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POLITICAL PARTIES

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DEBATING MATTERS TOPIC GUIDES

MOTION:

"POLITICAL PARTIES ARE BAD FOR DEMOCRACY"

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH:

Institute of Ideas

FreeParliament

ABOUT DEBATING MATTERS

Debating Matters because ideas matter. This is the premise of the Institute of Ideas Debating Matters Competition for sixth form students which emphasises substance, not just style, and the importance of taking ideas seriously. Debating Matters presents schools with an innovative and engaging approach to debating, where the real-world debates and a challenging format, including panel judges who engage with the students, appeal to students from a wide range of backgrounds, including schools with a long tradition of debating and those with none.

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CONTENTS

KEY TERMS

Constituent

Ideology

Liberal democracy

Representative democracy

Social contract

Whip

NOTES

Political parties are an essential feature of representative democracy in the UK [Ref: Wikipedia], and just a handful of parties have dominated British politics through most of the 19th and 20th centuries. Members of Parliament [Ref: Parliament] are elected to represent their constituents [Ref: Merriam-Webster] whilst simultaneously standing as a representative of a political party [Ref: Parliament]. This system of legislative representation is largely replicated across what is known as 'Western' or 'liberal democracy' [Ref: Wikipedia]. However, in recent times, the role and function of long-established political parties has been in the spotlight, with debate centring on whether they are a help or hindrance to democracy. In the UK the Labour Party is currently divided over its leader and internal democratic processes [Ref: Daily Mail], and previously minor parties, such as UKIP and the SNP in Scotland, have presented a challenge to the strength and roles of mainstream parties in recent years [Ref: BBC News]; in the USA the Republican Party finds itself with a divisive Presidential candidate [Ref: Politico]; and across Europe, post-war parties are under pressure from new political movements [Ref: Guardian]. However, despite this apparent upheaval, as an example, the current leadership contest in the Labour Party has led to a huge surge in membership [Ref: International Business Times], and some argue, a more active engagement between voters and party [Ref: YouGov]. For some, this is an example of political parties being good for democracy, by encouraging participation in the political process, and representing a range of political opinions and ideologies. But others question whether political parties still serve a democratic purpose, and argue that, "political parties do not represent the people; they represent themselves" [Ref: Daily Cardinal], because the role of MPs has been subverted by the competition for power between the two dominant parties in the UK. Is it possible for politicians to truly represent their constituents whilst remaining loyal to their party? Do political parties play a crucial role in the democratic process, by representing vast swathes of the electorate on a host of issues? Or are they the cause of what some call a 'democratic deficit' in British politics today [Ref: Free Parliament]?

For the people or for the party?

Democracy today is far removed from what some see as the idealised depiction of direct democracy of Plato's Athens, where citizens played a direct role in making political decisions [Ref: History.com]. The scale of modern societies, many argue, means that "direct democracy is still not an option on a large scale. Democracies with millions of voters probably still need some kind of representative system" [Ref: Democratic Audit]. In the UK, the electorate votes for a candidate to represent them in Parliament, with their primary role "to represent their constituents, including those who did not vote for them" [Ref: News Hub]. However, some deny that the will of constituents can ever be truly represented, due to the powerful influence of political parties over their MPs in parliament. Describing the role of MPs, the Free Parliament Campaign for instance, says that "although their primary duty is to their constituents, few dare defy the (party) Whip. Not only would their chances of promotion evaporate but they would also face demotion and even withdrawal of their party affiliation" [Ref: Free Parliament]. Ultimately, for critics of political parties, elected representatives "hew to that party line absolutely, speak when they're told to (which is rarely), vote how they're told to, espouse the views their leader tells them to hold, and occasionally come back to your city/town/rural area and get their picture in the paper saying that they're standing up for your interests" [Ref: The Alfalfafield]. Nevertheless, whilst not perfect, supporters argue that political parties are a necessity for democracy, ensuring that a range of ideas are represented, giving voters choice, because "parties pick up demands from society and bundle them into packages. Demands are numerous and sometimes conflicting. Parties are able to discuss and evaluate these issues and shape human needs into policy alternatives" [Ref: IDEA]. Political parties, they argue, allow for the practical application of representative democracy, enabling "those with common values to come together and reach a position on issues that can then be offered up as a choice of programmes for voters" [Ref: Guardian].

The way forward: Independence or collective vision?

