

UK: FROM EMPIRE TO DEMOCRACY DEBATE TOPICS

Topic 1	Political parties and democracy
Summary	Are political parties a help or a hindrance to democracy?
Context	<p>Political parties are an essential feature of representative democracy in the UK , and just a handful of parties have dominated British politics through most of the 19th and 20th centuries. Members of Parliament are elected to represent their constituents whilst simultaneously standing as a representative of a political party. In recent times, the role and function of long-established political parties has been in the spotlight, with debate centering on whether they are good or bad for democracy. In the UK, the Labour Party is currently divided over its leader and internal democratic processes, and previously minor parties, such as UKIP and the SNP in Scotland, have presented a challenge to the strength and roles of mainstream parties in recent years.</p> <p>However, the current leadership contest in the Labour Party has led to a huge surge in membership, and some argue, a more active engagement between voters and party. For some, this is an example of political parties being good for democracy, by encouraging participation in the political process, and representing a range of political opinions and ideologies. But others question whether political parties still serve a democratic purpose, and argue that, “political parties do not represent the people; they represent themselves”, because the role of MPs has been subverted by the competition for power between the two dominant parties in the UK. Is it possible for politicians to truly represent their constituents whilst remaining loyal to their party? Do political parties play a crucial role in the democratic process, by representing vast swathes of the electorate on a host of issues? Or are they the cause of what some call a ‘democratic deficit’ in British politics today?</p>
Motions	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <i>Political parties are bad for democracy.</i> 2. <i>Political parties are good for democracy.</i>
Useful links	<p>Parliament still to recover from expenses scandal, says ex-MP BBC News 14 August 2016</p> <p>Labour's leadership battle exposes civil war for soul of the party Financial Times 11 August 2016</p> <p>Labour will SPLIT if Jeremy Corbyn is re-elected leader, warns challenger Owen Smith Daily Mail 3 August 2016</p> <p>Cameron's 'cronies' honours list leads to calls for overhaul of system Guardian 1 August 2016</p> <p>SNP's bid to replace Labour as Commons opposition rejected BBC News 29 July 2016</p> <p>Revealed: Labour MPs go to police over death threats after refusal to back Jeremy Corbyn Telegraph 29 July 2016</p> <p>Lord Ashdown launches political movement to stop British politics being 'dragged away to the extreme Telegraph 24 July 2016</p> <p>Labour leadership: Over 183,000 people register to vote as Corbyn and Smith prepare for battle International Business Times 20 July 2016</p> <p>Reclusive millionaire to fund disaffected MPs in the next general election Independent 6 March 2016</p> <p>Independent MPs - can they make a difference? BBC News 7 March 2015</p>

Topic 2	An English Parliament
Summary	Should England have its own parliament?

Context	<p>This debate arises as a consequence of devolution, a policy carried out by the UK's Labour government from 1997. Devolution is the process of giving certain previously centralised powers to regional governments. Under the 1997 policy, the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly were created and contained similarities to the Stormont Parliament in Northern Ireland, which was established in the 1920s but then abolished in the 1970s. These legislative bodies are separately elected by UK citizens resident in Scotland and Wales and make policy on areas such as education, health, agriculture and justice. Policy in these areas in England is made by the UK Parliament (at Westminster in London), which also legislates on UK-wide policy, such as defence, economy and foreign policy. Scottish and Welsh citizens, therefore, vote in two elections – one to choose their representatives in the Scottish Parliament (Members of the Scottish Parliament – MSPs), or Welsh Assembly (Assembly Members – AMs) and another to choose their representatives in the Westminster Parliament (Members of Parliament – MPs). In contrast, English citizens only vote to elect MPs. A problem, known as the 'West Lothian Question', that arises from this is that Scottish and Welsh MPs get to vote on policy that only affects England, since the relevant policy in Scotland or Wales is decided on by the devolved bodies. One proposed solution is that England should also have its own legislative body – the English Parliament – which would decide on the same issues for England as the Scottish Parliament does for Scotland, leaving Westminster to decide only on those issues of UK-wide significance. Essentially, this debate will cover issues on the representation of English issues, the 'West Lothian Question' and population.</p>
Motion	<i>England should have its own legislative body – the English Parliament.</i>
Useful links	<p> http://news.parliament.uk/2009/05/report-on-devolution-and-the-governance-of-england http://www.thecep.org.uk/wordpress http://www.toque.co.uk/switan http://www.englishdemocrats.org.uk http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/West_Lothian_question http://www.ucl.ac.uk/constitution-unit/files/publications/unit-publications/130.pdf http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/4792120.stm </p>

