

The Think Tank

Up-to-date analysis of exam-relevant
issues for A Level Politics

Issue 83 ■ September 2025

The Crowded Left

Plus!

Rousseau Today

Trump's Troops

Palestine & Statehood in Global Politics

... and more!

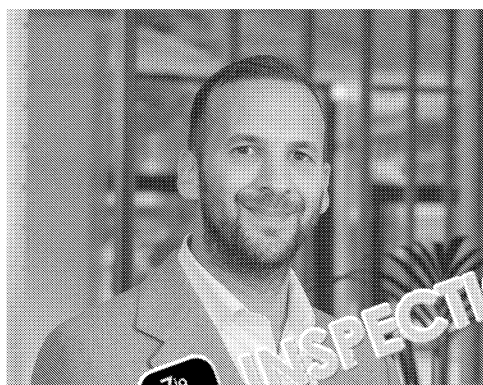
Springboard

‘My message to Labour is very clear: we are not here to be disappointed by you. We are not here to be concerned by you. We are here to replace you.’

▲ Zack Polanski, accepting a resounding vote in his favour to lead the Green Party of England and Wales. Polanski is thought of as the more left-wing populist option and achieved 85% of the party members’ votes. He faces questions as to whether he is the right leader to retain the party’s rural support, and how he will work alongside Jeremy Corbyn and Zarah Sultana’s new left-wing party.

Reform
Labour
Conservatives
Lib Dems
Greens
Others

▲ Recent opinion polls show Reform in the lead for a governing party. If they have massively increased their share in the election, it also shows other main parties are struggling to hold up in a general election result that would overhaul the political system – is anyone ready?



‘Congratulations to Zack Polanski on your victory. Your campaign stood up for the dignity of our communities, and gave people something to be proud of. Looking forward to working with you to build a fairer, greener world.’

▲ Former Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn welcoming Polanski’s victory. ‘Real change is in our manifesto under Corbyn’s leadership.’

Discussion Points

- Do you expect the Greens to gain more media attention with a single leader rather than a co-leader arrangement?
- Given that Reform have replaced the Conservatives as the main right-wing party, is it that the Greens could replace Labour as the main left-wing party?
- Does a fractured left pave the way for a Reform victory at the next general election through a ceiling of around 30%?
- Does the first-past-the-post system – which granted Labour a large majority in 2017 – make it easier or harder for Reform and the Greens?

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A Word from the Editor

A lot of focus has been on Reform and the right, so the election of a new Green Party leader and the alliance of Zarah Sultana and Jeremy Corbyn give us a great excuse to focus on the left. Meanwhile the Liberal Democrats – who compete with all parties for a certain kind of progressive-minded voter – are slowly gaining support.

The polls, which have been frankly astonishing since the 2015 general election, which had Labour and Conservatives holding the top two spots as ever. Kemi Badenoch's Conservatives seem to be settling into third place, while Labour flounders on lows that would have ousted a previous leader.

While we're used to a narrative of a two-horse race, and it's generally an accurate picture of general elections, we *have* been here before. In 2019 the European elections saw the top four parties within touching distance of each other. In 2015 UKIP – a previous vehicle for Nigel Farage – upset the Tory right with just 13% of the vote. And in 2010 of course, Nick Clegg's Lib Dems broke through to become coalition members with 23% of the ballot.

We welcome feedback and contributions at SamFrancis@PublishMeNow.com. If you have any ideas for the magazine, or articles you'd like to write, please get in touch.

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The Crowded

Moyra Grant surveys the competitive progressive side of UK party

The post-war two-party system

Fifty years ago, the UK had a relatively uncompetitive 'two-party system'. In the 1979 general election, the two main parties between them won 96% of the votes and 96% of the seats. The Conservatives, as they were then – won just 2% of the seats and all of the other parties combined won 2% of the seats. Today, the picture is more diverse with many more significant parties jostling for power and influence. This enhances pluralism and choice for voters, but also risks dispersing the votes and making the disparity between votes and seats ever more disproportionate. This article will focus on developments on the left of UK politics (excluding the many small revolutionary groups).

