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By Harry Jivenmukta

# WHAT IS REPRESENTATION?

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Representation is a method or process of enabling the citizenry, or some of them, to participate in the shaping of legislation and government policy through the election of representatives who will carry out certain tasks on their behalf.

In large countries the people cannot all assemble, (as they did in the marketplaces of Athens or Rome), and if therefore, the people are to participate in government, they must select and elect a small number from among themselves to represent them.

It is very important that the method used for selecting the representatives is fair so that everyone has confidence in the few who are selected. Various methods and devices have been developed in attempts to solve the many problems that have arisen in connection with representation. These problems include

- z The qualifications of electors (who can vote)
- z The apportionment of constituencies (size of the area, or population in an area)
- z The basis of election (how the election should take place, and how often)
- z Methods of nominating candidates (who can stand for election, how this is decided)

Political parties have come about as a mechanism to act as intermediaries between the citizens and their representatives. Political debate along party lines has become a characteristic feature of most representative systems of government.

How answerable a representative should be to the electorate is an issue that has long been debated. The basic alternatives are that the representatives of the people act as delegates carrying out instructions or that they are free agents, acting in accordance with their best ability and understanding.

## EXERCISE

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1. What does representation mean?
2. Why is it necessary to have other people to represent us?
3. Can a representative ever really properly undertake tasks so that everyone who voted for him or her would be satisfied?

In very small voting groups, where people can meet face to face and may be neighbours or friends as well, voting is mostly informal and may not even require counting, because the “**sense of the meeting**” emerges from the group’s deliberations. An issue is discussed until a solution emerges to which all participants can agree or, at least, from which any one participant will not disagree.

But in modern mass electorates, the standardization of voting practices and vote counting are the rule. This is necessary in order to guarantee that the outcome can be considered valid, reliable, and legitimate.

- z **Validity** means that the collective choice in fact expresses the sense of the electorate.
- z **Reliability** means that each vote is accurately recorded and effectively counted into the total.
- z **Legitimacy** means that the criteria of validity and reliability have been met, so that the result of the voting is acceptable and provides authority in subsequent political conduct.

The development of standardized electoral practices is a very recent phenomenon, not much older than 100 years. There are some basic requirements of a fair voting system, including:

- z **Secret voting.** People who have the right to vote are not all equal (in order of birth, in intellect and educational accomplishment, in social status and the possession of property, and so on). Secret voting is necessary because otherwise there is danger of undue influence, ranging from hidden persuasion and bribery to intimidation and coercion.
- z **Balloting.** The ballot makes secret voting possible. The objective of fair voting can be achieved only if the ballot paper is identical, distributed fairly to all voters, and makes voting easy and understandable by all those eligible to vote.

There are always potential difficulties with all voting systems including:

- z **Corruption.** This is not limited to bribery or intimidation of the individual voter. The possibilities are endless, ranging from spreading rumours about candidates, and deliberately false campaign propaganda, to tampering with the election machinery by stuffing the ballot box with fraudulent returns, dishonest counting or reporting of the vote, and total disregard of electoral outcomes.

The way people vote in elections differs according to the electoral system in place. In some systems people may vote only once in an election, whilst in other systems people may have to return to vote a second or even third time if there is no clear outcome. In some countries, including Australia, it is compulsory to vote, with fines being imposed for people who refuse.

Britain has a political system which is largely two party. This does not mean that there are only two parties in the UK, but that it is likely that only two of the parties are likely to win significantly in elections.

The reason why Britain is a two party system has more to do with how the British electoral system works than because of the absence of a strong third party. In the 1997 General Election the Liberal Democrats gained 17.9% of the votes cast but only 46 seats out of a total of 659 possible. In a proportional representation system, the Liberal Democrats would have won more than 100 seats.

Major influences in the electoral system which are favourable to the two-party system are:

- z The use of single-member constituencies for the election of representatives
- z The candidate polling the largest number of votes is the winner.

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The two-party system is said to promote government stability because a single party can win a majority in the parliament and govern. In a multi-party country, on the other hand, the formation of a government depends on the maintenance of a coalition of parties with enough total strength to form a parliamentary majority. The weakness of the ties that bind the coalition may threaten the continuance of a government in power.

There are potentially three types of political system:

- z One party, (autocratic, monarchy, totalitarian. China is a good example of this)
- z Two party (as in the UK and USA)
- z Multi-party (as in many parts of Europe)

The defining factors about what form of government persists in a country often can be reduced to the electoral system which allows greater or lesser opportunities to smaller parties. The British political scene could be changed completely if the electoral system was changed.