Topic 3	Party Funding
Summary	Should the state interfere in party funding matters?
Context	<p>The issue of political party funding and fundraising has been prevalent in any discussion of British politics since the mid-1990s. Most recently were the 2006 cash-for-honours scandal, the 2009 cash-for-amendments scandal and the 2010 lobbying scandal. Sir Hayden Philips's review of party funding in 2007 was the first to suggest an upper limit or cap on donations to political parties in order to increase transparency and put an end to scandal, and since then the focus has increased on political parties about the donations they receive both from wealthy individuals and businesses, and the extent to which donors have undue influence over political parties. David Cameron declared in 2010 that party funding would be the "next scandal to rock parliament", and the results of an enquiry led by Sir Christopher Kelly, chairman of the Independent Committee on Standards in Public Life, published in 2011, proposed that the state should regulate the funding of parties and limit all donations to £10,000. Any short-fall would be made up by allocating £3 for each vote a party receives in an election. Whilst the state does contribute indirectly to party funding through initiatives such as 'Short Money' for opposition MPs expenses and Policy Development Grants, the proposal would be a substantial increase in the state's involvement in the accounts of independent political parties. According to some critics this would place limitations on the ways that the electorate can engage and support political organisations. If the essence of democracy is that the government should be held to account by the populace, they argue, than any intervention by the state is an infringement of our democratic right to pursue our political goals.</p>
Motion	<i>The state should regulate the funding of political parties.</i>

Useful links	Why public finance of political parties is justified Martin Wolf Financial Times 29 March 2012 Only voters can get rid of the stink of politics' dirty money Polly Toynbee Guardian 29 March 2012 Labour and the Tories must accept state funding Dennis McShane New Statesman 27 March 2012 Political funding: paying for the party Guardian 28 October 2011 Time for state to fund political parties, says James Purnell Nicholas Watt & Allegra Stratton Guardian 29 May 2009 Taxpayer funding of political parties would damage our democracy Robert Oxley Politics 4 April 2012 Why state-funded political parties would be a disaster for our democracy Open Democracy 29 March 2012 Why Fund the Politically Bankrupt? Tim Black spiked 28 March 2012 State funding for political parties should be scrapped not increased Harry Phibbs Daily Mail 22 November 2011 State funding for parties will guarantee sleaze: look at Europe Daniel Hannan Telegraph 3 April 2006
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Topic 4	Reparations for Britain’s involvement in the slave trade
Summary	Are reparations the right way to resolve historical injustice?
Context	<p>Despite The Slavery Abolition Act of 1833 formally outlawing slavery throughout the British Empire nearly 200 years ago, Prime Minister David Cameron’s first state visit to Jamaica last September was overshadowed by calls from high-profile politicians, including Jamaican leader Portia Simpson Miller, for Britain to pay reparations for its involvement in the slave trade. This is just one example of an increasing demand for reparations from Western nations to individuals and countries who were affected by the slave trade. According to some calculations, reparations for the transatlantic slave trade could add up to \$14 trillion and those calling for reparations argue that slavery facilitated the rise of Britain as a global player, and forced human exploitation was a “major source of wealth of the British Empire”. The implication of this is that the impact of slavery has filtered down through generations and had a discernible material impact on the present: benefiting the descendants of those who owned and traded slaves, and holding back the societies of the descendants of slaves. Critics of reparations are concerned about the idea of apologising and paying reparations for something no modern Briton was a part of, and question whether reparations are ever the way to resolve historical injustice. Though few would argue about the inhumanity that slavery embodied, the issue at hand is whether there is a moral and financial debt still to be paid by modern Western states, such as the UK. Would financial reparations absolve the UK once and for all from its debt to generations of peoples affected by the transatlantic slave trade? Or should we stop trying to find solutions to today’s problems by resolving history’s wrongs?</p>
Motion	<i>Britain should pay reparations for its role in the slave trade.</i>
Useful links	‘Jamaica must move on from painful legacy of slavery’ – Cameron Russia Today 1 October 2015 David Cameron’s Jamaica visit overshadowed by slave trade reparations call Huffington Post 30 September 2015 David Cameron rules out slavery reparation during Jamaica visit BBC News 30 September 2015 Jamaica wants UK to pay them \$25 billion as financial reparation for involvement in slave trade Business Insider 30 September 2015 Slavery reparations could cost up to \$1 trillion according to new calculation Newsweek 19 August 2015 Benedict Cumberbatch’s ancestors built their multimillion pound fortune on backs of ‘250 negroes’ Daily Mail 29 January 2015 CARICOM nations unanimously approve 10 point plan for slavery reparations LeighDay.co.uk 11 March 2014 Caribbean nations agree to seek slavery reparations from Europe Reuters 11 March 2014 Jamaica leads Caribbean calls for Britain to pay slavery reparations Telegraph 15 February 2014 14 Caribbean nations sue European countries for slavery reparations Huffington Post 30 September 2013