For many, it is vital that politicians are able to act according to their conscience, with 18th century British parliamentarian and writer Edmund Burke arguing that an MP, "owes you, not his industry only, but his judgment; and he betrays, instead of serving you, if he sacrifices it to your opinion." [Ref: Speech to the Electors of Bristol, 1774] In this spirit, and as an alternative to the traditional party structure, some advocate the introduction of more independent MPs into parliament to strengthen democracy. Graham Brady MP argues that such a move would ensure "proper scrutiny and challenge" of government, away from "a system that discourages independent thought" [Ref: Telegraph]. As it currently stands, some MPs in parliament are not affiliated to a political party, but instead stand for election on single issue campaigns [Ref: BBC News] or to be free of party direction [Ref: Financial Times]. In theory, supporters argue that if there were more of these independent MPs, "all of the 650 parliamentary seats would be given to individual representatives acting on behalf of their voters" [Ref: Democratic Audit]. However, others disagree, arguing that rather than representing the whim of an individual MP with a specific set of interests and aims, political parties, "combine individual ideas, interests and preferences to a larger vision or plan, often

inspired by or accumulating to an ideology." [Ref: Democratic Audit] They contend that the benefit of political parties to the democratic process is that they, "contribute to the stability of the government", and are "important to the success of democracy" [Ref: Important India], acting as a "strong opposition for sustainable democracy... consistently and responsibly [exposing] the weaknesses of the ruling party and challenging it to deliver on its promises... That way the opposition is able to keep the government on its toes and motivate them to deliver on good governance" [Ref: Guardian].

A crisis of political legitimacy?

Whilst some critics of contemporary UK politics see the problem lying in the structure of the British parliament - the way MPs are elected and the dominance of the two-party system of governance - others point to a more fundamental issue. Political parties in western liberal democracies have traditionally convinced voters "that they will deliver jobs, decent wages, financial stability and enough economic growth...By and large, this is what the parties have done since the 1950s." [Ref: Financial Times]. For these critics, the issue is not a technical or structural one to do with political parties, but instead a crisis of political legitimacy, and a breakdown of the post-war 'social contract'. One commentator, speaking of the current American situation, where both Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump have upset the traditional party establishments, argues that "The social contract is a modern invention. It is the implicit agreement between a state and its people about how a country should be governed. When the social contract works, there is peace in the land...But when the social contract breaks down, as it seems

to be today, people get restless." [Ref: Salon] Across liberal democracies the post-war order is being questioned as seen in the rise of new political movements [Ref: Guardian], and in the UK, politicians "know that their parties, their political vehicles, be they Tory or Labour, no longer have deep roots in wider society", and they are unable to turn "their parties into expressions, representations, of social sentiment, to inspire people, to articulate with clarity the interests and vision of large swathes of the British populace" [Ref: spiked]. So would independent MPs be a solution for what some call our "malfunctioning democracy" [Ref: Guardian]? Or do political parties still play a vital role – holding government to account and cohering people around broad political aims? Are political parties good for democracy?

POLITICAL PARTIES:
"Political parties are bad for democracy"

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[Speech to the electors of Bristol 1774](#)
Edmund Burke

IN DEPTH

[After the vote, the implosion of the political class](#)
Tim Black *spiked* 27 June 2016

[A crisis of trust - and the rise of new political parties](#)
Alberto Nardelli *Guardian* 6 November 2014

FOR

[Britain's two-party political system isn't working](#)
Steve Hilton *Guardian* 20 April 2016

[Political parties are bad for democracy](#)
Thomas Rademacher *Daily Cardinal* 24 February 2016

[The end of the party: how we could be heading for a post-democratic era](#)
Michael Kenny & Nick Pearce *New Statesman* 1 August 2014

[Liberate MPs from their party shackles and give them a free vote](#)
Graham Brady *Telegraph* 7 March 2013

AGAINST

[How American politics went insane](#)
Jonathan Rauch *Atlantic* August 2016

[Why political parties are good for America](#)
David Cole *Odyssey* 15 February 2016

[Political parties improve democracy and it is implausible that it could be successful without them](#)
Ann Kristin-Kolln *Democratic Audit* 6 January 2015

[Political parties must be reformed: they are the best way to deliver democracy](#)
Chuka Umunna *Guardian* 5 January 2014

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BACKGROUNDERS

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The week Democracy died
Yascha Mounk *Slate* 14 August 2016

Are political parties out-of-step with UK voters?
BBC News 11 August 2016

Huge rise in Labour membership figures show Corbyn's strength
Sam Power *The Conversation* 5 August 2016

More democracy within parties, less democracy without
Doug Saunders *Globe & Mail* 30 July 2016

Corbyn's populism is bad for British democracy
Thomas Baker *News Hub* 28 July 2016

Jeremy Corbyn support rises among party members
Luke Chambers *YouGov* 19 July 2016

'Austerity of hope' as Australians lose faith in politics, Liberal strategist Mark Textor says
Shalailah Medhora *Guardian* 10 March 2016