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## EXERCISE

1. Why does the UK have a two party system?
2. What are the advantages of a two party system?
3. Write a paragraph each on the advantages and disadvantages of the one party, and multi-party systems.
4. What is the position of the present government on electoral reform?

The House of Commons is elected for a maximum term of five years, reduced in 1911 from seven. At any time during those five years, the prime minister has the right to request the monarch to dissolve Parliament and call a general election. A government with a working majority is expected to govern for the greater part of its term, though it rarely runs to the end. An early election may take place if there is no working majority, and only three weeks' notice need be given of a general election.

A **General Election** is an opportunity for the British people to vote to choose a new government. The difference between a general election and other elections is that it requires every MP to stand for re-election and gives the country as a whole the opportunity to vote on the record of the government; it allows the people to pass judgement on the performance of the government and its legislative programme, and choose between the parties.

There is potentially an inbuilt advantage for the governing party in that the Prime Minister can decide when to call a general election. The advantage of this can be seen in 1983, when Margaret Thatcher won a huge majority partly as a result of calling an election in the aftermath of victory in the Falkland Islands against Argentina. On the other hand, John Major was criticised for hanging on as long as possible because he knew he had little chance of winning another general election in 1997.

Each party decides on a Manifesto which outlines the policy of the party, and a campaign ensues to convince people that theirs is the best direction for the prosperity of the country. Often there are **key players** in each campaign which is fronted by the leaders of the parties and backed up by campaign managers. Specialist advisers, **spin doctors**, keep an eye on the overall strategy of the campaign and advise changes. Some parties have party **bandwagons**, consisting of coaches, **battlebuses**, or helicopters which go round the country covering thousands of miles in the three weeks before polling day.

The real battle goes on in the **marginal seats**. These are seats where only a small shift of voters can decide who will win. Parties have hit lists of seats which they must win. The party which wins the marginals will certainly form the new government. It is so clear, in fact, that the Conservative party which lost in 1997 already knew within a few days of analysing figures which seats it must regain if it is to have any chance of forming government in the future.

The party which wins the most seats forms the new government and takes over the reins of power immediately.

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## EXERCISE

1. Find out and make a list of the General Election results since 1979.
2. Is it fair that the Prime Minister can choose when to call a general election? Compare this to the system in the USA where elections are held at given times, (Presidential every 4 years, for instance).
3. Do you agree that a general election is decided in marginal seats? Why do parties concentrate on certain seats and not others? Are there any seats which 'belong' forever to just one party?

The correct name for the type of electoral system which is used in the UK is the **Plurality System**. People often refer to it as **first past the post** because it describes the system very well. Put simply, it means a system in which the candidate who polls more votes than any other candidate is elected.

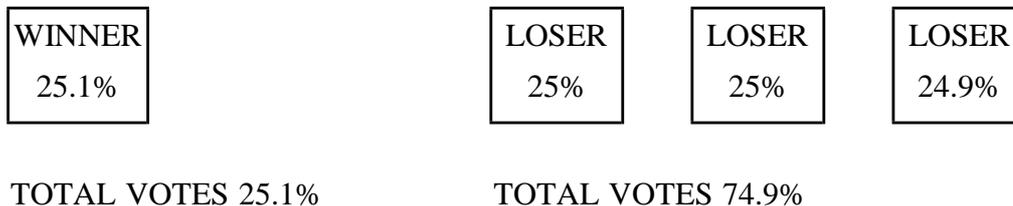
Advantages of the plurality system are that:

- z It is easily understood by voters,
- z Provides a quick decision,
- z Is more convenient and less costly to operate than other methods.

The plurality system is very simple and easy to understand. Often, in systems which use proportional representation, the ballot papers may be very complicated or it may be necessary for voters to return to the ballot box twice or three times before a clear winner emerges.

Where there are only two candidates, the plurality system is perfect, but the main argument against it is that in an election with more than two candidates, it may result in the election of a candidate who has received only a minority of the votes cast.

**EXAMPLE:**



It is possible for the winner to have many less votes than the other candidates put together, and only a few votes more than each of the losers. Although in Britain there has never been a vote as close as the example above, candidates have won with just over a third of the total votes cast. Opponents of this system argue that the winner should have at least 50% of votes cast if the result is to be called democratic.

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## EXERCISE

1. What are the main features of the plurality system of elections?
2. What are the main advantages and disadvantages of this system?
3. Does democracy always mean more than 50% support for it to be legitimate?
4. What effect does the plurality system have on small parties?

# PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION - INTRODUCTION

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**Proportional representation** is an electoral device that seeks to create a representative body that reflects the distribution of opinion in the electorate. Proportional representation ensures **all groups a measure of representation proportionate to their numbers.**

To its supporters the case for proportional representation is fundamentally the same as that for representative government: an election is like a census of opinion as to how the nation should be governed, and only if an assembly represents the full diversity of opinion within a nation can its decisions be regarded as the decisions of the nation itself.

The fundamental question is whether in an election a nation is making a decision, a choice, which is either:

z to achieve a **consensus**: (general agreement, the judgment arrived at by most of those concerned)

or

z a **census** of opinions: (a count of the view most prevalent, not necessarily majority)

The key to proportional representation is the creation of constituencies with multiple representatives. The principle was formulated systematically in the middle of the 19th century by C.C.G. Andrae in Denmark and Thomas Hare and John Stuart Mill in Great Britain. Since then, several methods for applying it have been devised; the best known are the single-transferrable-vote method and the party list system. Put simply, proportional representation in its purest form would give the same number of seats as the party has votes.

**EXAMPLE:** Where there are 200 seats to be filled, PARTY A polls 50% of the votes and therefore gets 50% of the seats (100); PARTY B gets 30% of the votes and therefore 30% of the seats (60); and PARTY C gets 20% of the vote and therefore 20% of the seats (40).

<b>PARTY A</b>	<b>50%</b>	<b>100 SEATS</b>
<b>PARTY B</b>	<b>30%</b>	<b>60 SEATS</b>
<b>PARTY C</b>	<b>20%</b>	<b>40 SEATS</b>

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## EXERCISE

1. What are the advantages of proportional representation?
2. What are the disadvantages of proportional representation?
3. If the UK adopted proportional representation what effect do you think it would have on the size of MP numbers in parliament from the three major political parties?

This is a method of voting for several electoral candidates, usually members of the same political party, with one mark of the ballot. It is used to elect the parliaments of many western European countries, including Switzerland, Italy, the Benelux countries, and Germany. Electors vote for one of several lists of candidates, usually prepared by the political parties. Each party is granted seats in proportion to the number of popular votes it receives. There are several rules for computing the number of seats awarded to a party, the best known being the “**d’Hondt rule**” and the “**largest-remainder rule**.” Seats are usually awarded to candidates in the order in which their names appear on the lists.

## EXAMPLE

Given that there are 10 seats at stake:

In this system if the **RIGHT PARTY** got 60% of the vote and the **LEFT PARTY** got 40% of the vote, then the right party would receive 6 seats and the left party 4 seats.

Some people criticise this system because the list is drawn up usually by the party. Some people may prefer the party but not the order of the candidates on it. Sometimes the voter feels that there is less freedom in this system because they cannot vote for a locally chosen candidate and people who are selected may have no real understanding or sympathy for their particular local needs. The system is, however, very fair and democratic.

<b>THE LEFT PARTY</b>	<b>THE RIGHT PARTY</b>
<b>LEFT 1</b>	<b>RIGHT 1</b>
<b>LEFT 2</b>	<b>RIGHT 2</b>
<b>LEFT 3</b>	<b>RIGHT 3</b>
<b>LEFT 4</b>	<b>RIGHT 4</b>
<b>LEFT 5</b>	<b>RIGHT 5</b>
<b>LEFT 6</b>	<b>RIGHT 6</b>
<b>LEFT 7</b>	<b>RIGHT 7</b>
<b>LEFT 8</b>	<b>RIGHT 8</b>
<b>LEFT 9</b>	<b>RIGHT 9</b>
<b>LEFT 10</b>	<b>RIGHT 10</b>

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## EXERCISE

1. Do you think that the party list system would be a good method of choosing a government in the UK? Why?
2. What is the advantage of locally selected and elected candidates?
3. Are people who are elected in this manner more or less effective in the following:

**In government,  
To local people and particular needs,  
As members of their party.**

# THE SINGLE TRANSFERRABLE VOTE

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Under the single-transferrable-vote method, voters rank candidates on the ballot in order of preference. A quota is calculated using the so-called Droop formula (named after its deviser, the Belgian H.R. Droop): the total number of valid votes cast is divided by the number of seats to be filled plus one, and one is added to the quotient. For example, if 200,000 votes are cast and nine seats are to be filled, the quota equals 200,000 divided by ten, plus one, or 20,001.