Splits and splinters

The first major shift away from the traditional UK party system was in 1981, when a group of centrist Labour Party 'big beasts' rejected the left-wing radicalism of Labour leader Michael Foot and broke away to form the Social Democratic Party (SDP). This 'Gang of Four' (former Cabinet ministers Roy Jenkins, David Owen, Bill Rodgers and Shirley Williams) were joined by a couple of dozen other Labour MPs. They eventually formed an electoral Alliance with the Liberals. However, the 1983 election starkly demonstrated the perils of small-party politics in the UK with the first-past-the-post (FPTP) electoral system: Labour won 27% of the votes and 209 seats, while the Alliance won 25% of the votes but just 23 seats. After an equally disheartening result in 1987, the Liberals and SDP merged to form the Liberal Democrats.

Other small left-wing parties have come and gone over the years:

- David Owen spurned the merger with the Liberals and briefly led a much smaller version of the SDP until 1990, with no electoral success.
- In 2015, TV presenter Sandi Toksvig and others launched the Women's Equality Party, campaigning on a platform of gender equality for all. It won a few council seats but no MPs, and dissolved in 2020.
- In 2019, seven centrist, pro-European Labour MPs (not very 'big beasts') rejected the left-wing radicalism of party leader Jeremy Corbyn – especially his perceived anti-Semitism and his approach to Brexit – and broke away to form Change UK. Obvious comparisons were made with the formation of the SDP in 1981. This new group caused a media stir and were joined by a few other MPs, including Conservatives (whose then leader Theresa May was also having Brexit problems) such as Anna Soubry, who led Change UK for six months. Boris Johnson's sister Rachel even stood for

Change UK at the new party lasted just in December 2019 that month's general politics had struck

Jeremy Corbyn

Under the radical left (2015–2020), Labour's western Europe with election Labour won Conservatives, resulting in Johnson, in large part ambivalence about perceptions of party of Keir Starmer took over and Human Rights Commission anti-Semitism in the condemning anti-Semitism

Corbyn's new party may give Labour a run for their money at the next election, but it may equally crash and burn

MP in the 2024 election

In 2025 Corbyn, together had lost the Labour Labour's two-child benefit of a new, radical left banner of Your Party. A name at the autumn the party's policies – for example, wealth social housing, safeguard right to protest. By August 750,000 sign-ups. (Labour members, the Conservative Lib Dems have 90,000 expressions of interest further developments.

The

Several other small parties the left than on the right

- In some ways, the Labour 'progressive' than Labour on the wealthy and social care policy and customs union expanding legal challenges to Reform

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policies', ending arms exports to Israel and seizing frozen Russian assets. They surged to a record 72 MPs in the 2024 election.

- The Green Party – which has existed since the 1970s – is also on a roll, with a record 65,000 members, four MPs and 860 councillors. It campaigns not only on net zero by 2040 and other green policies but also for rejoining the EU 'as soon as the domestic political situation is favourable', a wealth tax, big NHS investment, free personal care, scrapping university tuition fees and abandoning the UK's Trident nuclear programme.
- Other centre-left parties with parliamentary representation include the SNP, Plaid Cymru, Sinn Féin and the Northern Irish SDLP. These and others joined forces in the summer recess to demand – without success – that the Labour government recall Parliament, stop all arms sales to Israel and intensify its diplomatic pressures over 'the humanitarian catastrophe unfolding in Gaza'. As regional parties, of course, these can never jeopardise the UK dominance of the two main parties.

Conclusion

It is fair to say that some of Labour's policies over the last year have disillusioned or angered many voters – notably maintaining the Conservatives' two-child benefit cap, increasing inheritance tax and employers' National Insurance contributions, not taxing the rich more, early prisoner releases, immigration – and particularly on cutting pensioners' winter fuel allowances and cutting Personal Independence Payments for the disabled. Starmer has a water down both of these policies under the threat of a Commons revolt. The government is also reversing many popular policies, such as protecting the triple lock on pensions, strengthening tenants' rights, banning no-fault rental evictions, closing free breakfast clubs in schools, and launching a new British Energy – but these are receiving rather less media attention.

Corbyn's new party may give Labour a run for their money at the next election, but it may equally crash and burn – as others have done before – thanks to the disproportionalities of FPTP. The durability of Westminster's electoral system has outlasted many small parties because, of course, its winners – who are the only ones with the power to change it – are unwilling to abandon it.

