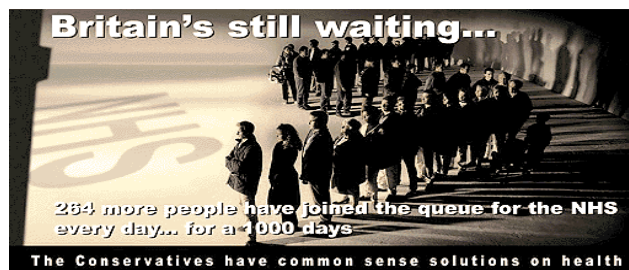




# POLITICS



# AN INTRODUCTION



## PART 1 INTRODUCTION

### What is Politics?

This is an important question to ask at the beginning of your course. Unfortunately there is no, single, simple answer to this question. The first part of this pack considers two approaches to answering the question. Firstly, it looks at the approach that suggests that politics is about resolving conflicts. Secondly, it looks at the possibility of looking at politics as the study of power.

### 📁 Politics as Conflict Resolution

People are social animals. They choose to live together in groups. Because people live together in groups, there is a need to make decisions - about how the resources available to the group are to be shared out, for example, or how conflicts which arise within the group are to be resolved. The study of politics is the study of how such decisions are made.

Since the resources available to any group are limited, questions inevitably arise about how the resources which are available should be distributed. Should everybody have an equal share, for example, or do some people deserve a bigger share than others? Since it is possible to increase the resources available to a group (by conquest, technological advance or better management of existing resources), further questions arise. For example, what (if any) strategy should be employed to increase resources and what is the best way to protect the resources which already exist? Since there is no single correct answer to such questions, different people have different ideas about what is the best action to take. According to some commentators, the conflict which arises from the expression of different views is at the heart of politics.



Modern society is highly complex. Individuals argue over many different interests, values and beliefs. Conflict does not just take place between individuals, however. It also exists between larger groups - between countries as well as within them. According to one viewpoint, the aim of politics is to remove conflict so that people can live in reasonable harmony with each other. In other words, the aim of politics is to produce consensus - a general agreement over what people want and what they

believe is right.

In general terms, it can be argued that conflict arises for two main reasons. First, it arises because of conflicting interests. And second, it arises because of conflicting values or beliefs.

### Conflicting interests

In a country such as Britain, there is a complex web of interests which people want to expand and protect. Many of these interests are economic and financial. People want a job with good pay, a comfortable house, holidays and so on. They want a good education for their children, healthcare and security against poverty. Farmers and agricultural workers want a prosperous farming industry. Publishers want people to buy lots of books.

Although many of the interests, such as the desire for a good health system, are common to all people, difficulties and disagreement emerge because resources are limited and different people have different priorities. Some people might want more money to be spent on high-tech machinery in hospitals, for example, whilst others want more nurses to be employed at a better rate of pay. Since there may not be the resources to take both approaches, choices have to be made. It is the necessity of making such choices which leads to conflict.

### **Conflicting values**

When people defend their interests, it does not necessarily mean that they are being selfish. Opponents of a new open cast mine, for example, might be furious that it is close to their homes. They might also claim, with some justification, that to open the mine would be an ecological disaster because of the damage it would cause to the wildlife living on the site. Such arguments might produce support from people living miles away who are not personally affected by the project. Political activity, in other words, can spring from a set of values and beliefs as well as from self-interest. Equally, the way in which a conflict is resolved might owe more to the values and beliefs of the decision makers than to their personal interest in the matter.

### **Politics as the study of power**

The sociologists Dowse & Hughes (1972) argue that politics is about power claiming that politics occurs when there are differentials in power'. This suggests that:

'Any social relationship which involves power differentials is political. Political relationships would extend from parents assigning domestic chores to their children to teachers enforcing discipline in the classroom; from a manager organising a workforce to a general ordering troops into battle.'(Haralambos & Holborn 1995, P.501)

If people have power, it means that they are able to make other people do what they want them to do, even if the other people do not want to do it. Power is, therefore, the ability to influence the behaviour of another either by threat, sanctions or through manipulation. In all political situations, those who have power are able to reward those who conform and punish those who do not.