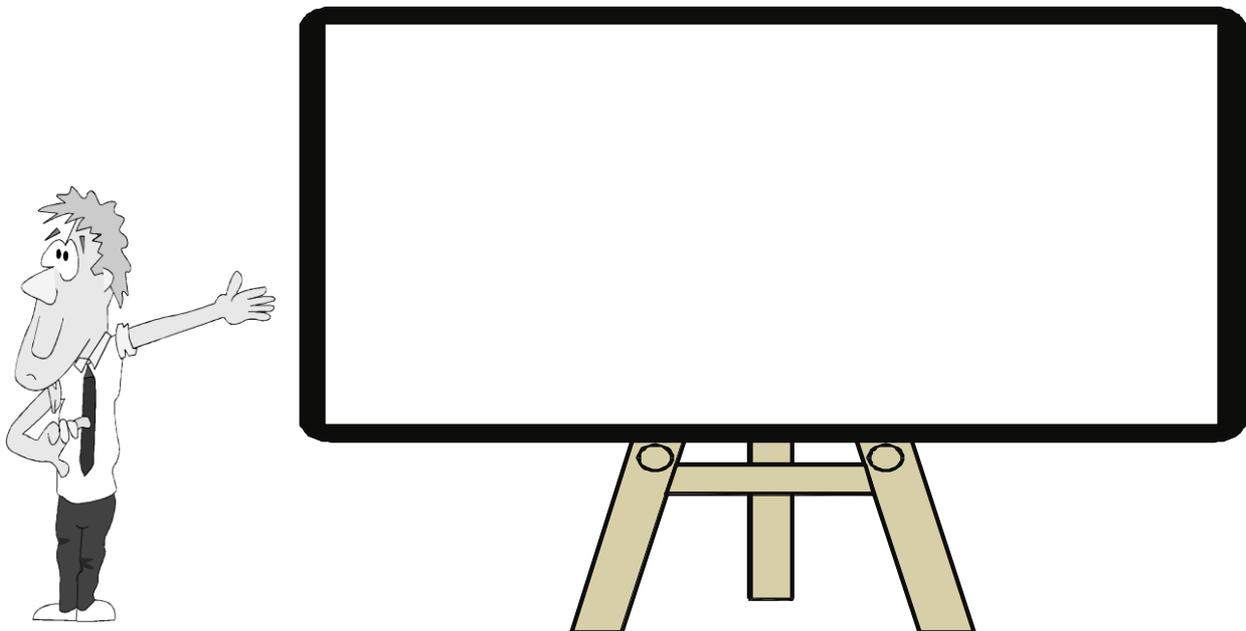
The first preference votes are counted, and any candidate who obtains the quota is declared elected. Votes received by successful candidates in excess of the quota are transferred to other candidates according to the voters' second preferences. Any surplus among subsequently elected candidates is similarly transferred, and so on, if necessary.

If any seats are still vacant, the candidate with the fewest votes is eliminated, and all his ballots transferred to the voters' second preferences, and so on, until all seats are filled by candidates obtaining a quota. In this way the results reflect fairly accurately the preferences of the electors and, therefore, their support for both individuals and parties.

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## EXERCISE

Write a summary of the basics of the Single Transferrable Vote system so that most people can easily understand it. Use diagrams if required.



1. What are the main problems associated with the single transferrable vote system?
2. What would happen if you only wanted to vote for one candidate and had no other preferences?
3. Why is this type of voting system popular?

# A REFERENDUM

A referendum is an electoral device by which voters may express their wishes with regard to a particular government policy or proposed legislation.

In the UK referendums are very little used because many people accept that the government has already been fairly elected so there should be no need for them to have their ideas tested again.

In some countries, however, it is compulsory to hold a referendum for certain legislation. For example, constitutional amendments proposed by legislatures in most of the states of the United States are subject to obligatory referendum.

It is likely that referendums will become more popular in the UK in coming years. The most recent referendums held in the UK were the ones relating to increased autonomy for Wales and Scotland, held in September 1997. It is also likely that referendums will be used when Single Currency issues arise and the UK has to decide whether to join in the scheme.

The main advantage of holding a referendum is that the government can stamp its authority on policy decisions by getting a 'thumbs up' from the electorate on its policy programme. Many people think that the Conservative Party could have saved itself from electoral annihilation in the General Election of 1997 if John Major had called a referendum on the UK's position in Europe. On the other hand, a referendum can 'backfire' if the electorate decide against the issue and leave the government with red faces and force it into a policy reversal.

As a tool of government, the referendum is sometimes controversial because the validity of it depends on how the questions it asks are expressed. It is important that the question posed should not be 'loaded' either to encourage or dissuade people to vote in a particular way. Sometimes two or more questions can be asked in one referendum. The recent Scottish devolution referendum, for instance, asked two questions: one regarding whether there should be devolution; the second asking whether any new Scottish Parliament should have tax raising powers.