Meanwhile, there is growing diversity and choice in UK party politics, while the national electoral results are increasingly disproportionate and unrepresentative. The 2024 general election broke many undesirable records. It was the most disproportionate ever: the total of the differences between the seat shares and vote shares of each party was the highest ever. The Labour Party – achieving 63% of the seats on a vote share of just under 34% – broke the most record for the lowest vote share of a party for a majority government. 2024 also saw the lowest-ever combined vote share for the two largest parties at 57%, though between them they got 82% of the seats. It was also the most volatile election recorded by

the British Election Study, with the proportion of voters changing their vote in the 2024 elections. And it was a record, with the highest number of parties of any UK general election.

In sum, UK elections – with their narrow political spectrum – pluralist and competitive – and less representative of the electorate's behaviour persist – are unpredictable and erratic. The next election may produce

The left' originally represented the working class of the assembly, while the right represented the aristocracy. They feel they have a good understanding of the political lexicon. 'Left' definitely means social and redistributive policies, while 'right' associate other things (like immigration and policy and international relations).

In everyday language, 'left' and 'right' have become shorthand for 'progressiveness' and 'conservatism'. Labour is failing to connect with voters because these make sense as a spectrum. In the UK we tend to think of 'left' and 'right' as 'US' 'left' and 'right' and 'conservative'.

There's a lot of interest in these concepts – and in the kinds of policies they represent – whether that defines 'left' or 'right'. For example, why is 'right' considered right wing?

Discussion Points

1. Suggest reasons why the current political climate is emerging on both sides of the spectrum and the Conservative Party.
2. In what ways can the current political climate both strengthen and weaken the Conservative Party?

Exam-style Questions

- Evaluate the view that the current political climate in the UK warrants a change to the current electoral system.
- 'The UK still essentially has a two-party system.' Analyse and evaluate this statement.

Moyra Grant is an experienced textbook author.

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300 Words & an Es

The Proscription of Palestin

An exam-style extract question with an example e... Write your own answer to

Palestine Action (PA) is an outside or national pressure group which was formed in 2020 'to end Israeli apartheid', as they say. They came to public prominence in 2021, leading the protests against the war in Gaza in 2023. Their members engage in 'non-violent disruptive' direct action, such as vandalising property and occupying premises. In 2025 activists broke into the military base at Brize Norton and sprayed red paint on two RAF planes – including into the engines – 'to symbolise the bloodshed in Gaza' because 'Britain continues to send military cargo, fly spy planes over Gaza and refuel US/Israeli fighter jets. Britain isn't just complicit, it's an active participant in the Gaza genocide and war crimes across the Middle East.' Six people since have been arrested.

This incident was apparently the last straw for the UK government, who proscribed – i.e. banned – PA in July. This means that people who join or support the group are now liable to a maximum 14-year prison sentence. This puts PA in the same category as groups like ISIS, Hamas, Al Qaeda, and neo-Nazis National Action and the Maniacs Murder Cult. Civil liberties groups such as Liberty and Amnesty International have criticised the ban, saying that it equates non-violent protest with terrorism. Even before the ban there have been several demonstrations around the UK in support of PA which have so far resulted in over 700 arrests.

However, Home Secretary Yvette Cooper has defended the ban, saying that PA caused £7m worth of damage to the planes, jeopardised national security and is in fact a violent group, though 'many important details cannot yet be publicly reported because of criminal proceedings'. PM Keir Starmer also said that the government proscribed PA in part because of the group's targeting of Jewish businesses.

An original commentary written for The Think Tank

- Evaluate the view that governments may undermine civil liberties in the UK more than pressure groups may do. **Edexcel-style (30 marks)**
- 'The success or failure of pressure groups to influence government policy is mainly determined by the methods which they employ.' Analyse and evaluate this statement. **AQA-style (25 marks)**

As the source says, controversy has surrounded the pressure group Palestine Action (PA) in 2025 because, after they deliberately damaged two military aircraft, the government banned ('proscribed') them under the Terrorism Act 2000, so that being a member or

simply a supporter... up to 14 years. The PA are undermining UK national security or whether the govt liberties by suppressing arguments may simply will argue that, on seems potentially and freedoms.

