Democracy in Scotland and the United Kingdom

Higher Modern Studies

**Topic 5: Participation**





**Topic 5: Participation**

This topic covers the ways in which citizens are informed about, participate in, and influence the political process in the United Kingdom.

You will:

* Learn about the ways in which citizens are informed about and can participate in the political system;
* Learn about the role of pressure groups in the political system and
* Evaluate the influence of pressure groups on the political system.

 **PARTICIPATION**

People in Britain live in a **democracy**. A democracy is where people can **participate** or have a say in how the country is run. They can do this by **voting** for the people they want to run the country and make decisions for them.

Sometimes people feel that they do not have a say, or that the people they voted for are not listening to them. When decisions are being made they feel left out. Other people are not old enough to vote and they also feel left out. They feel excluded from participating. **But voting is not the only way you can have your say and make a difference.** One option is to join a pressure group.

**PRESSURE GROUPS**

A pressure group is an organisation or group made up of like-minded people who have come together because they feel strongly about an issue and wish to see the government take action. Pressure groups may wish to see new laws introduced or existing laws amended or repealed, or they may wish the government to act in a particular way.

Pressure groups give people a chance to have a say, to be heard and listened to, to feel included and not left out. They give those who are not allowed to vote the chance to participate. People who join a pressure group usually have a **very strong** **opinion** about something. They get together and try to put pressure on Councilors, MSPs, MPs and others with power to listen to them and do the things that they want.

One of the main rights people have in a democracy is the right of **Freedom of Speech**. Freedom of Speech means that you are allowed to **give your opinion** on any topic. Other people can disagree with you, but they cannot stop you saying what you think. Pressure groups allow people to use their freedom of speech. There are two main types of pressure groups:

1. **Sectional or Interest pressure groups and**
2. **Promotional or Cause pressure groups.**

A pressure group can also be described as an organised group that does not put up candidates for election, but seeks to influence government policy or legislation. They can be described as ‘interest groups’, ‘lobby groups’ or ‘protest groups’. Some people avoid using the term ‘pressure group’ as it can inadvertently be interpreted as meaning the groups use actual pressure to achieve their aims, which does not necessarily happen. In Britain, the number of political parties is very small, whereas the number of pressure groups runs into thousands; as the membership of most political parties has fallen, that of pressure groups has increased.



Pressure groups vary in size – they could be a small group campaigning about a local issue e.g. the closing down of a school or sports centre, or they could be on a much larger scale like CND (Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament).

The term pressure group is a very wide definition that does not clearly distinguish between the groups that fall under the term. For example, a pressure group can be a fairly large organisation like the CBI (Confederation of British Industry), which claims to represent a large number of large businesses and it can also be a single-issue locally based organisation like CLARA (Central Leamington Area Resident’s Association), which represents fewer than 300 households campaigning to preserve and improve the town of Leamington Spa. The definition also does not distinguish between the more extreme pressure groups such as the Animal Liberation Front (see picture) whose campaigns include illegal activities such as planting bombs and pressure groups such as the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR), which had links to the previous Labour government and regular contact with cabinet ministers.

The aim of all pressure groups is to influence the people who actually have the power to make decisions. Pressure groups do not look for the power of political office for themselves but do seek to influence the decisions made by those who do hold this political power. Often pressure groups find themselves competing with rival pressure groups with the aim of gaining an advantage over them but sometimes groups work together to achieve a common aim.

Pressure groups provide a means of popular participation in national politics between elections. They are sometimes able to gather sufficient support to force government to amend or even scrap legislation. For example, in March 1998 around 300,000 people went to London to protest about the Labour government’s rural policies - the ‘Countryside March’ - the government reacted by announcing plans for a Ministry of Rural Affairs and by publishing a white paper investigating all aspects of rural life.

Pressure groups also provide a means of participation in local politics between elections. For example, in 1994 the A452 Coordination Group campaigned to block plans by Warwickshire County Council to make the A452 a dual carriageway. After the group’s intense lobbying, the council dropped the plans. Pressure groups also act as a sense of specialist knowledge, and often have access to information that is highly valued by decision makers. For example, MENCAP and MIND – groups campaigning on behalf of people with mental disabilities – are often invited to give government briefings. In return, these groups have an input into the making of decisions, and they can also receive financial contributions direct from the government.

