

6 Britain: a diverse society

CULTURE CLUB

The English nation has been made as a result of migration – and is all the better for it, says Dinah Starkey

The English are the product of centuries of migration, some peaceful, some forcible. John Bull, the typical Englishman, may in fact be two parts Germanic Saxon to one part Celt, with a chunk of Scandinavian, a smattering of French and a dash of West Indian, Asian, Jewish or Irish. The asylum seekers who enter our country today are only the latest immigrants.

Scotland and Wales have had their newcomers too, but England has always been a bigger melting pot. The Scots and the Welsh kept their native languages and culture for much longer, and even now they have a separate identity.

Go back 40,000 years and the original ancient Britons were arriving from continental Europe. They were followed, much later, by the Beaker people, who brought with them skills in working the mysterious new metal – bronze.

The Celts arrived about 700bc, and with them came the Iron Age. Next were the Romans in AD43. They stayed for nearly 400 years, transforming the landscape with road systems, farming methods and new crops. Many of the towns they established still survive.

By AD410 the Roman empire was crumbling, and the Angles and Saxons began to raid across the sea from what is now Germany. It was the Saxons who named the shires and villages, and the English language began to take shape.

The Normans, themselves the descendants of the Vikings, held all things

Saxon in contempt and invaded in 1066. They ignored the native language and continued to speak Norman French for generations. But the locals went on using Saxon, and gradually the two languages began to merge.

As trade routes opened in Tudor times, African boys were brought to Britain to satisfy the fashionable demand for black servants called blackamoors. By the end of Queen Elizabeth I's reign in 1603, an estimated 20,000 'blackamoors' were living and working in London.

The Huguenots, a French Protestant group, flooded into Britain in the 17th century to escape persecution by Catholic France. Many were cloth workers and they brought with them techniques which revitalised the British textile industry. In the 19th century, tens of thousands of Irish immigrants came to England after the potato famine, and from 1881 mounting persecution in Eastern Europe and Russia led to the arrival of thousands of Jews.

The evolution of the British national identity has been slow and painful. The struggle for success that has faced each generation of immigrants continues today. Perhaps we can help to make the process of assimilation a little easier by teaching young people about their past. That way they may come to understand what incomers have brought to our country and what they might contribute in the centuries to come.

Source: TES

Aim To explore the origins of Britain as a multicultural and multiethnic society, and the benefits that this has brought



In groups

- 1 Why could England be described as a 'melting pot'?
- 2 Identify three different reasons why immigrant groups have come to Britain in the last 40,000 years. Are these the same reasons why different peoples are still coming to Britain today?
- 3 Why is this ethnic immigration described as 'Britain's benefit'?
- 4 Discuss why you think people coming to Britain are often met with hostility and resentment.

How did Britain begin?

Britain's benefit

The contribution of ethnic minorities to Britain is immense. Research shows that one in seven UK companies was set up by immigrant entrepreneurs, e.g. New Look, which was set up by Tom Singh.

And people from ethnic minorities have contributed in all walks of life. These include politicians such as Diane Abbott and Keith Vaz, TV newsreaders such as Zena Badhawi and Clive Myrie, writers such as Zadie Smith and Hanish Kureshi, actors such as Lenny Henry and Chiwetel Ejiofor and Olympic stars, such as Mo Farah and Jessica Ennis-Hill.

Immigration into Britain: the last 65 years

- 1948** The first West Indian immigrants come to Britain, invited by the British government to help address the shortage of unskilled workers.
- 1960** India and Pakistan begin to issue passports to allow economic migration to Britain. In 1961, 48,850 people arrive from these countries.
- 1968–76** Thousands of African Asians come from East Africa, many to escape the persecution of the dictator Idi Amin. Many bring useful business and professional skills.
- 1976** The Race Relations Act is passed to promote racial equality and tackle discrimination. The Commission for Racial Equality is set up.
- 1979** The first of 22,000 Vietnamese refugees arrive, fleeing Communism in Vietnam.
- 1992** The Maastricht Treaty is passed, allowing citizens of the European Union states to live and work in Britain.
- 2003** Asylum seekers continue to seek a haven in Britain from persecution and war in countries such as Sri Lanka, Iraq and Afghanistan.
- 2004–13** The expansion of the European Union brings in immigrants from central and eastern Europe – an estimated 1.9 million by 2013.