Palestine Action is a pressure group – with the executive, disapproves of its work. PA, are to oppose activities in Palestine in the form of 'civil' legal actions as the occupation of premises. The group's launch in 400 strikes against military. It claims that the suspects' first... PA had 'not participated in any person or endangering or safety'. If this is a dangerous precedent for groups such as Liberty. However, Home Secretary that PA 'have been the source points out a few details while underway, so 'some know the kind of promoting.' Given that if PA's activities is under the government does in the UK's liberal d

The UK's legal definition of terrorism in the Act has been criticised by Liberty as too broad and encompasses 'serious' would not deny and ever, cited as the main proscription of PA.

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military aircraft at Brize Norton, PA sprayed paint directly into the engines, disabling the planes, which cost millions and which could potentially undermine national security in the UK. However, the group's supporters seem to find it difficult to see this group in the same light as other proscribed groups – currently 84 in all – such as ISIS, Hamas, Al Qaeda, and neo-Nazi National Action and the Marianas Murder Cult, who all openly advocate, and may commit murder.

The protest which led to the ban on PA involved people holding deliberately provocative placards saying 'I oppose genocide, I support Palestine Action', and sitting waiting patiently for the police to move in. As the source says, over 700 people have so far been arrested, including 474 at one peaceful protest on 9th August in London's Parliament Square (the largest number on a single day in the last 10 years, said the Met Police). It was notable how many of the demonstrators were elderly – perhaps because they were retired and would have less to lose if convicted and imprisoned. Amnesty International commented, 'The protesters were not inciting violence and it is entirely disproportionate to the point of absurdity to be treating them as terrorists'. It will take time – probably many months – before we know the scale of charges, convictions and sentences against them.

Meanwhile, Palestine Action has been given permission by the High Court to mount a legal challenge to their proscription, and the case will be heard in November. Another PA trial is also due in November concerning an attack on an Israeli defence firm in Bristol where allegedly three people were injured. This may, in due course, change the picture and may change the opinions of some PA supporters. The ban followed lobbying of the government by Lord Dannatt, paid adviser to a US defence company, and PM Starmer has said that the government proscribed PA in part because of the group's targeting of Jewish businesses. Also, the PM has been vigorous in acting against real or perceived anti-Semitism since he expelled former Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn from the party. Starmer's critics say that his action against PA was therefore to some extent politically motivated. It is unclear so far whether the PA ban was prompted by concerns for public safety, for costly property damage, for a real effect or for political bias.

In conclusion, PA's actions are against Israel and in favour of many millions of people. National security and civil liberties are an important part of the Home Secretary's job. But freedoms will always be important. Palestine Action is not a non-violent group supported by the Government.

However, the Foreign Office has reservations about the reaction which risks alienating Muslims and in favour of Muslims. The source expressed concern that the ban could look like 'state censorship'. They have argued that the ban does not address vandalism or terrorism, to the sledgehammer they say are an over-reaction. Dozens of international human rights activists, including Angela Davis and Nelson Mandela, calling the ban 'an attack on civil liberties'. The current UN Human Rights, Volker Türk, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, PA actually breach international law itself. The ban has a 'chilling effect' on legitimate protest. There is understandable unease about Palestine Action becoming a tool to enhance civil liberties.

Examiner's Comments

There was comprehensive knowledge here, though the source referred to more often (AO1) was very good. Generally careful argument (AO3) was good but the essay lacked argument and coherence. Paragraphs were not put together. If each paragraph undermined the claim...

AO1: 10

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JEAN-JACQUES ROUSSEAU

Moyra Grant explores Rousseau's relationship with nationalism. It's pronounced...

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) was a Genevan philosopher who predicated most contemporary political ideologies as we now know them, including nationalism itself, but whose ideas have influenced almost all of them – from anarchism through liberalism and socialism to totalitarianism – in very different ways. As this implies, his theories were multifaceted and sometimes contradictory – but that has only helped to broaden their appeal.

ROUSSEAU'S KEY IDEAS

NATIONALISM

Rousseau was an early advocate of the idea that nations have the right to govern themselves in what we now call a 'nation state' – a sovereign political territory housing a community with common values – and he advanced a form of 'civic nationalism' where the state is legitimised by the active participation of its citizens, and national identity is premised on such participation rather than on culture or ethnicity. He was influenced in part by the earlier thought of John Locke and argued that governments should serve the people, not the other way around as monarchists believed. (He described himself as having 'a free and republican spirit'.)