**Why are Pressure Groups powerful?**

Participating in a pressure group is more powerful than working alone for a number of reasons:

* More money is available to fund campaigns – often pressure groups will charge their members an annual subscription fee;
* Membership may be nationwide so the message is broadcast across the country;
* Research can be commissioned to support a point of view and experts used to explain this research publicly;
* Force of numbers can be very persuasive and may catch the eye of the media;
* Many people reacting to an issue will give the government an idea of how strongly the public feel about an issue. For example, the campaign to ban handguns in 1997 won enormous public support, leading to the passing of a law banning the private ownership of most handguns;
* Lobbyists can be employed to get the message across to Cabinet Ministers and
* Often, since pressure groups are very knowledgeable and are the experts on an issue, the government will ask for their help when drawing up a Bill, e.g. the British Medical Association on issues relating to the NHS.

**Tasks**

1. What is a pressure group?
2. Why could the term “pressure group” be considered a wide definition?
3. Describe an example where a pressure group has been able to force the Government to produce a White Paper.
4. Why does it help a pressure group if they have specialist knowledge? Give an example.
5. Why is participating in a pressure group more powerful than working alone?





**Types of Pressure Groups**

There are two main types of pressure groups. People participate in decision making through pressure groups because they have a **cause** or an **interest**.

**PROMOTIONAL OR CAUSE GROUPS…**

* Have a particular cause they would like to change. E.g. Age Concern campaign on behalf of the elderly.
* Share a view about how life could be improved.
* Wish to help a particular group e.g. children, the homeless.
* Wish to change public opinion on an issue. E.g. stopping animal testing.

**SECTIONAL OR INTEREST GROUPS…**

* Only campaign on behalf of their members.
* Try to improve economic conditions for their members. E.g. better pay for nurses.
* Try to create better working conditions for their members. E.g. EIS campaigning for better conditions for teachers.
* Are concerned only with the social, political and economic interests of their members. E.g. trade unions.

**Cause (or Promotional) Pressure Groups**

These groups act to promote or highlight a specific political or moral cause rather than the interests of their members. Members of promotional pressure groups are usually people who feel very strongly about something that is happening in society.

Cause (or Promotional) pressure groups endeavour to promote a particular cause, and for this reason are sometimes called ‘cause’ groups. Cause pressure groups are not self-interested in that the achievement of their objectives is not necessarily of direct professional or economic benefit to the members of the group. Examples of promotional/cause pressure groups are Shelter, Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) and Greenpeace.

Because cause groups aim to promote a cause - which might potentially be supported by everybody, regardless of their profession or economic position - membership is not usually restricted. Cause groups may have or may want to have a large membership.

Some cause groups have few members but a great deal of influence. For example, Liberty - a group with 5,000 members - put pressure on the Labour Party, in opposition and in government, to make the incorporation of the European Convention on Human Rights into UK law a priority.

On the other hand, some cause groups have many members but little influence. For example, in the early 1980s over 250,000 supporters of CND marched in London on several occasions. Despite this show of popular support, CND failed to influence the government’s defence policy.

Cause groups can be subdivided according to the aims they pursue. Sectional cause groups aim to protect the interests of a section of society. Attitude cause groups aim to change people’s attitudes about a particular issue or policy.

The following are examples of promotional pressure groups:

**Greenpeace**

It highlights bad things happening to the environment. It puts pressure on the government to promote policies that will care for the environment.

**Amnesty International**

It highlights the bad treatment of people in some countries. It puts pressure on the government to promote policies that will help protect people from being tortured in some countries.

**ASH (Action on Smoking and Health)**

It highlights the dangers of smoking. It puts pressure on the government and all people to promote good health by cutting down on smoking.

**Crimestoppers**



This group highlights the levels of crime in communities. It puts pressure on the government to promote policies that will reduce crime.

**Friends of the Earth**



It highlights the damage some industries are causing to the environment. It puts pressure on the government to promote policies that will prevent environmental damage.

**CND (Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament)**

This group highlights the dangers of nuclear weapons. It puts pressure on the government to promote policies that will lead to nuclear disarmament.

**Interest Groups**

Interest (or Sectional) pressure groups seek to represent the common interests of a particular section of society. These groups act on behalf of their members. Their members make up a specific **section** of society. A section is a small part. Sectional pressure groups highlight the opinions and views of their members.

As a result, members of sectional pressure groups are directly and personally concerned with the outcome of the campaign fought by the group because they usually stand to gain professionally and/or economically. Trade unions, employers’ associations and professional bodies are all sectional groups. The Scottish Secondary Teachers Association (SSTA), the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders, the British Medical Association (BMA), the Confederation of British Industry, the Trades Union Congress and the Law Society are examples of sectional groups.