In groups

- 1 Study the timeline 'Immigration into Britain'. What do you learn from it about the main groups of immigrants that have come to Britain in the last 65 years?
- 2 Use the information on these pages to extend this timeline backwards 40,000 years. Call it 'The Making of Britain'.

On your own

On your own, choose one of the immigrant groups mentioned in the articles and find out more about their history. What reasons did they have for coming, and what have they contributed to Britain's culture?



Britain: a diverse society

Is there a national identity and culture in Britain?

Aim To explore the meaning of national identity and culture

How do you see yourself?

"I am proud to be Scottish and I am proud to be British. I see no contradiction in that." Andy Murray

"I see myself as a London Irishman. I was born in London to parents from the west of Ireland. I write for the *Irish Post*, have an Irish passport and often say I'm English by birth and Irish by the grace of God."

"I was born in Wales, but my parents are English and we've lived in England since I was three. What does this mean – that I'm a British Englishman who is also Welsh?"

"One of my grandmothers was Scottish, the other Welsh. One of my grandfathers was English and the other came from Belfast. What does that make me? I guess because I was born in Scotland I am Scottish, but I have roots in all parts of the UK. I am British and Scottish."

"To be 100% Welsh, I think you need to be born and raised in Wales, to have Welsh ancestors, to know about Welsh culture and to speak the Welsh language."

"I'm a British African-Caribbean. My parents came to the United Kingdom before I was born. I was born in Oxford and my sisters were born in Edinburgh. So I suppose I'm English and they're Scottish."

"My parents are from Pakistan. I was born and brought up in Oldham, which means I'm a Lancastrian British Asian."

What does 'being British' mean?

Being British means being part of a country in which people:

- believe in democracy and the right of people to have a say in who governs the country
- respect the right of other people to practise their religion and to express their views freely
- believe in justice and the rule of law
- tolerate and respect other cultures
- are prepared to stand up to terrorists
- are prepared to support sanctions against countries with repressive regimes.

In groups

Do you agree with this definition of what 'being British' means? Is there anything you would add to this definition?

In pairs

Discuss what these people say about their identity. How would you describe your own identity and that of your family?



Coping with two cultures. Two families speak about their experiences.

Sunil and Parul Shah are Hindu, live in Milton Keynes and have two sons, Mayur, 14, and Tushar, 16.

SUNIL: "My father emigrated from India to Africa, where I was born, and so did my wife's parents. Our parents managed to keep their ethnic identity and pass it on to us, so we are passing it on to our children. Our culture, language, religion and moral values are all important in identifying who, and what, we are.

It was important for us to marry a Hindu because we have the same values and are raising our children in agreement. But we understand the importance of adapting to western culture."

MAYUR: "When I was small I used to be embarrassed if my parents spoke to me in Gujarati, but now I am proud and very pleased to be able to communicate with my grandmother, who doesn't speak English. It gives me a sense of my culture and reminds me of who I am."

Roya and Hossein Shahidi are Iranians who live in London. They have two sons, Farhang, 15, and Farhad, 21.

ROYA: We are Persian-Iranian and have a rich culture, such as our language, history, literature, music and food. I feel it is a blessing to be able to embrace two cultures, and it is beneficial not only to us as immigrants but to our host country, too. It is a two-way process."

FARHANG: "Being Iranian is not something that I consciously think about. I suppose I feel as British as I do Iranian because I fit into both cultures with the same ease. What does make me feel good, though, is the knowledge that I have this dual nationality. I know what it is like to be a foreigner in this country, but I also know what it is like being British."

Source: 'Roots And Branches' by Nadia Marks, *The Guardian*

Proud to be British

Britain is a nation where many of its newest citizens are proud to call themselves British.

In a report published in 2014, 71% of Bangladeshi-heritage people, 63% of Pakistani descent and 58% of Indian descent described themselves as British.



'I'm British, Asian, a Londoner and an ethnic minority politician. I went to a Church of England school, where I learned about Britain and Christianity, and sang hymns and carols. In the summer my friends and I were encouraged to volunteer in the community. I met children from other cultures who gave me a perspective on my own, and grew up loving being British, though I never lost my Asian heritage.'