## EXERCISE

1. What are the main advantages and disadvantages of referendums?
2. Make a list of referendums held in the UK in the last 30 years. Were there other issues on which referendums could have been held?
3. Design a referendum question, or more than one if required, which could be used to decide the Single Currency issue, and whether the UK should join. Remember that you must not be biased in your question formulation.

## REFERENDUM

**NB** You may use **REFERENDA**, or **REFERENDUMS** as a plural expression of **REFERENDUM**. Traditionally a **-DA** ending has been used but a **-DUMS** ending seems to be more popular now.

The present system has persisted for too long and is unfair because:

- z The MP elected often does not have a majority of the votes cast.
- z The House of Commons does not represent the people because the number of MPs which the government has in no way reflects the number of votes it received at the General Election. For instance, the Labour government elected in 1997 had 44.4% of the votes cast but has 419 seats. Proportionately there should have been about 300 Labour MPs.
- z Small parties are never properly represented. In the 1997 General Election the Liberal Democrats received 17.2% of the national vote and should have received over 100 seats instead of only 46.
- z Constituencies are represented by only one MP who having won on a minority vote doesn't have the confidence of the rest of the constituents. Multi-member constituencies would be more representative, as well as offering a wider variety of expertise that two or more MPs could offer.
- z The term of a government should be set to four or five years. At present the government has an advantage because the prime minister can call an election at any time and so coincide it with an event which brings temporary good news and distort the truth about its performance.

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## EXERCISE

1. Do you think that electoral reform is needed in the UK?
2. Which alternative system would be best for the UK? Why?
3. How does a fairer electoral system help or hinder the effective implementation of government policy?
4. Find out about the electoral systems of two other countries. How do they compare to the present UK system?

- z The British electoral system has persisted for a very long time and that is the best reason for keeping it - it works.
- z The present system is very simple. Everyone understands it. We don't want a system like some in Europe where you need to vote in a complicated fashion which you might not understand.
- z In a proportional representation system there is never likely to be a single party with enough seats to form an effective government.
- z Because parties have to compromise to form a government the policies that you voted for may be dropped by your party in order to satisfy the other parties in the coalition.
- z There is a chance that there may be very unstable government because sometimes coalitions only last for a few months before they start disagreeing and another election has to be called. In Italy there have been more than one government for each year since 1945. That is not desirable.
- z The present system is part of our collective history and culture. Every time something which works is changed it is another part of our heritage which is being lost in favour of some new and possibly untried system.

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## EXERCISE

1. Is it not true that because it has worked well for many years that it would be foolish to change the British electoral system?
2. Does a coalition government always mean disagreement and problems?
3. Are proportional representation systems difficult to understand? Why is this?

When studying the relative electoral success or failure of the Labour party is it necessary to look at the history of the party and how its policy and ideology affected its appeal and popularity.

In 1900 the Trades Union Congress cooperated with the Independent Labour Party (founded in 1893) to establish the Labour Representation Committee, which took the name Labour Party in 1906. It emerged from the 1918 general election as the second largest party in the House of Commons, thus becoming the official opposition after the war.

In January 1924, with Liberal support, Ramsay MacDonald formed the first Labour government, which fell the same year. In 1929 Labour again obtained enough votes to form a Liberal-supported administration, which lasted until 1931, when disagreement over economic policy led MacDonald to resign and form a coalition government composed of Liberals and Conservatives. Labour was heavily defeated in the ensuing election and remained out of office until 1940, when Labour ministers joined Winston Churchill's World War II coalition government.

In 1945, after leading the country to victory in the Second World War, Churchill expected to win the election for the Conservatives. However, the Labour Party won a resounding electoral victory and was able to implement an ambitious program of domestic reforms. Postwar economic recovery proved slow in the meantime, however, and in the 1950 election Labour's majority in the House of Commons was reduced to five; in 1951 it lost power to the Conservatives.

Throughout the 1950s the question of whether, and how, to adapt the party's traditional socialist approach to an affluent society--especially the question of the nationalization of industry--divided Labour's ranks. "Bevanites" (followers of Aneurin Bevan) wanted a more socialist economic policy and less dependence on the United States; the "revisionists" wished to drop the commitment to nationalization of industry. The Labour Party did not regain power until 1964 under Harold Wilson, who was prime minister until 1970. The party again held power from 1974 to 1979, first under Wilson and then (from 1976) under James Callaghan. During these years Britain's worsening economic problems allowed the party little opportunity for any new social initiatives.