Because interest groups are solely concerned with a particular section of society, membership is usually restricted to, for instance, lawyers, teachers etc. Since the aim is to look after the interests of all the people in that section of society, interest groups tend to aim to get as many eligible members as possible to join the group.

The following are examples of Sectional / Interest Groups:

**Trade Unions**

They try to put pressure on the Government on behalf of their members.

Their members are the section of society that is employed.

**British Medical Association (BMA)**

This group puts pressure on MPs on behalf of their members.

Their members are the section of society that works in the medical profession, such as doctors and nurses.

**Confederation of British Industry (CBI)**

This group puts pressure on MPs on behalf of their members. Their members are some of the section of society who are owners/directors of some large businesses.

**Insider Pressure Groups**

The government sometimes finds pressure groups quite useful. There are lots of experts in pressure groups. The government can ask them for **information** and **advice**. This can be useful when the government is making decisions about public services like education and health.

It is useful for the government to speak with the teaching unions, for example the Educational Institute for Scotland (EIS), before making a decision about education. Also, it is useful for the government to speak with the BMA, which represents doctors, before making a decision about the National Health Service.

In these cases the pressure groups do not need to put much pressure on the government to be listened to. The government goes to the pressure group for information and advice.

**What if the government does not use pressure groups?**

A pressure group wants the government and as many people as possible to listen to them and agree with them. If the government does not want to listen to a pressure group then the pressure group needs to put more pressure on them to do so. They have to let people know who they are. They have to get noticed. They need **publicity**.

The more that people know who they are, the more that people might agree with them and join them, the more pressure they can put on the MPs to promote policies to help them.

Insider pressure groups have strong links with decision makers and are regularly consulted. Insider pressure groups are the groups that the government - local or national - considers to be legitimate and are, therefore, given access to decision makers. For example, insider groups might be included in regular meetings with ministers or civil servants and they might be included on lists for circulation of new government proposals. The fact that insider groups are part of the consultation process enables them to use direct methods in order to exert influence. Insider groups tend to be very powerful and long-term in terms of political influence. It is more common for interest rather than cause groups to be insiders, although this is by no means always the case.

Insider pressure groups are similar in one respect. Generally, they abide by the ‘rules of the game’. For example, they tend to respect confidences and not to make public attacks on ministers. Insider groups can be further divided into two categories. The first is institutions within the state apparatus. This category includes organisations such as the Church of England and the police force. They can be described as insider groups because they are involved in the consultation process as a matter of course when government proposals relevant to their activities are discussed. The second category is external groups. Whilst institutions within the state apparatus are consulted in the discussion process of governmental proposals, the same is not true of external groups with insider status. Instead they are the independent organisations such as trade unions or charities, which are called upon by the government to provide expertise when it is needed. The type of group selected varies according to the government’s ideological orientation and other factors such as public opinion. So, the type of external groups given insider status varies from government to government.

**Outsider Pressure Groups**

Outsider pressure groups have none of the advantages of insider groups. They cannot expect to be consulted during the policy-making process, nor can they expect to gain access to ministers and civil servants. Rather, they have to work outside the governmental decision making process and, therefore, have fewer opportunities to determine the direction of policy.

In the 1980s, CND (Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament) was excluded from any consultation process with the government because its aim was unacceptable to the Conservative government of the time. An extreme example of an outsider group is the Irish Republican Army (IRA), which seeks a united Ireland and used violence to try to achieve this up until the early 1990s. It was considered an illegitimate organisation by the British government. It was considered anti-constitutional because its violent indirect method - terrorism - was considered unacceptable in a democratic country.

Outsider groups adopt different strategies and can be further subdivided in to two categories. The first are outsider groups aiming for insider status. They do this by waiting for a different political climate, such as a change in government. If such a change materialises, they might immediately gain insider status. Outsider groups hoping for a change in political climate often work closely with the opposition in Parliament and, generally, their strategy is to abide by the ‘rules of the game’. Alternatively, groups seeking insider status may be new groups with little experience, resources and expertise. Decision makers might support their aims but do not consult them because they are thought to have little to offer. In addition there is a category of outsider groups that do not aim for insider status because they are ideologically opposed to the political system. By definition, such groups have no interest in gaining access to governmental decision makers.

**Task**

Using a double page in your jotter, complete **two** mind maps. The first should describe the main features of an insider pressure group. The second should describe the main features of an outsider pressure group.

