

# The Era of the Participatory System

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**What is democracy?**  
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Democracy is a political system based on the principle that the government should serve the interests of the people. Abraham Lincoln stated that democracy is government 'by' the people, 'for' the people and 'of' the people.

One viewpoint that defines this term is Representation. This is the process by which citizens support representatives to make decisions on their behalf. Governments can only be truly representative if they mirror a broad cross-section of society.

Another key aspect that helps to define democracy is Legitimacy. Legitimacy is the extent to which a government can be said to have the right to rule. If a government has a large majority it is said to be legitimate. However, low turnout in elections can reduce this legitimacy.

**Turnout of referendums in the UK**

Turnout in UK referendums tend to be very low. The average turnout is 57.7%.

**Should the voting age be lowered?**

Most people think that the voting age should be lowered to increase participation and challenge the current perception of politics that it is boring and irrelevant for the younger generation.

However, some people argue that young people are not able to vote intelligently. Young people do not have the education, life experience or maturity to vote responsibly. It is also argued that it is unfair for them to vote on issues that affect older citizens.

**Should voting be compulsory?**

Voting is a civic duty like paying taxes and therefore some say it should be compulsory. Being compulsory would also make parliament more legitimate. Governments would be forced to consider the wishes of the electorate rather than certain facets.

This would also mean that during campaigning, MPs could focus on policies rather than making people vote.

However, it can be argued that it is undemocratic to force people to vote. It is also expensive to track down those who have failed to cast a ballot. Lastly, it forces those with little interest or knowledge to vote.

**Some UK examples of referendums:**

2005 - Should the UK stay in the EC/EU? Yes 51.1%, No 48.8%

2011 - Should Scotland be an independent country? No 68%, Yes 32%

2016 - Should the UK remain a member of the EU? Yes 51.9%, No 48.1%

**Political participation**

Why, then, do citizens fail to exercise their rights and their willingness to do so. This can happen through: standing for election, being elected, joining political parties, and joining pressure groups.

**Referendums**

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A referendum is a vote on a single important or constitutional issue directly themselves. An example of a referendum in the UK was, 'Should Scotland become independent?'

Parliament and government decide whether a referendum is held. Referendums are only yes or no questions on a single issue. In some countries the outcome of a referendum is binding, however in the UK they are not binding as Parliament remains sovereign.

**Reasons of increasing the number of referendums can prove controversial.**

An example of this is the Scottish independence vote in the UK. This vote was held to be a way to encourage a greater respect for the voters.

**Should referendums be compulsory?**

Compulsory referendums would ensure that all citizens have a say in the most important decisions of the country. This would also ensure that the government is more accountable to the people.

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**Topics of referendums in the UK**

All referendums in the UK have related to the distribution of power between the two main political parties. Some have related to the status of the country as a whole, such as the category of 'major constitutional matters'.

They include the issue of 'devolution' (the only government to offer a referendum on the issue of whether they can devolve powers to their citizens).

**How can we tackle the participation crisis?**

We could:

- 1) Make use of postal voting.
- 2) Use SMS Voting and web-based voting.
- 3) Lower the voting age.

This have all been experimented with but mixed results were given. Although they increased voter turnout, it also led to allegations of voter fraud and intimidation.

**Funding of referendums in the UK**

In the past, governments have been criticised over the different levels of funding available for yes and no campaigns.

An example of the BBC referendum is a 2016 where the 'No' campaign was said to have a significant lead in fundraising.

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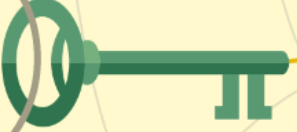
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However, some people argue that young people are not able to vote intelligently. Young people do not have the education and experience to be able to make an informed decision.

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This would also mean that during campaigning, MPs could focus on policies rather than making people vote.

However, it can be argued that it is undemocratic to force people to vote. It is also expensive to track down those who have failed to cast a ballot. Lastly, it forces those with little interest or knowledge to vote.

**Some UK examples of referendums**

2005 - Should the UK stay in the EC? Yes 51.1%, No 48.8%

2011 - Should Scotland be an independent country? No 68.8%, Yes 31.2%

2016 - Should the UK remain a member of the EU? Yes 51.9%, No 48.1%

**Political participation**

Why do citizens care about politics and their willingness to do so. This can happen through: standing for election, being a political party, and joining pressure groups.

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Thereminformation.com is a website that provides information on various topics, including politics and referendums.

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An example of the EC referendum is a 70% share of the campaign cost had to have been spent on campaigning by a no.

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**Topics of referendums in the UK**

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There have been 14 referendums in the UK since 1979. 10 of these referendums were on the topic of 'Major constitutional issues'.

They included the 1979 'Should the UK remain a member of the EC?' and the 2016 'Should the UK remain a member of the EU?'

**Has the UK become 'being democratic'?**

There are several criteria that you have to consider when deciding whether the UK is democratic. These are:

- 1) Voting secretly
- 2) Political parties and freedom of political parties
- 3) One of more members have to participate

**UK's Constitution**

The UK's constitution is uncodified and is based on a number of sources, including statutes, common law, and conventions.

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**Meaning of 'democracy'**

The meaning of 'democracy' is the system of government in which the people have the right to elect their representatives to make decisions on their behalf.