Power cannot be exercised unless there is some way of backing it up. This may be the direct threat of or the use of force, but it does not have to be. Power that is based on the direct threat of or the use of force is usually described as 'coercion'. But, individuals (or governments) often do not have to resort to coercion to get their own way. Rather, some forms of power are accepted as 'legitimate' (as fair and right) and people are obedient. In Britain, for example, most people obey the laws made by the government even if they themselves do not agree with them. They do this because they accept that the government is legitimate. **Power which is regarded as legitimate is usually described as authority**

Because there are so many groups in society, each wanting different things, government is a difficult business - both at national and local level. Groups and individuals who disagree must find ways of living and working together if society is not to break down. This is a basic problem of politics; and, to put it very simply, there are two sorts of solutions. One way of dealing with people who disagree with us is to shoot them, hit them over the head or lock them up. This approach can be used by conflicting groups within a society, or by a government which gives out orders and uses force to eliminate opposition. The other kind of solution to the problem of conflict is the one generally favoured in most societies. It is to work out methods of decision-making which all groups can accept as fair - even when they do not get their own way. At government level, this is only likely to work if the groups directly concerned in particular decisions are consulted. Without proper consultation there is always a danger that decisions will not be accepted.

Political activity is of course not just concerned with making decisions but also with carrying them out. Those who are responsible for managing the affairs of a society require some sort of power in order to make their decisions effective.

Consequently the study of politics is to a large extent a study of the power that some have over others - the form it takes, the groups or individuals who possess it, and the uses to which it is put. Those who seek political power are often talked of in uncomplimentary ways. Politicians are accused of being 'power mad', and we are told that power corrupts people, making them dishonest and self-seeking. It is always easy to claim that politicians want power in order to 'feather their own nests' or simply to feel important. But we cannot get away from the fact that in a modern state some people have to take essential decisions; and they have to be given power to can them out.

Everyone has views about what is good or bad in society and about the sorts of changes that need to be made. Political power is essential if any such changes are to be brought about. The really important question is not whether some should have power over others, but whether power is put to good use. Are political leaders taking account of the wishes of the people? And if they are not is it possible to replace them?

Political power is largely concentrated in the hands of MPs at Westminster. But in fact many groups and individuals outside Parliament have power to influence political decisions, including leaders of big business, the trade unions and the civil service. So when we look at the British political system we should keep firmly in mind the question. 'Where does power lie?'

(from British Government by Philip Gabriel, Longman, London)

### **ACTIVITY**

**Read the document above and answer the questions below:**

- 1. From Your knowledge of current affairs, provide one example of a disagreement between two or more groups. Clearly state**  
**[a] What the disagreement is about**  
**[b] the groups involved**
- 2. Explain the two types of solutions to the political conflict.**
- 3. What is political power?**
- 4. Give two reasons why people might seek political power**
- 5. Which groups do you think are the most powerful in British society? Give reasons for your answer.**

## DEMOCRACY

Relatively few people are active in politics. But a requirement of democracy is that people should be able to have a say about matters which affect their lives. There are different views about how this should operate and how far it should go. The following passage examines the development of ideas about democracy and how the term has been interpreted at different times and in different places.

The word democracy comes from two Greek words meaning 'people power'. In ancient Greece democracy was the form of government in which all qualified citizens were allowed to **participate** in the government of their cities. The citizen was expected to play a positive role in government rather than giving the task of ruling to others. This **direct** form of democracy has been seen as the purest form of democracy. However, even in Greece, large sections of the population - notably slaves, women and children - were not regarded as qualified citizens' and therefore were denied participation.

Two distinct views of democracy developed in nineteenth century Britain. With the first view, democracy meant people being involved in decision-making and in being able to control their working lives as well as influencing political events. The second view expressed a less direct form of democracy. It was limited to the idea that people should have some say in selecting a government. If **direct** democracy was impossible in a large industrial society then a **representative** democracy (in which the people elect representatives to assist in government) was seen as the practical alternative. This second type would mean that most people should be entitled to vote rather than, as with the first view, enabling them to actively participate in government. It is the second view - representative democracy - that has formed the main approach to political thinking in Britain.