After Labour's defeat by the Conservative Party in the election of 1980, the left wing and the trade unionists expanded their power within the party

Under Michael Foot, the left-wing party leader (from 1980) Labour was overwhelmingly defeated by the Conservatives in the 1983 elections. Foot was replaced by Neil Kinnock, who tried to enhance the party's popular appeal by ridding it of its major left-wing policies--unilateral nuclear disarmament, union power, and heavy taxation. The new policy of moderation did not win elections, however, and Kinnock resigned as party leader after losing the elections of 1992. In 1995 the Labour Party formally abandoned its long-standing commitment to the government ownership of industry.

Tony Blair reformed many parts of the Labour Party including its structure and ideology. Moving from left wing to centre left, Blair managed to appeal to disaffected middle class voters whilst holding on to most of the traditionally labour voters and secured a landslide in the General Elections of 1997.

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## EXERCISE

Consider the following points and say how they affected the electoral prospects of the Labour Party:

What was Labour's attraction after the second world war which caused a landslide?

How has its traditional links with trade unions affected its electability?

How did issues like Nationalisation and Nuclear Disarmament affect its chances?

Why was Labour in the 'political wilderness' from 1979 to 1997?

The Conservative Party has been the most successful political party in the UK in the twentieth century, forming more governments and holding power for more years than any other party. The party has three main elements:

- z The National Union of Conservative and Unionist Associations,
- z The Central Office,
- z The Parliamentary Party

At the local level, the party is organized into constituency associations, whose executive committees have the important function of selecting and screening a prospective parliamentary candidate for the constituency. The local associations are organized into the National Union of Conservative and Unionist Associations, the Central Council of which is made up of the party leader, other prominent Conservatives, and representatives from the local constituency associations. The Central Office, whose chief officers are appointed by the party leader, has the primary task of guiding the work of the party throughout the country. Within Parliament, Conservative members are organized into a group known as the 1922 Committee (so called because it first met in 1922).

By the late 20th century, the Conservative Party's most important guiding principle was its faith in private enterprise and the private ownership of property as the best means of developing national wealth. The party draws its greatest strength from the upper and upper-middle classes, with the support of landowners, businessmen, corporate managers, and the upper ranks of the professions. Less than 20% of the party's membership comes from the working class, though it nevertheless enjoys the electoral support of 30% of that group. The party is strongest in rural and non-industrial areas and in suburban constituencies.

In recent years the Conservative party has been involved in a very damaging self destructive struggle over Europe, and the position that it should take regarding the single currency amongst other matters. Failing to show a united front at all levels - constituency, cabinet and in Parliament, they were badly mauled in the General Elections of 1997, and are now in a process of re building

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## EXERCISE

1. List the Conservative governments of the twentieth century.
2. What are the main issues which divide the Conservative Party?
3. How important is unity in ensuring electoral success?
4. How is the Conservative party trying to reform itself in order to recover its position as a viable party of government?

The British electoral system is very hard on small parties. The Liberal Democrats poll about 20% of votes in elections as a whole yet only have 46 seats in the current parliament, its highest number for years. It should be remembered, however, that the Liberal Democrats are the second best represented party in local councils. The reasons for these are various, including very well organised campaigning locally. This doesn't translate at constituency level partly because electors feel that only the two largest parties have any real chance of winning and they don't want to 'waste' their vote.

The performance of the Liberal Democrats in the 1997 General Elections can be put down to two main factors:

- z A genuine feeling that the Liberal Democrats have a valid policy position.
- z Whenever the Conservatives do badly, Liberal Democrats benefit because disaffected Tories cannot find it in themselves to vote Labour.

The Liberal Democrats find it very difficult to find a role in Parliament because they are not the official opposition and so have little right to determine the way Parliament operates in terms of time allocation and issues debated. Paddy Ashdown, the Liberal Democrat leader was, however, offered an assurance by the Prime Minister in 1997 that in matters of devolution, electoral reform, and reform of the House of Lords the Liberal Democrats would be jointly involved.

It is clear that if any electoral reform happens, the main beneficiaries would be Liberal Democrats who can expect their numbers to increase to over 100 in the House of Commons. Some people believe that electoral reform would ensure that the Labour Party and Liberal Democrats working together would mean that the Conservative Party would **never** again be in a position to form a government.

Electoral reform would certainly mean that no single party would be able to form a government on their own, but the Liberal Democrat position of a government by consensus would be achieved.

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## EXERCISE

1. Why do the Liberal Democrats find it difficult to win many seats in Parliament?
2. Why do you think the Liberal Democrats find it easier to win local council seats?
3. Is electoral reform a good idea? Will it definitely benefit the Liberal Democrats?
4. Should there be a role for a third party in British politics? Aren't two parties enough?

There is no doubt that British elections are becoming more reliant on and affected by the media. From 'meet the leader' type interviews to Tony Blair's fleets of helicopters criss crossing the country, image and media play a huge part in elections today. No-one seems able to make a move without consulting opinion polls, and the days of shabbily dressed politicians knocking on doors is long gone.

