains marks in the top band because:

AO1 There is a good range of knowledge demonstrated many recent valid examples used in the response.

AO2 The response contains a range of points that make a valid case about the influence of the Internet. Good use of contemporary examples to support the points being made.

AO3 There is a good use of citizenship terms, a well structured response.

Chapter 13 Active citizenship skills and participation

Exam practice questions page 105

5 Identify two pieces of research you had to undertake as a part of Active Citizenship tasks (5 marks)

Sample answer: As a member of a group, I had to research background details about the changes in university tuition fees. As a group, we had to present a case for and against the recent changes to the rest of our group. I was a member of a group that was putting the case for the changes. The research we undertook involved some Internet research when we looked at the debate in the House of Commons and we also wrote to our local MP who voted in favour of asking him to give us any background information he might have. Both of these pieces of research help us to prepare our case.

Examiner comment: This response gains marks in the top band because:

AO3 All the essential elements of the question have been covered:

1. Identified an active citizenship task
2. Outlined two different types of research that were undertaken
3. Commented upon the use of the research.

6 Explain how working with others can make a difference when undertaking active citizenship tasks. (15 marks)

Sample answer: I have taken part in several active citizenship tasks during my AS Citizenship course as well as tasks where I worked on my own. I enjoyed the tasks much more when I was working with others and also felt that more was achieved when I worked with others.

I was involved in presenting a case for and against the changes in university tuition fees. I felt that, by working with a group, we achieved more as we could research in depth and prepare our argument together. I also felt we had a range of skills that complimented each other. I do not enjoy public speaking but am good at IT so I was able to produce the PowerPoint presentation that went with our case whilst a more confident member of the group did the talking.

Another task, which involved me working with others, was when we organised an event to promote a pressure group. We chose a group that is fighting for the truth to come out about the deaths of their loved ones at Hillsborough. This work involved both a lot of research and putting together a display and giving hand outs that promoted our cause to fellow students. One person simply couldn't have done all the work required within the timescale. Also, one member of the group, who was a Liverpool supporter, felt passionately about the issue and that spurred the rest of us on to do our best to present their case. We had lots of things to do on the day: setting up the display and the equipment, printing out materials and preparing our prompts to promote the cause. We also had to design an evaluation form to find out how successful we had been in promoting the cause. You needed a group of people on the day to do all these things. We also helped each other out as some things took longer than others.

Examiner comment: This response gains marks in the top band because:

A02 The response does outline a number of group activities that involved both a group working together and were clearly active citizenship tasks.

A03 The response demonstrates a range of reasons why working together can be better than working alone. The reasons and case studies quoted related to developing knowledge, skills and trying to make a difference. Even though one relates to a task quoted in the previous answer the student remembered to write up the material as if they had not referred to the work before.

7 To what extent should we be concerned about the power and influence of the press in the UK? (15 marks)

Sample answer: Traditionally in the UK it has been believed that newspapers and their owners have had extensive influence especially in relation to politicians. The question poses the point that we should be concerned about the power and influence of the press so I will examine firstly the evidence as to whether the press has any actual power and influence before I consider what concerns we, as citizens, should have.

One hundred years ago the press were the sole providers of news and opinions and were widely read by most people in society so it could be argued that the stories or editorial that they carried had the ability to influence their readers. So if you were an owner of a newspaper you would expect those in power or seeking power to be influenced by the views of newspaper proprietors.

This view is still held by many today but in my opinion the nature of 21st century media and its ownership means that the influence of the press is less than it was. Today fewer people read newspapers, most follow the news on television or the radio or via e-media. The way in which the Internet works allows for citizen journalists, where individual citizens can create and report news.