However, some feel that with this arrangement the people are relegated to mere votecasters. They say that voting should be only one aspect of democracy and that people should be able to involve themselves more actively in political affairs.

(adapted from **Basic Political Concepts** by Alan Renwick and Ian Swinburn, Hutchinson, London, 1980, pp. 124-36)

### ACTIVITY

Read the document above and answer the questions below:

1. [a] Why are the cities of Ancient Greece referred to as direct democracies?  
[b] In what ways might they be regarded as undemocratic today?
2. [a] Why might a direct democracy be impossible in a large democratic society?  
[b] Could a direct democracy work today?  
[c] Why do some people think that the British form of representative democracy is too limited?
3. Suggest ways in which people could actively participate in political affairs in addition to voting at elections.

Nearly all governments around the world would claim that their political systems are democratic. But democracy is not a precise word. It means different things to different people. How democracy is viewed may depend very much on the society in which the individual is brought up and on his or her political socialization.

**The following passage emphasises this point and then examines some of the characteristics that might be found in a representative democracy.**

Democracy may exist in more than one form and all societies, including Britain, have some flaws in their claims to being democratic. 'Many people who live in the 'liberal democracies' of the Western world (such as those in North America and Western Europe) say that other societies are undemocratic because their political systems seem so unlike those of the West. Yet many societies have characteristics of democracy which people in this country may be unwilling to see. At the same time, it is possible to recognise undemocratic aspects in the British system.

What are the main ideas associated with representative democracies? A government must arise out of public opinion and be answerable to the public. This means a government taking account of the wishes of the people and publicly explaining and justifying its actions. It also means that the people have opportunities to change government by choosing an alternative. This would require regular elections and a system of checks to prevent one group of people from having too much power. Power concentrated in the hands of one group or a single person can lead to a denial of other features expected in a democracy. For example, it is often thought that governments should act for the benefit of the nation as a whole and not in the interests of a particular group or class. There should be tolerance towards minority groups. Free speech and a free press should exist. People should have the freedom to meet together when and with whom they wish.

To guarantee these freedoms it is necessary to have an independent system of Law courts free from government interference. To prevent the concentration of power, the main functions of government should be divided and each function should be controlled by different groups of people. This would mean that the functions of making laws, carrying out the law and deciding if and when law has been broken should not all be the responsibility of the same people.

(Basic Political Concepts by Alan Renwick)

## **ACTIVITY**

**Read the above document and answer the following questions:**

- 1. List 5 characteristics of a representative democracy.**
- 2. What do you think is meant by the term 'a free press'?**
- 3. [a] Which off the features mentioned in the passage could be described as 'freedom of assembly'?**  
**[b] why is this important for democracy?**
- 4. [a] What are the main functions of government referred to in the passage?**  
**[b] Why is it thought necessary that each function should be carried out by different groups of people?**
- 5. Suggests other features that might be considered desirable in a democracy.**

# **POLITICAL ACTIVITY**

## **Types of political activity - Voting**

When people either belong to or take a side over a particular issue, they are engaged in political activity. The most common political activity in Britain, as in most countries, is voting. In the general election held in June 2001, for example, only 59% of the electorate turned out to vote (down from 73% in April 1992). Although a smaller percentage of the electorate tends to vote in local or European elections (just under 30% voted in the local elections of May 1998, for example, and only 36.5% voted in the European election of June 1994). These elections involve the political participation of far more people than many other countries.

## **Other types of political activity**

Apart from voting, people have the opportunity of participating in the political process in a number of other ways. Writing to a local councillor, Member of Parliament (MP) or Member of the European Parliament (MEP), or to a local or national newspaper is one way of participating in the political process. Joining a pressure group or political party is another. But, whilst some people feel that paying their membership fee to a pressure group or political party is enough, others are prepared to spend a great deal of their spare time campaigning. There is, in other words, a scale of political participation. This scale ranges from complete inactivity at one end to full-time activity at the other end.