In the age of massive opinion researches and with the aid of speech coaches and make-up artists and the magic impact of television, it has become increasingly possible for image makers to create front men who can affect the votes and other behaviour of very large percentages of a national audience. As one knowledgeable participant phrased it:

There are now four essential ingredients to a professionally managed political campaign:

- z Political polls,
- z Data processing,
- z Imagery,
- z Money.

Using these four categories the strategy continues:

- z The polls discover what the voter already believes.
- z Data processing interprets and analyses the depth of voters' attitudes.
- z An image of the candidate is tailored to meet the voters' demands and desires.
- z The whole package is then sold by massive expenditures of money in the advertising media, particularly television.



The candidate has become relatively unimportant as long as he can be properly managed. The candidate must be bright enough to handle the material furnished to him, but not too intelligent, because there is always the danger that an intelligent candidate may come up with unpopular or controversial ideas of his own, and thereby destroy a carefully contrived campaign strategy.

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### EXERCISE

1. Do you agree with the comments above that electoral strategy can be reduced to simple marketing rules?
2. Are people more discerning than the comments suggest, or are they impressionable and easily convinced?
3. How do you think political campaigning will develop in the future?
4. Compare election campaigning in the UK with campaigns in other countries.

The press, radio, and television are usually less important than the immediate social environment when it comes to the formation of attitudes, but they are still significant. They focus the attention on certain personalities and issues, and many people then form opinions about these issues. Government officials have noted that their mail from the public tends to “**follow the headlines**”; whatever is featured in the press at a particular moment is likely to be the subject that most people write about.

The mass media can also activate and reinforce attitudes. Political attitudes, for example, are likely to be activated and reinforced just before an election. Voters who may have only a mild preference for one party or candidate before the election campaign starts are often worked up by the mass media to a point where they not only take the trouble to vote but may contribute money or help a party organization in some other way.

The mass media play another extremely important role in letting individuals know what other people think and in giving leaders large audiences. In this way they make it possible for public opinion to include a large number of individuals and to spread over wider geographic areas. It appears in fact that in some European countries the growth of broadcasting, and especially television, has affected the operation of the parliamentary system. Before television, national elections were seen largely as contests between a number of candidates or parties for parliamentary seats. More recently, elections in countries like the UK have appeared more as a personal struggle between the leaders of the principal parties concerned, since these leaders were featured on television and came to personify their parties.



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## EXERCISE

1. What is the '**Media**'? Make a list.
2. Imagine that you have to campaign for a particular issue, (European integration, devolution, electoral reform, reform of the House of Lords etc.), how would you use the media? Consider:
  - z How to attract people to your cause,
  - z How much coverage you need,
  - z Where you need to concentrate your effort most,
  - z How much it would cost,
  - z Who would pay.

Opinion polls are seen to be vital in any election campaign. The aim of an opinion poll is to try to establish how many people support the party or the candidate. Political parties often ask polling companies to conduct opinion polls for them which ask specific questions:

- z which issues are of most concern to you?
- z which politicians can you recognise (putting names to faces etc.)?
- z who will you vote for?
- z do you feel better off than this time last year?
- z what would you like the parties to do about...?

The aim of the opinion poll is two fold: firstly, to assess the mood of the nation to existing strategies and policies; secondly, to sort the answers and so be able to plan a more effective strategy in the future, or continue with the present strategies if the polls say they are working.

Opinion polls can, however, be very wrong. In the General Election campaign of 1992 all the polls predicted a Labour victory. On the night the Conservatives won and threw the whole opinion poll industry into disarray.

In the 1997 General Election the pollsters got it right. the NOP poll for the Sunday Times held one week before polling day predicted a Labour landslide with a projection of 419 Labour MPs and 165 Conservative MPs. In the event Labour won just three less and the Conservatives polled exactly the 165 predicted! Michael Hesiltine had rubbished the polls arguing that on the doorstep the story was different. **"Had Hesiltine been right, no-one would have ever believed the polls again"**, suggested one commentator.

In total, of the 43 surveys carried out in the 1997 campaign, only two were more than 3 percentage points out from the final result, although after the fiasco of 1992 the pollsters were playing down the lead because **"we couldn't believe that a swing like that could happen"**. This illustrates that even those carrying out the polls always had doubts because there was always the possibility of a late 'swing' back to the Conservatives which would catch everyone out.

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## EXERCISE

1. Find out about and chart the rise in importance of the opinion poll.
2. How important is the formulation of the questions in an opinion poll to the accuracy of its findings?
3. Find out what defines a **reliable** opinion poll. This may include the number of people questioned, the way questions are designed and asked, and the geographical areas covered.