Seema Malhotra MP

In groups

- 1 Discuss what the people on this page are saying about being part of more than one culture. Do they identify with one culture more than the other?
- 2 Are the conflicting loyalties a burden or a benefit? Do the children feel any differently from their parents?

Is Britain a racist society?

Aim To discuss whether racism still exists in modern Britain

BRITAIN – ONE OF THE MOST RACIALLY TOLERANT COUNTRIES

Erica Stewart argues that although racist views still exist among some groups, British society is less racist than many others.

There are still some people who support the British National Party at elections, but their vote collapsed in the 2014 European election and they failed to win any seats.

It is true that there is a disproportionate number of non-white people in our prisons and that you are still more likely to be stopped and searched if your skin is black.

Also, research from the Department of Work and Pensions found that people with ethnic-sounding surnames are less likely to be called for interview than others with similar qualifications.

But research has also found that Britain is one of the most racially tolerant countries. In 2013, the World Value Survey asked individuals what types of people they would refuse to live next to and found that in Britain less than 5 per cent said people of a different race. This was far less than in the least tolerant countries, which included India, Jordan, Iran and Saudi Arabia.

In the 1990s, a British Social Attitudes survey found that 44 per cent of people would feel uncomfortable if their children married someone from a different ethnic background. A survey of 18 to 24 year olds in 2014 found that only 5 per cent would mind if their children married across ethnic lines.

The fact is that attitudes have changed. There will always be a few people who are racist, but in our diverse society they are becoming fewer and fewer.

Source: From *Is Britain a Racist Country?*



In groups

Discuss the views below. Do you think UKIP is a racist party? Are its supporters xenophobic? Give reasons for your views.

Is UKIP a racist party?

'Quite simply, yes. It is deliberately whipping up fear and – by extension – hatred of foreigners with its provocative posters and inflammatory language. It is deliberately exaggerating figures and playing on people's anxieties about immigration in order to win political support.' Nick Lowles, Director of HOPE not hate

'Immigration and race are two separate issues. UKIP is not a racist party. It would never ally itself with a party like the Front National in France, which is racist.'

'People in Britain may not be racist, but many of them are xenophobic, frightened by the arrival of immigrants from other EU countries.'

“I have never felt myself not to be a British citizen”

I am, thanks to joint Indian and English heritage, slightly brown. I am, naturally, outraged by the stupidity of the BNP. But I have never, for a second, felt myself not to be a British citizen; never felt it to be some kind of triumph of integration to be able to sit in the local chippie; and never felt intimidated by some moron willing to judge on appearances alone.

I don't notice because I have never thought that I have not belonged. It has never occurred to me that because of the colour of my skin, I would be less able to succeed. It is this blissful ignorance of my colour that, I believe, shows that Britain is not a racist country. The only time when I become aware of my skin? As I sit smugly on the beach in Cornwall surrounded by holidaymakers frantically dolloping on the sun cream and fake tan.”

Freya Berry

Source: *The Huffington Post*



▲ Freya Berry

BRITAIN HAS MANY PROBLEMS – RACISM ISN'T ONE OF THEM

Britain is not a racist country. I have not, as a member of a minority ethnic group here, encountered racist comments or treatment from anyone.

To the British young, racism is not repugnant – it is incomprehensible. The young of Britain, according to a British Future report, belong to the 'Jessica Ennis generation' and are 'ever more likely to form mixed race relationships themselves; and much less likely to think there is any big deal about that anyway'.

You only have to look at other nations across the globe to see how far Britain has come. Countries everywhere impose laws and policies along racial lines, in a manner that would be inconceivable here. Malaysia, where I was born, has a constitution which safeguards the 'special position' of ethnic Malays, such as by establishing quotas for entry into the civil service, public scholarships and public education. Thus many Malaysians – and I am deemed an ethnic-Chinese-Malaysian – come to be extremely aware of their racial background.

As for China, racism appears to be ingrained, especially against blacks; large numbers of young Africans studying there complain of this. And across Africa inter-ethnic tension is rife.