## **People involved in politics**

### **Activism and apathy**

During election campaigns, activists from the political parties go round from house to house, knocking on doors and canvassing support. On the doorstep, people are often prepared to air their views. When asked what sort of people, in their opinion, are involved in politics, most mention councillors, MPs and MEPS, but few mention themselves. Many say that they are disillusioned with politics and that it is not even worth voting since 'they're all the same'. The fact that they refer to politicians as 'they' rather than 'we' shows that they feel removed from the political process. In reality, however, political activity covers a much wider area than many people realise. People are involved in political activity whenever they interact with others in any form of social activity. This is because any group, however large or small, involves an element of decision making - and, therefore, involves political activity.

If politics is about decision making, then everybody can be said to be involved in politics through their everyday participation with others. All members of society, after all, are members of groups - either because they are born into them (such as their family or ethnic group) or because they choose to join them (such as a sports club or religious group). choose to participate in political activity in the narrower sense of working for a political party or group, or of

### **Why participate?**

Those who do choose to get involved in politics in this narrower sense may do so for a number of reasons. First, they may hold a set of beliefs strongly and hope to persuade others to accept them. Second, they may want to bring about change and feel that participation in the political process is the best way to achieve this. Third, they may want to help others. Fourth, they may want to promote their own interests or the interests of their group. And fifth, they may enjoy exercising power over others and want to hold power for its own sake.

## **Where political activity takes place**

### **A broad definition**

If politics is taken in its broadest sense, then it is possible to argue that: 'Politics is at the heart of all collective human activity, formal and informal, public and

private, in all human groups, institutions and societies, not just some of them, and it always has been and always will be.'  
(Leftwich 1984, p.63)

In this sense, political activity can be said to take place wherever one person tries to influence or change the behaviour of another. It takes place in any situation in which decisions have to be made or disagreements sorted out. It takes place wherever there is a power relationship between the participants. It takes place, therefore, at both the micro (small) level and at the macro (large) level.

### **The small picture**

At the micro level, political activity can be identified, for example, within the family. Take the traditional 'nuclear' family, made up of two parents and two children. In such a family, the roles are clearly defined. The father goes out to work to support the family, whilst the mother stays at home to look after the children and the house. The children are expected to obey the wishes of the parents without question. What the father says goes, there is, in other words a power relationship in which the children are at the bottom and the father is at the top. When important decisions have to be made, it is the father who has the final say. But, families do not have to work like this, and indeed, many do not, many families have a single parent or, if there are two parents, make decisions jointly rather than allowing the father to have all the power. The point is that, in every family (whether it works as a traditional nuclear family or not), there is a power relationship which determines how decisions are made and disputes are settled. Activity within the family, therefore, can be described as political at the micro level. The same is true of activity which takes place in the workplace or in school or college.

### **The Big Picture**

At the macro level, political activity is, perhaps, easier to identify. The work of government ministers, the civil service, opposition MPs or MEPs and local councillors, for example, all comes under the heading of political activity at the macro level. Political activity takes place, therefore, where these people work - at Number 10 Downing Street, in Whitehall, in the British and European Parliaments or in the local council chamber.

It is not only in these places, however, that political activity takes place at the macro level. Since the position of most politicians is dependent on their election to office, it is necessary for them to gain and maintain their electors' support. To do this, they need to communicate with the electorate. As a result, the media is also the centre of a great deal of political activity at the macro level. It is on television or radio, or in the newspapers that politicians try to persuade their electors of the validity of their views. Politicians and political activists, therefore, attempt to gain positive exposure of their views in the media and they often stage events for the benefit of the media.

The fact that the media is the focus of a great deal of political activity does not mean, however, that political activity at the macro level is something which only takes place in public. On the contrary, most important decisions are made behind closed doors. Take, for example, the decisions made by the Cabinet. During a parliamentary session, the Cabinet meets each week to discuss what the Prime Minister decides are the key political issues of the day. What is discussed in Cabinet and many of the decisions which are reached, however, remain secret. Since part, or even the whole, of the decision-making process goes on in secret, it is sometimes difficult to find out exactly how a decision came to be made. It is, therefore, sometimes difficult to be sure exactly where political activity takes place.