## 3 DEFINING ELECTIONS IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

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In the twentieth century there have been three general elections which stand out because of their incredible results. These are;

- z The Liberal landslide of 1906
- z The Labour landslide of 1945
- z The Labour landslide of 1997

1997 saw many records broken, not least the return of 116 women MPs, almost double the number returned in 1992. The Conservative share of the vote was 31.4%, which was the lowest since 1832. The Conservatives had the lowest number of MPs at 165 since 1906 when they had 157.

The Liberal government of 1906 had the largest number of Liberal MPs, winning 400.

In 1997 for the first time the Conservatives returned no MPs at all to Scotland, and none in Wales.

Seven Cabinet members lost their seats compared with five in 1945, and eight in 1906.

The electoral swing from the Conservatives to Labour in 1997 was a massive 10% which is about twice the next largest swing in recent times, (1979 Labour to Conservative 5.2%). In 1945 the swing to Labour was the highest ever at 12%.

The number of Labour MPs returned in 1945 was 393 to the Conservatives 213, overall majority of 146. In 1997 the overall majority won by Labour was 179, the highest in Labour's history.

The Liberal democrats had their best result in 1997 for almost 70 years, winning 46 seats.

The turnout in the 1997 General Election was 71.3%, the record being established in 1992, with 77.7% turnout. The turnout in 1997 was the lowest since the General Election of 1935.

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### EXERCISE

1. Find out more about each of the elections of; 1906, 1945, and 1997.
2. Are there any common factors why there were landslides at these times?
3. What constitutes a landslide?
4. How do landslides affect the status of the losing parties?
5. Write about the effect that a landslide had on the Conservative Party in the 1997 elections.

In the age of the computer it seems ridiculous to many people that in the UK people still have to go through an antiquated voting procedure:

- z Write an X on a piece of paper and put it in a ballot box.
- z Someone collects the boxes and delivers them to the Town Hall or other counting place.
- z Lots of people sort the papers by hand.
- z The collated bundles are counted.
- z All the while people wander up and down the counting aisle to make sure there is no cheating.
- z The results take hours to be counted and declared.

Many people hope that 1997 was the last time people had to use a system little changed since Victorian times. It is hoped that in future general elections, people will be casting their vote at a computerised polling station. This may especially be the case in remote polling stations and constituencies which at present take over 24 hours to deliver a result.

It is hoped that a test for electronic voting could be in a referendum, perhaps on monetary union, which would then give the planners time to reflect and fine tune such a system if required. In a recent poll 53% of people questioned indicated that they would be happy to use electronic voting. The big advantage of this type of voting is that results could be declared minutes after the close of polling.

Electronic voting is already commonplace in some countries. In the Presidential elections in America in 1995, only 2.6% of people voted by putting a cross on a piece of paper. In some other countries, including Canada (Ontario), Smart Cards are being tested which would hold all the personal information of an individual and could also be used to cast a vote at a machine rather like going to a cash dispensing machine to withdraw money.

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## EXERCISE

1. The present system is notable for its good record for accuracy and security against fraud. Why should it be changed?
2. How would an electronic system be better?
3. How can security against fraud be guaranteed in an electronic voting system?
4. Could electronic voting have other implications on the electoral system as a whole?
5. Are electronic opinion polls a good idea, (a box on top of your TV on which you could give your opinion about government policy etc.)?

# 1997 GENERAL ELECTION RESULTS (1992 AND 1987 FOR COMPARISON)

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## 1997 GENERAL ELECTION RESULTS

<b>PARTIES</b>	<b>SEATS</b>	<b>SHARE OF THE VOTE</b>
<b>LABOUR</b>	<b>419</b>	<b>44.4%</b>
CONSERVATIVE	165	31.4%
LIB/DEMS	46	17.2%
OTHERS	29	7.0%

## 1992 GENERAL ELECTION RESULTS

<b>PARTIES</b>	<b>SEATS</b>	<b>SHARE OF THE VOTE</b>
LABOUR	271	34.5%
<b>CONSERVATIVE</b>	<b>336</b>	<b>41.9%</b>
LIB/DEMS	20	17.9%
OTHERS	24	5.7%

## 1987 GENERAL ELECTION RESULTS

<b>PARTIES</b>	<b>SEATS</b>	<b>SHARE OF THE VOTE</b>
LABOUR	229	30.8%
<b>CONSERVATIVE</b>	<b>375</b>	<b>42.3%</b>
LIB/DEMS	22	22.6%
OTHERS	23	4.3%