At the time of general elections all the newspapers state which political party they are going to support and many support the same party election after election. The Sun newspaper is famous for declaring that it was 'The Sun wot won it!' when it switched its support from the Conservative to Labour in 1997. Most people buy newspapers that they are happy with and that support their own point of view so the idea that a newspaper can swing an election for one party or another does seem an overstatement. The power of the press lies in its ability to set an agenda: by constantly pursuing a story or related stories they can establish a public perception. For example many newspapers oppose the Euro and actions by the European Union so therefore give prominence to stories that portray both negatively. The recent Leveson Enquiry has unmasked the way in which the press portray the police, other public services and politicians so I think that any influence the media did have is likely to be in decline in relation to politicians. It is likely that the Leveson Enquiry will recommend stronger monitoring of the press, which will assist citizens in challenging errors that the press make. With the variety of media format now available I believe that citizens should not be over concerned about the power and influence of the press and with legislation, such as the Data Protection Act and the Freedom of Information Act, citizens are better able to find the truth about events for themselves.

Examiner comment: This response gains marks in the top band because:

AO1 The response is clearly focussed on the press and an example of media influence is given. More case studies would have been helpful.

AO2 The response challenges the basis of the question and provides a range of valid points to support their own contention. The response comes to a clear conclusion based upon the evidence presented. This is a well-argued case making many valid points. Writing in the first person should be avoided with this style of question.

8 Why don't more citizens get involved in campaigning about local issues? Discuss. 25 marks.

Sample answer: The question raises the issue of citizen's involvement in local campaigning. I believe the contention of the question is not valid. I believe large numbers of citizens do get involved in local issues. When something has a direct impact upon your daily life it gives you a motivation to take some action. In regard to issues relating to planning, local planning authorities have a duty to inform those affected of any proposals and take their views into account. Unless the planning decision impacts upon thousands of people, only a few who are directly affected will take part in a local campaign.

Other community decisions, such as the location of wind farms or out of town shopping centres, can often lead to many people being involved in issues and being actively involved in campaigning.

A point can be made that some people are reluctant to take part in campaigning for a range of reasons: lack of knowledge about the issue, concern about what they can contribute, belief that they don't have the necessary skills required, or just the feeling they don't have enough time to devote to campaigning.

During my course I have studied two local campaigns in my area: one about the possible closure of a library and the other about the quality of school dinners at our Academy.

The campaign about the library closure has generated a lot of local public interest. The local newspaper is backing a stop the closure campaign and organised a public petition, which attracted 5,000 signatories, and a local campaign group was formed led by the opposition councillors on the local council. Young children have marched through the town centre, fighting to keep open the children's section of the library.

The campaign about school dinners arose from complaints made at school to the school council. A number of members of the council raised points about the type of food on offer. After the council meeting, posters appeared around the school asking people to support the cause.

So in both these cases it appears that some local issues can cause people to get involved.

The reasons why people may not get involved include: lack of knowledge about the issues, pressures of work and family not allowing time to take part and thinking that whatever you do you will not make a difference. Also a lot of people are just apathetic.

A problem in relation to the question is what you define as 'local'. It could be a street, a village, a town or a larger community. When dealing with any local campaign, there needs to be a focus of concern and leadership for the issue otherwise the campaign will not gain any momentum. Any local campaign has to work hard to gain publicity and therefore support, so unless there is local media

coverage or an active group of campaigners, who go out to gain support, members of the community many be unaware of the issue.

Many people feel they cannot make a difference and that vested interest, or those with power, will always win. Campaign groups have to overcome this problem.

One of the priorities of the government formed in 2010 was the idea of the 'Big Society' and localism, where they wished more people to become involved in local issues and for more decisions to be made locally. If more people do not become involved in issues that directly affect their communities, there will be an impact on the whole national political process through lack of interest and participation so it is important, in a democratic society, to encourage citizen participation as it drives the entire political process.

Examiner comment: This response gains marks in the top band because:

AO3 This response covers a range of points regarding why people do not get involved both at a practical and theoretical level. The response includes examples of the student's own participation and local knowledge.

The response does also place the question within the larger context of civic participation in a democratic society.