## How political participation has changed

### The general trends

Over the past 30 or so years, the nature of political participation has changed. In the first three decades after the Second World War, a large number of people joined conventional political organisations like trade unions and political parties. Between 1945 and 1978, the number of people who were members of trade unions grew from 7.87 million to 13.11 million and there were only eight years during this period when the number of members did not grow (Pelling 1987, pp.299-300). Between 1978 and 1996, however, membership of trade unions went down from 53% of the working population to 31 % (Social Trends 1998). Similarly, membership of the two main political parties has declined in recent years:

'in the post-war era, there has been a substantial erosion in the overall pool of volunteers: since the early 1950s, Conservative Party membership plunged from 2.8 million to 780,000 in 1992, while individual membership of the Labour Party declined from just over a million to its nadir [lowest point] in the 1980s, before recovering to 400,000 in 1997.'  
(Norris 1997, p.78)

### Unconventional participation

Young people, in particular, seem alienated from traditional forms of participation. Mark Evans (1997) argues that, in part, this is due to the British first-past-the-post electoral system which makes it difficult for new parties to grow. But, he also points out:

'Age differences in participation are complex. The young are less likely to vote than the old and are more likely to be alienated from conventional forms of participation. However, they are more likely to engage in unconventional forms of participation, such as protest politics. In short, it is not that young people do not participate in politics, rather that they participate differently. Under 35s are particularly interested in help for the homeless (73%), disabled rights (71 %), animal rights (66%) and increased funding for the NHS (64%). Young people have been prominent in championing environmental causes and civil rights (in, for example, campaigns against the Criminal Justice Bill in 1994).'

(Evans 1997, p.112 - slightly adapted)

Unconventional participation is not confined to the young, however. People of all ages and classes can be found protesting. The campaign against road building, for example, has support from many sections in the population.

### ACTIVITY

#### Questions

1. Devise a questionnaire to find out the extent which people participate in political activity. Test your questionnaire on colleagues and friends, and write a short report discussing the findings.
2. Discuss the issue of political participation in class and write half a page or so on the reasons why:  
[a] Many young people appear disinterested in traditional politics?  
[b] Why so few people turned out for the 2001 General Election?

# POWER AND AUTHORITY IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

## The Location of Power

### The State

The institution which exercises power over a defined area is usually described as the state. Sovereignty (that is, supreme power) normally lies with the state. All states have certain characteristics in common.

- ◆ **First**, they have a territory with clearly defined geographical boundaries.
- ◆ **Second**, membership is compulsory - all members of the population become citizens at birth.
- ◆ **Third**, since the state is a sovereign body, it holds the ultimate legal power over its members. The state controls coercive bodies such as the military and the police and it can decide who may use force and to what extent it should be used. Laws made by the state can result in a citizen's imprisonment or even a citizen's death.
- ◆ **Fourth**, the state delegates its power to certain institutions.
- ◆ **Fifth**, all states have some kind of constitution (a set of rules) and a pattern of offices which have to be filled. In some countries, such as the USA, this constitution is written down in a document ('codified'). In the UK, it is not

### Liberal democracies

The UK like the USA and other members of the EU, is a 'liberal democracy'. Three basic types of power are involved in the running of liberal democracies.

The first type is **legislative power** - the power to make laws. In the UK, this power has been granted to Parliament. The UK, like the USA and the other members of the EU, is a 'liberal democracy'. Three basic types of power are involved in the running of liberal democracies the first type is legislative power - the power to make laws. In the UK, this power has been granted to Parliament. It is the role of Parliament to make new laws and to reform those already in existence.

The second type is executive power - the power to suggest new laws and to implement existing laws. In the UK, this power has been granted to the government and its departments. The government is helped to fulfil its role by the civil service, a permanent body of supposedly impartial state employees.

The third type is **judicial power** - the power to interpret laws and to make judgements about whether they have been broken or not. This power is exercised by the courts. These range from the House of Lords, the highest appeal court, to local courts presided over by magistrates.

### Sovereignty

In the UK, it is possible to talk of 'parliamentary sovereignty' - the idea that power rests with Parliament. This is because Parliament has the power to make laws which cannot be challenged. Since, however, at regular intervals Parliament (or, at least the House of Commons) must submit itself to the people in elections, it could be argued that the people are sovereign because they have the power to decide who will rule them.

## The Institutional Framework

### The Monarchy

The UK is a constitutional monarchy. In former times, the monarch possessed a great deal of political power, but this has now been eroded.