I have been welcomed in this country and I feel grateful for this. Perhaps there are thousands of other 'minority' people in this country who feel the same way. We are here to throw ourselves pell-mell into the national life whatever that may bring. Because of course Britain faces many challenges today. It's just that racism isn't one of them.

How do I tell my daughter that people across Europe fear minorities like us?

Clarissa Tan

In groups

'It is wrong to suggest that Britain is not a racist country. There is still a lot of racism in British society.' Say whether you agree or disagree with this statement and why.

For your file

Use the Internet to investigate instances of racism in other societies and write a short article on racism around the world.

16 It's your government

The UK Parliament

Aim To understand what the UK Parliament is and what it does

How the UK Government works

The Government in the UK is made up of three parts:

1 Executive – Responsible for making day-to-day decisions, such as how to spend money raised through taxation. The head of the executive is the Prime Minister.

2 Legislature – The section of Government that makes and amends laws (Parliament): the House of Commons, the House of Lords and the Monarchy (see right). The Prime Minister is head of the legislature.

3 Judiciary – Since 2009 we have had an independent judiciary in the UK. Senior judges interpret laws that the legislature has passed. Individual cases are then brought before a judge who decides whether or not the law has been broken and, if necessary, what corrective steps a person needs to take.

The origins of Parliament lie in medieval times.

When the monarch needed to raise large amounts of money, nobles formed a Great Council (later the House of Lords). The Great Council also consisted of local people – commoners (later the House of Commons).

At this time, the monarch held absolute power. Over time, power has transferred from the monarch to the House of Commons. However, some power to delay legislation is held by the House of Lords.

The Cabinet and the Opposition

The Cabinet is the main executive committee of Government made up of between 20 and 25 ministers appointed by the Prime Minister. It makes key decisions and provides leadership to the Government. The three top members of the Cabinet are:

- 1 The Chancellor** – finance
- 2 The Home Secretary** – law and order
- 3 The Foreign Secretary** – foreign policy with other countries.

Watching the work of the Cabinet closely is the Shadow Cabinet – the main figures of the second-largest political party in the House of Commons. The head is the Leader of the Opposition. The role of the Opposition and the Shadow Cabinet is to oppose the Government and offer alternative courses of action.

In groups

What is the difference between the Cabinet and the Shadow Cabinet? Draw up lists of key members of the Cabinet and Shadow Cabinet. Use the Internet to help you to compile the lists.



The House of Commons

In 2014 there were 650 elected members of the House of Commons. These included 148 women and 27 MPs from ethnic minority backgrounds.

The House of Commons has 15 select committees, made up of 10–20 MPs, who look at one specific area of parliamentary business. For example, the work of the Home Secretary – who oversees the police, domestic security, and fighting crime – is scrutinised by the Home Affairs Select Committee.



The House of Lords

The House of Lords also scrutinises legislation, considers motions and holds debates. It has four select committees. The House of Lords usually agrees with the House of Commons. However, it frequently proposes amendments to legislation and sometimes it refuses to pass a bill. But it can reject a bill only three times within one year. After this the bill becomes law.

What the UK Parliament does

Parliament has several different functions:

- To debate major, current issues of political importance.
- To make laws. Most laws in the UK are made by Parliament. However, local councils can pass minor, local laws ('by-laws').
- To scrutinise and debate laws that are passed in Europe. More and more decisions are made in Europe, with legal force across the European Union (EU) (see page 67).
- To agree a budget, including the income and expenditure for the government each year, and to scrutinise how this money is spent.

Who is in the House of Lords?

In 2014 there were 778 members of the House of Lords, made up of different groups who have been appointed in the following ways:

Life peers – about 650 appointed by the government. Life peers include 12 senior judges, known as the Law Lords. These Law Lords also sit as the highest court in the UK. There are also 26 archbishops and bishops, appointed by the Church of England.

Elected hereditary peers
The House of Lords Act 1999 ended the right of about 700 hereditary peers to sit and vote in the House of Lords. Now there are only 92 hereditary peers who are elected by various groups within the House of Lords.

Once someone is a member of the House of Lords, they cannot be removed. Some support this idea – political parties have less power over them as they cannot be threatened with removal from office if they don't support a particular party. Opponents say that the system of appointment of life peers allows the government to fill the House of Lords with its own supporters. They argue that the House of Lords should be an elected body.