**Methods Used by Pressure Groups**

Pressure groups want publicity for their campaigns and the issues that they care about. They want to persuade and influence people to join their cause and they use a variety of methods to achieve this.

The methods that pressure groups use can be legal (billboards, peaceful demonstrations) or illegal (Fathers For Justice scaling the walls of Buckingham Palace). Most pressure groups try to stick to legal methods to achieve their aims.

**Letter Writing / Email Campaigns**



If an MP receives one letter or email on an issue he/she may not be very impressed. If thousands of letters or emails arrive, the impression is quite different. Many letters may help to persuade Ministers that there is strong public opinion for or against the issue.

**Lobbying MPs**

This is when representatives from pressure groups meet with MPs to try and get them to listen to their views and either bring up their case in Parliament or speak to Ministers about it.

 Large pressure groups (e.g. the British Medical Association who represent doctors and nurses) employ permanent lobbyists. These are individuals and groups of people who have excellent contacts with government and top decision makers such as leading civil servants. Often such lobbyists are former politicians, former civil servants, leading business people or media consultants. All claim to have access to key decision makers and, for a fee, will work to promote the interests of a pressure group.

**Public Petitions**

Pressure Groups will try to convince MPs and the government about the strength of feelings on an issue by presenting a petition. Often thousands of people will have signed for or against a proposal. Increasingly, e-petitions are being delivered. For example, in 2005, the Make Poverty History campaign, organised by OXFAM, delivered a petition to Downing Street containing hundreds of thousands of names.

**Poster and Leaflet Campaigns**



These draw attention to a campaign and can persuade ordinary people to write to their MPs or take action themselves. For example, animal rights campaigns may use distressing posters of animals being mistreated to try and influence public opinion.

**Marches and Demonstrations**



Thousands, or even tens of thousands can take to the streets with banners, leaflets and loudspeakers. This normally attracts widespread media coverage and can influence the government. Recent demonstrations include marches in London protesting against the British Government’s involvement in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

**The Mass Media**

Pressure groups will use television, radio and newspapers to get their point of views across. Advertisements will be bought, broadcasts produced, stories or research will be given to key journalists and interviews explaining what the group wants to see done will be undertaken. For instance, the protesters against the expansion of Heathrow Airport got wide media coverage. Hundreds of people joined the protest which argued that expanding Heathrow with 3 new runways by 2020 would have a negative effect on climate change. The protest began peacefully but ended with protesters clashing with riot police.

**Methods Used to Influence Law-Makers**

A pressure group can use a variety of different methods to influence law.

Firstly, it can merely inform legislators of its member’s preferences. Second it may well give money or time to help with an election campaign. Third, its members may threaten, as a group, to vote as a bloc. By doing this they promise to help a cooperative legislator, and threaten to harm a non-cooperative legislator. Fourth, a pressure group may speed up legislation by writing bills and helping legislators make progressive agreements. Finally, a pressure group may attempt to influence members of the government, who have some law making input and who can partly decide the strength and effectiveness of law enforcement.

**Task:** Create a mind map showing the methods used by pressure groups to influence law makers.

**Legal and Illegal Pressure Group Action**

The major responsibility which both individuals and pressure groups have when attempting to influence decision making is to obey the law of the land. Also, there is a responsibility to respect the rights of others, ensuring that any action taken does not interfere with or restrict the rights of those who are not involved in a particular campaign.

In recent years a number of pressure groups have taken their protests beyond the law, often restricting the rights of others or in some cases committing serious crimes. Examples include rioting by anarchist groups at the G8 summit, letter bombs from terrorist groups, occupying land illegally as in the Heathrow protest or refusing to pay the poll tax.

Sometimes it is obvious when the law is being broken, but on other occasions the situation is less clear. Some groups such as the Animal Liberation Front take the view that it is right to break the law because they claim that cruelty being inflicted on animals justifies such action.

**Are Pressure Groups Democratic?**

For some, pressure groups are a fundamental part of democracy. To others, pressure groups undermine the whole principle of democracy.

Democracy is a system of government where decisions are arrived at by majoritarian principles with representatives elected at periodic elections where political equality and political freedom allow the voter an effective choice between competing candidates in a secret ballot. How do pressure groups fit in with this concept?

Some argue that pressure groups play an essential role in democracy. Political parties cannot provide adequate representation for the full range of diverse interests and opinions in a modern democracy because their key function is to combine all interests into a coherent political entity capable of governing the country. Pressure groups enable particular interests and causes to be heard and to exert influence in public decision and decision-making.