Topic 5	Compulsory voting
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Summary	Should voting in the UK be made compulsory?
Context	In November 2014, the UK parliament's Political and Constitutional Reform Committee submitted a report recommending that voting in national elections should be made compulsory, in addition to other recommendations such as developing online voting and extending the franchise to 16 and 17 year olds. These calls come in the wake of falling voter turnout at both local and national elections in the UK in the post-war period. Since the franchise was extended to all adults in the UK in 1928 (although modern suffrage of 'one person, one vote' only came into being in 1948) turnout reached an all-time low in 2001, with 59.4% of voters turning out, and has been in decline since an all-time high at the 1950 general election. In addition, the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee estimates that approximately 7.5 million are not correctly registered to vote, with millions more UK citizens overseas not registered to vote at all, stating that: "These figures indicate a substantial lack of engagement of the public with elections in the UK". The UK situation reflects a broader trend across Western democracies, where voter turnout has been in decline. To counter this trend, some see mandatory voting as a way to stem the decline in voter engagement and this is being debated in other democracies around the world, including in the USA and India. In Australia, one of 22 countries to currently have compulsory attendance at polls, there is a contemporary debate about whether this process enhances or damages the democratic process. So what are the key issues at stake in the current debate in the UK and elsewhere about making voting mandatory? And what are the causes of a decline in voting amongst electorates in Western democracies? Will compulsory voting re-engage voters or are there more complicated issues to resolve?
Motion	<i>Voting in the UK should be made compulsory.</i>
Useful links	MPs call for compulsory voting and a lower voting age ITV News 14 November 2014 Gujarat first state to make voting must in local body elections Times of India 10 November 2014 Online voting should be made mandatory, says Martha Lane Fox Guardian 14 October 2014 'Astonishing' Turnout Breaks UK Voting Records Sky News 19 September 2014 Make voting compulsory at elections, says Kevin Meagher BBC News 12 March 2014 Labour May Force Young People To Vote, Says Sadiq Khan Huffington Post 24 January 2014 Voting should be compulsory for young people at least once, says Think Tank Independent 26 August 2013 Plea to make voting compulsory Scottish Express 6 May 2012 2008 Surge in Black Voters Nearly Erased Racial Gap New York Times 20 July 2009 '08 Voter Turnout Rate Said to Be Highest in 40 Years Washington Post 15 December 2008 Britain 'needs compulsory voting' BBC News 1 May 2006 Hoon suggests compulsory voting BBC News 4 July 2005

Topic 6	Written Constitution
Summary	Should the UK have a written Constitution?

Context	<p>The proposition is that the United Kingdom should adopt a written constitution, explicitly outlining the rights of citizens, the roles of all organs of the government, and the powers (and limitations thereon) of the state. The choice facing the country is therefore whether to adopt the sort of explicit, formal supreme law typified by documents such as the United States Constitution. The alternative is to retain the status quo of its constitution consisting of a variety of informal codes and conventions, many of them unwritten, which guide the political and legal culture of the country. As it stands, parliament enjoys “sovereignty,” whereby it may pass whatever laws it wishes with no higher law limiting its legislation nor any judicial power to question the fundamental legitimacy of the law. Adopting such a constitution would restrict the behavior of the government, and subject all exercises of state power to judicial review. In 2007 then Prime Minister Gordon Brown made proposals for a British constitution and bill of rights which would have restricted the powers of the prime minister in areas such as declaring war, however these proposals never came to anything.</p>
Motion	<p><i>The UK should adopt a written constitution.</i></p>
Useful links	<p>"Why Britain Needs a Written Constitution". Charter88, 20th July 1992. Will Woodward et al., "PM offers to hand power to the people in constitution debate", The Guardian, 4th July 2007, accessed 29/6/11. "Government Commits to Seeking a Ban of the Extreme Right-Wing National Democratic Party of Germany (NPD)", 1 German Law Journal (2000). "The British Constitution" Icons a portrait of England. BBC News, "DNA Database 'Breach of Rights", 4th December 2008, accessed 29/6/11.</p>