In groups

- 1 Discuss your views on life peers. Is the system whereby the government chooses who should be in the House of Lords the best way of selecting its members?
- 2 Research the different proposals for further reform of the House of Lords, then hold a debate on the motion "This house believes that the House of Lords should be replaced by an elected House of Representatives."
- 3 Should peers be stripped of their peerage if they are sent to prison or fail to attend the House of Lords regularly?

In groups

Look at the different functions of Parliament. Which do you think are the most important? Give reasons for your views.

Raising and spending money

Aim To understand how the government raises and spends money

Government finance

The government minister responsible for the nation's finances is the Chancellor of the Exchequer. He presents his plans to Parliament annually in the Budget. This outlines how much money the government needs during the next year (its **expenditure**) and how it plans to raise the money (its **income**).

The government raises money by taxing individuals and businesses. The main taxes on individuals are income tax, national insurance and VAT. There is also a tax on sales of property called stamp duty. The main taxes on businesses are business rates and corporation tax.

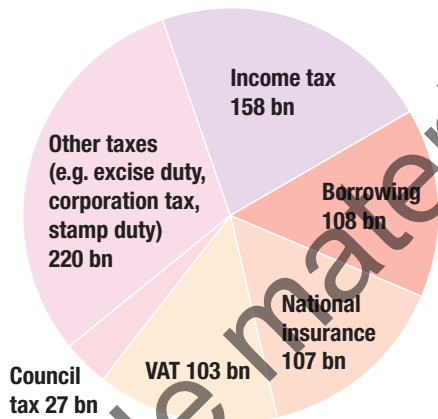
The government spends money on such things as defence, education, health, housing, public safety and social services.

The total expenditure exceeds the total income, so the government raises the extra money it needs by borrowing.

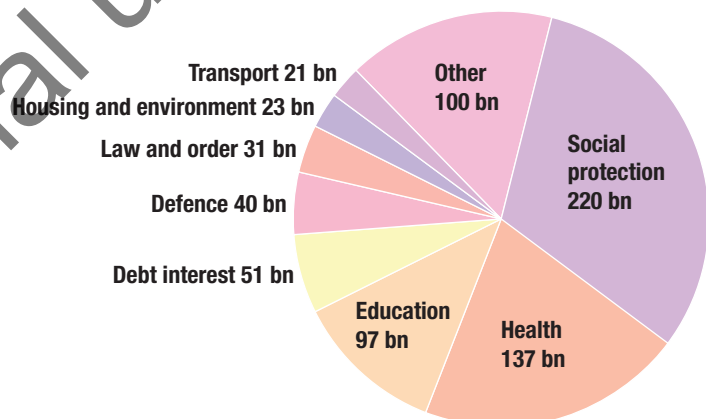
The chart shows the planned income and expenditure for 2014.



▲ The Conservative government's Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne



▲ Total government income 2013



▲ Total government expenditure 2013

In groups

1 The Liberal Democrats and the Labour Party have proposed to introduce a 'mansion tax' on homes worth over £2 million, as a way of raising more money for the government. Are you for or against the idea of a mansion tax?

2 Discuss the view that the Scottish Parliament should have control of its own taxes and revenue.

For your file

The amount of money you pay in income tax varies from year to year. Research what the current rates of taxation are. Is the system fair? Write your views on the income tax system.

Cutting public spending

The National Debt is the total amount of money that the government of the United Kingdom has borrowed from the private sector. The interest paid annually on the National Debt exceeds the amount spent on the defence budget.

Because in the past Britain has borrowed so much money, the government is committed to making cuts in public spending. But there is disagreement about where the cuts should be made.

"The increasing threat of terror attacks means that we cannot afford to spend less on security. Besides, if we are to continue to see a reduction in crime, we mustn't reduce the number of police officers."

"Already our roads are inadequate for the weight of traffic they have and many are full of potholes and in a bad state of repair. We must ensure that we continue to maintain and improve our transport network, and that means building high-speed rail links and a new runway for London, not cutting our investment in transport."

"As the population ages, more and more people will require medical help. The health budget must be protected, not cut. Expensive treatments should continue to be available to all who need them."