Some believe that pressure groups help people to participate in politics as most people’s political participation is to cast a vote every five years. This leads to people having little or no influence over decisions made between elections, and minority views not being represented. Pressure groups increase participation and access to the political system, thereby enhancing the quality of democracy. They complement and supplement electoral democracy by providing an important mechanism by which citizens can influence government between elections.

Pressure groups improve the quality of government. Consultation with pressure groups is the rational way to make decisions in a free society. It makes government more efficient by enhancing the quality of the decision making process - the information and advice provided by groups helps to improve the quality of government policy and legislation.

Pressure groups are a product of freedom of association, which is a fundamental principle of liberal democracy. We live in a democratic society and we have the right to protest, the right to question our government and the right to meet and form groups. Pressure groups help us exert our democratic rights.

Pressure groups enable new concerns and issues to reach the political agenda, thereby facilitating social progress and preventing social stagnation. For example, the women’s and environmentalist movements.

Pressure groups assist the surveillance of the government by exposing information it would rather keep secret, thereby reinforcing and complementing work of opposition through political parties. Pressure groups thereby improve the accountability of decision makers to electorates.

However, some believe that pressure groups are not democratic. Pressure groups improve participation, but in an unequal way, benefiting the well organised and well-funded but disadvantaging the weakly organised or poorly funded. In this sense, they work against - not in favour of - the public interest.

Pressure groups themselves may not be representative of their members. Their officers are not usually elected. Few groups have procedures for consulting their members. As a result, the views expressed by group officials may not be shared by the group’s members.

Although the views of pressure groups may sometimes be considered, they are likely to be ignored if they do not confirm with the ideology or agenda of the decision makers.

Pressure group activity gives people hope that they can make a difference. This hope is a distraction. The ruling class would rather that people put their energies into pressure group activities, which do not question the fundamentals of the system than into political activity, which seriously challenges the right of the elite to govern.

Group opposition can slow down or block desirable changes, thereby hindering legislation by the Government.

Large-scale demonstrations mounted by any group may lead to unpleasant clashes with the police, sometimes involving militants with their own agenda. This level of civil disobedience cannot be justified in today’s democratic system. For example, a member of the pressure group Fathers 4 Justice scaled the walls of Buckingham Palace dressed as Batman. Members of a pro-fox hunting group burst into the House of Commons whilst it was in session and threw flour bombs at (then Prime Minister) Tony Blair. Both of these demonstrations showed extreme civil disobedience and in a post 9/11 and 7/7 society were a frightening reminder of the damage terrorists may be able to do.

**So, overall, it can be argued that pressure groups are an essential dimension of any democracy, yet they can endanger democracy if groups undermine the public interest or if the methods they use are corrupt or intimidating.**

**How successful are pressure groups?**

Some pressure groups are successful, some are not.

**A successful pressure group**

**ASH** (Action Against Smoking) **was** successful.

They wanted to promote good health by getting people to stop or cut down on smoking.

Fewer people in the country now smoke.

Across the UK, you are not allowed to smoke in public places now.



**An unsuccessful pressure group**

**CND** (Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament) **was not** successful.

They wanted nuclear disarmament.

They put pressure on the Government for many years, held meetings and demonstrations, wrote letters, made posters and went on to the television and radio to get rid of nuclear weapons.

But we still have nuclear weapons, such as Trident.

**Practice** **End of** **Unit Assessment Task:**

Pressure groups are thought to influence the political system to an extent.

* Explain, in detail, at least two key ways pressure groups are thought to influence the political system.
* Analyse the extent to which pressure groups influence the political system.

The marking instructions for this type of assessment task can be seen on the next page.

**Marking Instructions:**

**Explain, in detail, at least two key ways pressure groups are thought to influence the political system.**

For this part of the task you must explain at least two aspects of a complex political issue.

Your explanation must be supported by points of description.

Each explanation must make at least two developed points which make the political issue clear. Developed points can include, for example:

* additional detail
* examples
* evidence
* reasons
* drawing out implications

**Analyse the extent to which pressure groups influence the political system.**

For this part of the task your analysis must derive from a body of accurate information.

You must move beyond description and explanation of relevant detail.

You must identify at least two relevant aspects/features and clearly show at least one of the following:

* links between aspects
* similarities and contradictions
* consistency and inconsistencies
* different views/ interpretations
* possible consequences/ implications
* a logical order
* relative importance