He is therefore usually classified as a pioneer of liberal nationalism, but some of his ideas – notably the 'general will' (see below) – seem contrary to liberal individualism. That said, the 'nation' is a collective concept, so the very idea of 'liberal nationalism' embodies inherent contradictions.

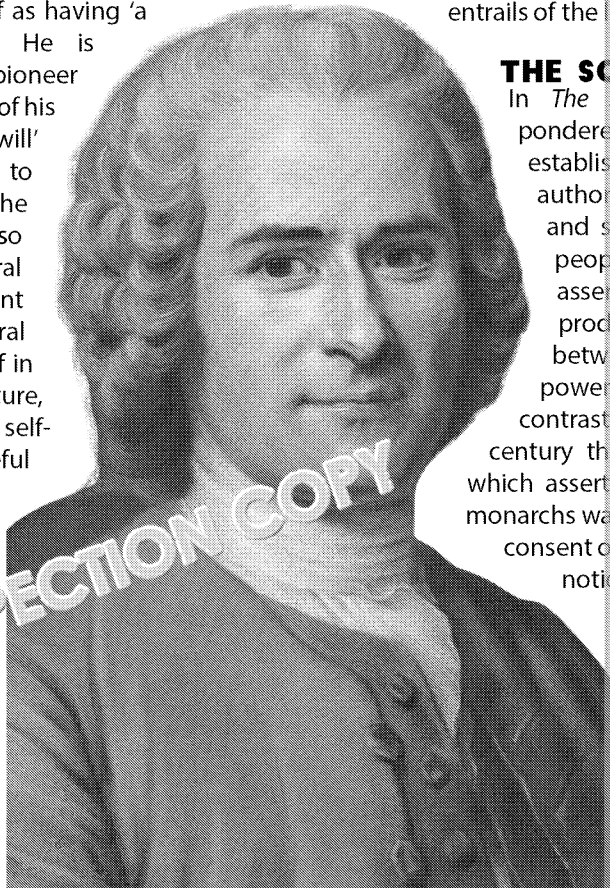
Liberal nationalism is based on a belief in the rationalism of human nature, and its goals of economic self-determination and peaceful international coexistence can be seen as reasoned and sensible. It also accords with Rousseau's belief that 'a country cannot submit to a master without liberty, and liberty without virtue'. However, Rousseau's hypothetical notions of a 'state of nature', 'social contract' and 'general will' may be seen by some as irrational fictions.

THE STATE OF NATURE

Like many other philosophers, Rousseau employed the term 'state of nature' when human governments, states, rulers and laws have used this thought to explain, justify or control social arrangements. Rousseau was a naturalist in nature who believed in the possibility of human improvement and even an innate sense of justice. He was an advocate of freedom and equality, but his pessimism and suggestion that in the state of nature, humans lived in a peaceful, equal and contented state before they formed social contracts, which they were increasingly constrained by laws and norms which often greatly limited their freedoms, has been interpreted as he meant by his famous phrase 'everywhere he is in chains'. Anarchy would endorse. Anarchy would never be free until it is the entrails of the la...

THE SOCIAL CONTRACT

In *The Social Contract*, Rousseau pondered how to establish a legitimate authority and secure the freedom and security of people. He asserted that people produce laws and power between themselves, contrasting this with the absolute power of monarchs in the 17th century. He argued that in the 18th century the people's consent was necessary for a government which asserted that monarchs were not bound by the consent of the governed.



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were confined to the sphere of home and family – which earned him a rebuke from one of his contemporaries, Mary Wollstonecraft.) In essence, he argued that government must rest on the collective will of the people in pursuit of the common good. His vision of democracy was a system of delegates: ‘Thus deputies of the people are not, and cannot be, its representatives; they are merely its agents, and can make no final decisions. Any law which the people have not ratified in person is null, is not a law.’ So far, so democratic – but:

THE GENERAL WILL

Rousseau advanced his concept of the ‘general will’ as the indivisible will of the sovereign, collective people in pursuit of the common good – which, he argued, was not simply the aggregate of individual wills, i.e. the ‘will of all’, nor the aggregate of group or ‘partial wills’. This was an idealistic vision of ‘people power’ as the foundation of national unity, but it conflicted with liberal individualism.