"The birth rate has risen in recent years, so we need to build new primary schools. Also, having an educated workforce is the key to our future prosperity. It would be foolish to spend less on education."

"Already, the defence budget has been cut so that we no longer have as large a number of armed forces. At a time when the world needs to take action against ISIS, we need to be prepared, if anything, to spend more on defence."

"Social services are essential, if we are to protect vulnerable people."

"Our house-building programme has stalled in recent years. To accommodate the rise in our population, we need to build more houses, not cut back on the number we build."

"There are large numbers of families who cannot make ends meet. They are living in poverty and need the benefits that they can claim. In a caring society, we should not expect the poorest to bear the brunt of any cuts. It would be wrong to cut the benefits bill."

"If we don't spend money on the environment, we'll all suffer the consequences in the future."

"It is important to support less economically developed countries and to send aid to countries in which there are refugees from conflicts, in which there have been natural disasters, such as floods and earthquakes and epidemics of diseases, such as Ebola. It would be selfish of us not to give money in international aid."

For your file

Draft a letter to the Chancellor saying why one particular department should not have its budget cut.

In groups

Discuss these statements. Which departments should have their budgets ring-fenced and not have any cuts at all? If you were Chancellor of the Exchequer, which department budgets would you cut?

Voting and elections

Aim To understand how Parliament is elected, to explore different systems of election, and to discuss what can be done to improve voter turnout

You and your vote – elections

Elections are held to choose people to represent us – in the House of Commons, the European Parliament, in regional assemblies, and on local councils. You have to be 18 or over in order to vote.

First past the post

The country is divided into 650 areas, known as constituencies. One member of Parliament (MP) is elected in each constituency.

The present system of voting is known as 'first past the post'. It produces clear election results – the candidate with the most votes wins.

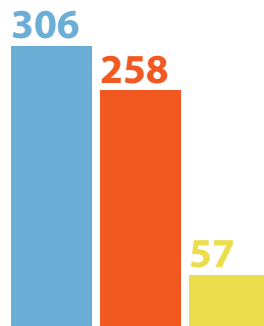
Proportional representation

However, the 'first past the post' system does not allow a candidate to be elected on a minority of votes. For instance, one candidate may get 40% of the votes, another 35% and another 25%. Over 60% of the voters have not supported the winning candidate – but they have not been allowed to register a preference for more than one candidate.

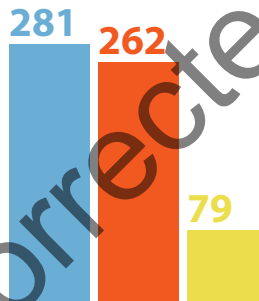
The alternative is proportional representation (PR) where candidates can register a preference for more than one candidate and the result is that the number of votes a party receives reflects closely the final number of seats that the party gains in the House of Commons.

Critics of PR argue that it does not allow close links between a single MP and a small constituency as, instead, a group of MPs would represent a larger area. Also, PR does not produce decisive results with one party with an overall majority.

First past the post
System we have now – the candidate with the most votes wins



Alternative vote
If no candidate gains a majority on the preferences, then the second-preference of the candidate who finished last out count are redistributed. This process is repeated until someone gets over 50%.



▶ How different voting systems would change the make up of Parliament
(Source: Guardian Online)

The Alternative Vote

Under this system, voters list candidates in their constituency in order of preference rather than voting for just one candidate. If a candidate receives 50% of the vote they are elected. But if no one achieves that, the second choices for the least popular candidate are redistributed. That process is repeated until one candidate gets an absolute majority.

When a referendum was held in 2011 on whether to change the system of electing MPs to the Alternative Vote system, over two-thirds of voters voted against changing the system.

In groups

- 1 Discuss which system of election you prefer and why.
- 2 Should there be a system of PR to ensure all parties are fairly represented? Or is it more important for each local area to have one dedicated MP?



▲ In 2014, 84.5% of those registered to vote voted in the referendum on whether Scotland should become independent, including 80% of 16- and 17-year-olds.

Is it worth voting?

Some people don't vote because they forget, or to make a political statement. Many people simply do not care, or feel that their vote does not make a difference. This is known as 'voter apathy'.