The new social contract: Trump, Sanders, Cruz
Robert Freeman *Salon* 6 February 2016

Towards sustainable democracy in Nigeria: The role of political parties
Ifeanyi Okowa *Guardian* 24 September 2015

Functions of political parties in democracy
Amit Goel *Important India* 21 July 2015

The party system is undemocratic – here's why
Matt Alfalfafield *Alfalfafield* 12 July 2015

Crisis of political legitimacy heralds change at the top in India
The Conversation 1 January 2014

Europe must confront crisis of legitimacy
Tony Barber *Financial Times* 23 April 2012

Britain's would-be independent MPs
Alex Barker *Financial Times* 10 April 2010

Political parties: necessary for democracy?
Matthias Caton *IDEA* 12 March 2007

What MPs do
Parliament

The party system
Parliament

Ancient Greek Democracy
History.com

Political Parties: Past, present and future
Free Parliament

More than 120 Republicans tell RNC to cut off funds to Donald Trump
CBS News 16 August 2016

Parliament still to recover from expenses scandal, says ex-MP
BBC News 14 August 2016

Labour's leadership battle exposes civil war for soul of the party
Financial Times 11 August 2016

Former GOP senator pleads with RNC to replace Trump
Politico 9 August 2016

Labour will SPLIT if Jeremy Corbyn is re-elected leader, warns challenger Owen Smith
Daily Mail 3 August 2016

Cameron's 'cronies' honours list leads to calls for overhaul of system
Guardian 1 August 2016

SNP's bid to replace Labour as Commons opposition rejected
BBC News 29 July 2016

Revealed: Labour MPs go to police over death threats after refusal to back Jeremy Corbyn
Telegraph 29 July 2016

Lord Ashdown launches political movement to stop British politics being 'dragged away to the extreme
Telegraph 24 July 2016

Under pressure from Bernie Sanders, Democrats poised to change how they pick nominees
Los Angeles Times 23 July 2016

Labour leadership: Over 183,000 people register to vote as Corbyn and Smith prepare for battle
International Business Times 20 July 2016

German far right Pegida movement seeking to establish political party, says leader Lutz Bachmann
International Business Times 19 July 2016

Britain delivers stunning rejection to EU
Wall Street Journal 24 June 2016

Reclusive millionaire to fund disaffected MPs in the next general election
Independent 6 March 2016

Independent MPs - can they make a difference?
BBC News 7 March 2015

ORGANISATIONS

Free Parliament

Parliament

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ADVICE FOR
DEBATING MATTERS

FOR STUDENTS

READ EVERYTHING .....
In the Topic Guide and in the news - not just your side of the argument either.

STATISTICS ARE GOOD BUT.....
Your opponents will have their own too. They'll support your points but they aren't a substitute for them.

BE BOLD
Get straight to the point but don't rush into things: make sure you aren't falling back on earlier assertions because interpreting a debate too narrowly might show a lack of understanding or confidence.

DON'T BACK DOWN
Try to take your case to its logical conclusion before trying to seem 'balanced' - your ability to challenge fundamental principles will be rewarded - even if you personally disagree with your arguments.

DON'T PANIC
Never assume you've lost because every question is an opportunity to explain what you know. Don't try to answer every question but don't avoid the tough ones either.

FOR JUDGES

Judges are asked to consider whether students have been brave enough to address the difficult questions asked of them. Clever semantics might demonstrate an acrobatic mind but are also likely to hinder a serious discussion by changing the terms and parameters of the debate itself.

Whilst a team might demonstrate considerable knowledge and familiarity with the topic, evading difficult issues and failing to address the main substance of the debate misses the point of the competition. Judges are therefore encouraged to consider how far students have gone in defending their side of the motion, to what extent students have taken up the more challenging parts of the debate and how far the teams were able to respond to and challenge their opponents.

As one judge remarked *'These are not debates won simply by the rather technical rules of schools competitive debating. The challenge is to dig in to the real issues.'* This assessment seems to grasp the point and is worth bearing in mind when sitting on a judging panel.

FOR TEACHERS

Hoping to start a debating club? Looking for ways to give your debaters more experience? Debaitng Matters have have a wide range of resources to help develop a culture of debate in your school and many more Topic Guides like this one to bring out the best in your students. For these and details of how to enter a team for the Debating Matters Competition visit our website, **www.debatingmatters.com**

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"A COMPLEX WORLD REQUIRES THE CAPACITY TO MARSHALL CHALLENGING IDEAS AND ARGUMENTS"

LORD BOATENG, FORMER BRITISH HIGH COMMISSIONER TO SOUTH AFRICA