Whilst the monarch remains the nominal head of state, the political role played by monarchs in the past is now undertaken by the Prime Minister and other members of government:



'The Queen personifies the state. In law, she is head of the executive, an integral part of the legislature, head of the judiciary, the commander-in-chief of the armed forces of the Crown and the "supreme governor" of the established Church of England. As a result, of a long process of evolution during which the monarchy's power has been progressively reduced, the Queen acts on the advice of her ministers Britain is governed by Her Majesty's government in the name of the queen. '

(HMSO 1994)

### The Executive



The political power once exercised by the monarch, is now, therefore, exercised by the executive - by the Cabinet which is chaired by the Prime Minister and by the government departments. Most government departments are headed by a Cabinet minister chosen by the Prime Minister. The Cabinet meets once a week at the Cabinet Room in Number 10 Downing Street, the Prime Minister's Most Cabinet ministers are in charge of a government department - such as the Department of Health, the Department of Transport and so on. These ministers are responsible for a particular area of the government's work. Occasionally, however, a Cabinet minister is appointed 'without portfolio'. As well as choosing Cabinet ministers, the Prime Minister also chooses the junior ministers who work in government departments. At any one time, there are around 100 ministers in total. Periodically, the Prime Minister has a 'reshuffle' and sacks, promotes or moves ministers. Whilst ministers are, therefore, political appointees, they work in tandem with permanent civil servants who are state employees.

### The Legislature

Legislative power is exercised by Parliament which consists of two Houses, the House of Commons and the House of lords. Each member of the House of



Commons is elected by people living in a constituency (a geographical area). General elections must take place every five years, but they can be called before the five year term has been completed. The vast majority of candidates in general elections belong to a political party and they stand on behalf of that party. The political party which gains the largest number of seats in the House of Commons is usually invited to form a government (it is possible that the combined number of seats held by two or more parties might outnumber the largest party and, by making a coalition, these smaller parties might then be in a position to form a government). The leader of the party invited to form the government becomes Prime Minister. The largest party outside government forms the official opposition. The leader of the opposition normally chooses a 'shadow Cabinet'.

All proposed legislation must pass through a number of stages before it becomes law. Most proposals ('Bills') are first put forward in the House of Commons. They must pass through both the Houses of Parliament, however, before they can be sent to the monarch for royal assent. Once a Bill has received royal assent, it becomes law.

### An adversarial system

When a party wins an election and forms a government, it is generally regarded as having a mandate (the authorisation) to put into practice the promises it made in its

election manifesto. The British system of government, however, is **adversarial** - it relies on two sides being taken on any issue. It is, therefore, the job of the opposition to oppose proposals made by the government and to criticise them. Since the government usually commands a majority in the House of Commons, it can usually rely on its supporters to pass its proposals regardless of the criticism made by the opposition.

### **The House of Lords**

Members of the House of lords are not elected. The labour government elected in 1997 pledged to pass legislation taking away the right of hereditary peers (Lords who gained their position by birthright) to vote on legislation (see Chapter 14, Section 3.3). Life peers sit in the lords during their lifetime, but they do not pass on the right to sit in the lords to their children. Two other groups sit in the House of lords - the lords Spiritual (the two Archbishops and other bishops from the Church of England) and the lords Pastoral (Law lords who sit in judgement when the House of lords is used as a court of appeal).

### **Who Exercises Power in the UK?**

Three main models have been developed to explain who exercises power in the UK - the pluralist model, the elite model and the Marxist model.

#### **The pluralist model**

According to the pluralist model, power is exercised by the mass of the population, rather than by a small, elite group. This conclusion is derived from two main arguments.

First, pluralists note that if a majority of people do not like what their representatives are doing, they can vote them out of office at the next election. Representatives, therefore, have to act in a way that is pleasing to the majority. And second, pluralists claim that people are able to exercise power between elections by joining interest groups (such as political parties, trade unions and other pressure groups). Group activity, they argue, is vital to the successful functioning of the political system. Groups constantly compete to gain the attention of decision-makers and it is the job of the decision-maker to decide between the competing claims made by different groups.