In the 1950 general election, 83.9% of registered voters voted. But at the 2001 general election only 59.4% voted and the figure was 61.4% in 2005 and 65.7% in 2010.

Only 44% of 18–24 year olds voted in the 2010 general election.

In local elections the turnout is even lower, usually between 30% and 40%.

Get Out the Vote

'Get Out the Vote' aims to get more people to vote. Suggestions for ways of encouraging people to vote include having polling stations in supermarkets, holding elections on Sundays and allowing internet voting. It has even been suggested that a lottery could be run with each person who votes been given a lottery ticket.

In other elections, even fewer people vote:

- In 2014, only 34% of those eligible to vote voted in the elections for the European Parliament.
- In local elections the turnout is usually between 30% and 40%, but in some areas is as low as 20%.
- In the election for the London Mayor in 2012 the turnout was 37.4%
- In 2012 only 15% of the local electorate voted to choose a police and crime commissioner for their area.

In groups

- 1 Why is there so much voter apathy? Why is the turnout lower for European and local elections than for general elections?
- 2 Over 30 countries have compulsory voting. Should voting be made compulsory for all UK elections?
- 3 Would you vote in a general election, a local council or European election? Give reasons for your views.
- 4 Discuss the 'Get out the Vote' suggestions. Which do you, think would be most effective?

Devolution

Regional government

In the past two decades the UK Parliament has transferred certain powers to the Scottish Parliament and to the Northern Ireland Assembly and Welsh Assembly. This transfer of power is known as devolution.

The Scottish Parliament

The first elections to the Scottish Parliament were held in 1999. There are 129 Members of the Scottish Parliament (MSPs). The Scottish Parliament has the power to make new laws for Scotland concerning health, education, transport, the environment, social services and housing.

During the debate before the referendum on whether Scotland should become independent, the leaders of the three main political parties promised further devolution of powers if Scotland voted no to independence, but they could not agree on the details. These further powers, including the power to vary the rate of income tax in Scotland, are due to be devolved in 2015.

The Welsh Assembly

The Welsh Assembly was created in 1999, following a successful referendum for devolution in 1998. Unlike the Scottish people, the Welsh did not vote in favour of tax-raising powers for Wales and the Welsh Assembly had limited powers. However, in a second referendum in 2011, the Welsh people voted for the Assembly to be able to make laws in 20 areas including health, education and the environment. A third referendum is planned which would give the Assembly some tax-raising powers.

The Northern Ireland Assembly

After the Good Friday Agreement in 1998 the UK Parliament ended the direct rule of Northern Ireland by devolving certain powers to the Northern Ireland Assembly. Power is shared by the Protestant members and the Catholic members of the Assembly. The Assembly has the power to make laws on most everyday issues that affect the people of Northern Ireland. The UK Parliament continues to make decisions on areas such as defence and foreign affairs.

London

In England, regional government has been introduced in London which has an elected mayor and a London Assembly with 25 elected members. The mayor is responsible for policing, transport, housing, planning and development, and a range of environmental issues including waste disposal and air quality. Greater Manchester is to have an elected mayor with similar responsibilities from 2017 and plans are being made for other cities such as Liverpool and Newcastle to be run by mayors.



In groups

Now that the Scottish Parliament is being given more powers, should further powers be devolved to the Welsh and Northern Ireland Assemblies? What do you think about Greater Manchester having an elected mayor? Do you think it is a good idea to have directly elected mayors in cities such as Liverpool, Sheffield, Newcastle and Birmingham?



In groups

1 “The Scottish referendum was badly thought out. English people who lived in Scotland had a vote, but Scottish people who lived in England didn’t. And why did 16-year-olds suddenly get to vote when the age has always been 18? Thank goodness the United Kingdom survived.” Discuss this view.

“Devolution is fine for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, but we don’t need an English Parliament.” Jill, Norfolk

“I’m in favour of devolution, but that’s far enough – there shouldn’t be independence for either Scotland or Wales.” Andrew, Aberdeen

“Devolution isn’t enough. We need to run our own affairs and have full independence for Wales.” Alwyn, Cardiff

Discuss these views and say why you agree or disagree with them.