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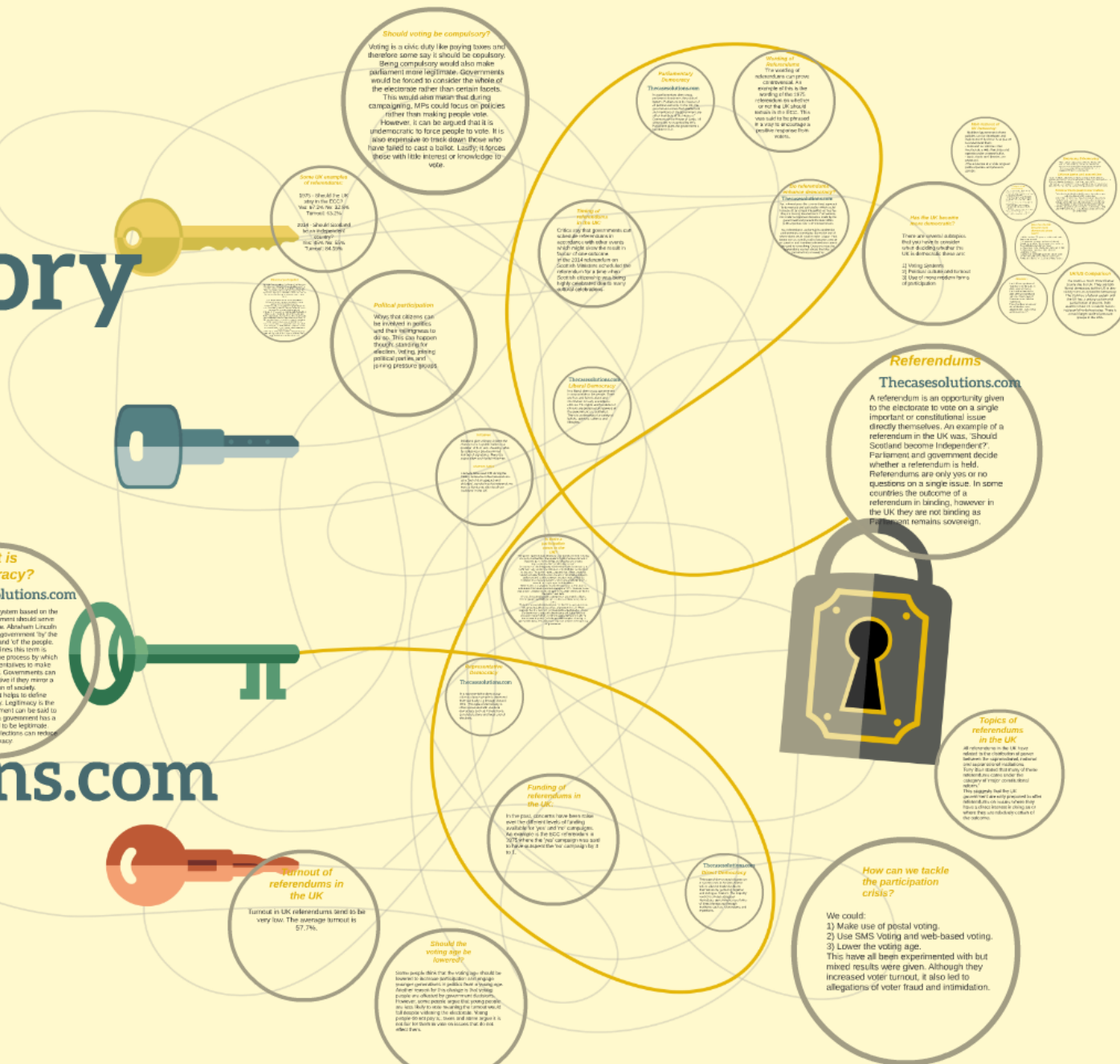
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# *Representative Democracy*

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In a representative democracy, citizens choose people to represent them politically e.g through elected MPs. This type of democracy is often associated with electoral democracy such as EU elections, general elections and local council elections.

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## ***Direct Democracy***

This type of democracy is based on a system used in Ancient Athens where citizens made decisions themselves by gathering together and voting on matters. The majority verdict is always accepted.

Nowadays, governments use forms of direct democracy through mediums such as referendums and e-petitions.

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## *Liberal Democracy*

In a liberal democracy, government is accountable to the people. There are free and fair elections and information is freely available to citizens. The rights and freedoms of citizens are protected and powers of the government are controlled. There is a tolerance of a variety of beliefs, opinions, cultures and lifestyles.

# *Parliamentary Democracy*

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In a parliamentary democracy, parliament dominates the political system. Parliament is the source of all political authority. In the UK, the government comes from parliament and members of the government are either members of the House of Commons or the House of Lords. All citizens are represented by MPs. Parliament gives the government a mandate to rule.

# *Referendums*

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# *Do referendums enhance democracy?*

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Yes, referendums offer a more direct approach to democracy and participation which could increase citizens input into politics as they feel they are making key decisions. Furthermore, referendums legitimize decisions made by the government and prevent divisions within political parties over controversial issues.

No, referendums can be said to undermine parliamentary sovereignty. Excessive use of referendums could result in voter fatigue. Most issues are too complicated to become a yes or no question and therefore referendums cannot be used for everything. Decisions made by referendums are not always final due to parliamentary sovereignty.