#### **The location of power**

It follows from this, therefore, that what matters to pluralists about the distribution of power in society is not that it is uneven, but that it is widely dispersed rather than concentrated into the hands of the few. It also follows that, according to the pluralist model, the state acts impartially, responding to the demands of different popular pressures. No single group can possibly dominate in society since, for every force exerted by one group, there is an equal and opposite force exerted by other groups.

Pluralists argue that such a system is healthy because it encourages political participation, it ensures that people can exert influence over decision makers, it ensures that power is dispersed rather than concentrated into the hands of a few and, at the same time, it allows the view of minority groups to be voiced.

#### **The Elite model**

Elite theorists suggest that power in the UK is held by a small minority of people who use it for their own ends. The unequal distribution of power in society, the model suggests, is not necessarily in the best interests of the majority of people. Rather, it benefits a ruling elite. Classical elite theorists argue that all states are governed by an elite or conflicting elites and that the majority of the population is basically passive and uninterested in politics. Schumpeter, for example, defined the role of elections in liberal democracies as:

'That institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote.'  
(Schumpeter 1974, p.269)

### **Contrasts with the pluralist model**

The Elite model differs from the pluralist model in a number of ways.

First, whereas pluralists argue that political parties act as a route through which different interests can be expressed, elite theorists argue that this is not so. elite theorists point out that political parties often prevent views and opinions being aired if they do not coincide with the particular party's stance. Second, whilst pluralists concentrate on those groups which make an input into decision making, elite theorists point out that a process of non- decision making can operate to prevent certain interests reaching the political agenda. To put this in terms used by Lukes (1974), pluralists concentrate on the first face of power only, whilst elite theorists also consider the second face of power.

And third, elite theorists point out that interest groups are not equal in status. Some are more powerful than others and any dispute or disagreement is likely to favour the more powerful group. Those with more economic clout or a well educated and articulate membership, for example, are more likely to shape the political agenda than those representing groups like the homeless, the poor or the elderly. Pluralists, on the other hand, imply that interest groups compete on a level playing field.

### **The Establishment**

Studies of the British political system have led some Elite theorists to suggest that there is a cohesive political class which monopolises power. This is sometimes described as the 'Establishment'. Members of the Establishment share the same sort of social and educational background and have a distinct set of values:

'A number of researchers have found that the majority of those who occupy elite positions in Britain are recruited from a minority of the population with highly privileged backgrounds. This appears to apply to a wide range of British elites including politicians, judges, higher civil servants, senior military officers and the directors of large companies and major banks ... There is also evidence that there may be some degree of cohesion within and between the various elites.'  
(Haralambos & Holborn 1995, pp.518-19)

### **📁 The Marxist model**

Like most other liberal democracies, the UK is a capitalist country. The vast bulk of its wealth is owned by individuals rather than by the state. In simple terms, those who own and control the wealth are capitalists whilst the people they employ are workers. Although the capitalists are fewer in number than the workers, they tend to acquire political as well as economic power. Marxists are fundamentally opposed to the capitalist system. They argue that it is responsible for the inequalities in British society and the unevenness of the distribution of power. Marxist studies of the British political system are, therefore, (unlike some pluralist or elitist studies) necessarily critical of the system.

### **Contrasts with the other models.**

The Marxist model is closer to the elite model than to the pluralist model. Like elite theorists, Marxists argue that a cohesive political elite exists in the UK. Also like some elite theorists, Marxists agree that the democratic institutions in the UK are a sham. It is not, therefore, in their conclusions that elite theorists and Marxists disagree. Rather, it is in the arguments they use to reach these conclusions. Marxists argue that the Elite - the ruling class - has power because it controls and owns capital. The source of power lies, therefore, in the economic infrastructure (in the way in which the economic system works). Elite theorists, on the other hand, argue that the explanation for the domination of elites is psychological.

Marxists are particularly critical of the pluralist idea that the state is, in some way, neutral. On the contrary, Marxists argue, the capitalist system developed to protect

the interests of those with economic power. Power is distributed in the state to ensure that this happens. One way in which that state does this is to manipulate people's views.

**Activity**

Having read about the three models of power in the UK write a few lines explaining which one is the most persuasive to you?

Write a few lines suggesting where you think power lies in the UK ?