2 Many people in England think that there should be English Votes for English Laws (EVEL). Should only MPs for English constituencies vote on English laws?

The devolution debate

As a result of Scotland having its own Parliament, the Scottish Nationalist party voted to have a referendum on Scottish independence. After a bitter campaign, a referendum was held in 2014 and the Scottish people voted to remain part of the United Kingdom.

However, the fact that the Scottish Parliament is to have further powers devolved to it has led many people in England to debate the issue of whether more power should be devolved to the English regions. Opponents of devolving power to the English regions point out that when a referendum was held in 2004 on the proposal to devolve limited political powers from the UK Parliament to an elected regional assembly in North East England the proposal was rejected by 77.9% of voters. Since the margin of defeat was so large, referenda which were planned in the North West, Yorkshire and the Humber were postponed and then dropped.

The idea of having a separate English Parliament has gained little support, since it is argued that laws relating to England can be made at Westminster. One idea is that when the Westminster Parliament is making a law that affects England only, then only the MPs who represent English constituencies would be allowed to vote on it. The Labour Party supports the idea of holding an English constitutional convention which would consult opinions before deciding how to proceed.

Democracy

Aim To understand different forms of government and what the key characteristics are of the UK's political system

Democracy and the UK political system

DEMOCRACY means 'people power'. In the UK, we have representative democracy – representatives are elected to make decisions on our behalf. These representatives are the MPs who sit in the House of Commons.

Representative democracy allows the opinions of a large number of people to be heard. It also allows speedy decision-making – it would be impossible for all 60 million people in the UK to be involved in every decision that is made.

However, representative democracy can create a distance between ordinary people and the politicians they elect to work on their behalf. In addition, very few independent politicians are elected. Instead, politicians form parties to achieve their aims and objectives.

Politicians try to keep in touch with the people they represent in a number of ways. Political parties organise focus groups to find out people's opinions and concerns and communicate with the public through the press, TV and Internet.

Individual MPs meet their constituents by attending local events and running surgeries where people can go to discuss issues and problems. They also distribute regular newsletters throughout their constituencies.

Different political systems

Here are four examples of other forms of government.

China – a Communist state

In China, there is only one political party, the Communist party. All others are forbidden. Views are sought at a local level, then passed upwards to a regional level, and finally to a national level. Supporters of this system call it 'grassroots democracy' as decisions flow upwards from a local area to the centre. Critics say this prevents freedom of speech and that it is open to corruption.

▼ Tens of thousands of students march towards Tiananmen Square in Beijing, 4th May 1989



Switzerland – direct democracy

In Switzerland, the government is a loose collection of areas called cantons (devolved government). Many decisions are made by the local population via referenda. This is known as direct democracy, allowing people a direct say. The system can be expensive, as holding referenda costs money and different decisions can be produced in different parts of the country.



◀ Anti-government protest in Tehran, November 2009

In groups

Discuss the similarities and differences between each of the four systems of government. Talk about how living in these countries would be different compared to life in a representative democracy such as the UK.

In groups

“The scandal over MPs’ expenses showed just how much MPs have lost touch with the general public.”

“MPs do their best to communicate with the people they represent.”

Discuss these views. How effective are such things as focus groups in helping people to be involved in policy-making? Suggest other ways that the public can be consulted about political decisions. For example, should there be more referenda on key issues?

Iran – a theocracy

A theocracy is where the government is based on a particular religious group. In Iran, it is a Muslim state. A Muslim leader, called the Ayatollah, holds absolute power.

Iran still has a parliament and a president, both of which are elected. However, they can be overruled by the Ayatollah, who holds absolute power.

In 2009, Iran held a presidential election. The result was challenged by the main opposition candidate. The government responded by cracking down on opposition protests, including intimidating and arresting the opposition, and putting some key figures on trial for treason.



▲ Kim Jong-un, leader of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea

North Korea – a dictatorship

A dictatorship is when one person holds absolute power. North Korea officially calls itself the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea and there are elections. But it is ruled by Kim Jong-un, the leader of a family dynasty, which tolerates no dissent. North Korea has a huge standing army which is used to suppress any opposition.

For your file

“For all its flaws, a representative democracy is the best system of government.” Say why you agree or disagree with this view.