Rousseau further disagreed with Locke by arguing that all individual rights, including property rights, were subordinate to the general will. He believed that private property created inequality, injustice and social conflict. He wrote, ‘The fruits of the earth belong to us all, and the earth itself to nobody’ – meaning that natural resources such as land and water should be owned in common, while the products of human labour should be owned by the labourer himself. Socialists like to quote him on this.

Rousseau also said, ‘Each of us puts his person under the supreme direction of the general will’. His idea of collective sovereignty meant that individuals would have to surrender some of their freedom for the good of all which by definition included the common good. This meant, in his famous phrase, that individuals may be ‘forced to be free’ – that is, coerced to obey the dictates of the common good of society, implying that coercion is legitimate if it serves the wider community. At the least, this presents the clear danger of the ‘tyranny of the majority’ so feared by liberals. Also, autocratic, authoritarian and totalitarian leaders have often employed Rousseau’s concept to buttress their own power and control. Mussolini’s fascist theory, for example, coined the idea of ‘totalitarianism’ – *lo stato totalitario* – which claimed that he and the state embodied the general will of the people, justifying total control. Similarly, Hitler claimed to embody the ‘will of the Volk’, justifying his demand for complete public obedience to the Fuhrer: ‘His will is not the subjective, individual will of a single man, but the collective national will’. The potential paradoxes within Rousseau’s ideas mean that he has variously been seen as the father of both anarchism and totalitarianism.

THE IMPACT OF ROUSSEAU’S IDEAS

Rousseau’s philosophy helped to shape the development of much modern political, economic, cultural and educational thought, including thinkers as diverse as Marx and Herder. His ideas influenced Europe’s Age of Enlightenment, and inspired both the 1775 American Revolution and 1789 French Revolution with

their republican drive, such as *Julie, or the New Heloise*. Rousseau’s ideas were part of the Romantic movement of the 18th and 19th centuries. In *Émile* (1762) he introduced the concept of the ‘noble savage’ and the ‘reasoning man’ with a focus on the individual. His ideas still resonate centuries later.

AP ROUSSEAU

CASE STUDY 1: FRANCE

There has been a rise in nationalism around governments such as Russia, Belarus, Austria, and rising parties such as Reform UK.

WHAT WOULD ROUSSEAU SAY?

The concepts of freedom of the people towards Rousseau’s philosophy of contemporary populist authoritarian and drive for power, contrary to healthy democracy.

CASE STUDY 2: SCOTLAND

There is today a wide gap across the world, both in the UK, for example, the wealthy while the bottom

WHAT WOULD ROUSSEAU SAY?

In his *Discourse on Inequality*, Rousseau argued that such economic disparity and generated social conflict would likely see such undermining social justice common good – while, in populist nationalism

Discussion Points

1. Would you classify...
 - a collectivist or an individualist?
 - a rationalist or an emotionalist?
 - favouring equality or inequality?
2. How far do Rousseau’s ideas differ from those of other nationalists?

Exam-style Questions

- ‘Nationalism is an idealism rather than a realism.’ Analyse and evaluate this statement in relation to the nationalist movement in the 19th century.
- To what extent do Rousseau’s ideas influence the view of the nation?

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TRUMP'S TROOPS

THE PRESIDENT BUSTS THE FEDERALISM

Trump's administration has continued to push the boundaries of the US Constitution, using the National Guard to deploy troops to the streets of Washington DC.

The Trump administration has taken a highly controversial and antagonistic approach to federalism in recent months, twice disregarding the authority of state government and law enforcement by deploying the National Guard – the nation's reserve army – to deal with law and order.

In June, Trump deployed the National Guard in Los Angeles, against the wishes of the State of California. And just last month a further major mobilisation took place on the streets of the nation's capital city, Washington D.C.

So what exactly is going on? Well, one thing that all sides can agree on is that Trump's deployment of the National Guard is highly unusual.

The National Guard is an organised military force which can be called upon by the US army as a reserve army. Each state has its own National Guard; however, the President can – under certain circumstances – *federalise* a specified number of guards, placing them under the direct command of the President rather than the state governor.

There is some precedent for this. Famously, during the civil rights struggles in the 1950s, President Eisenhower federalised the National Guard in Little Rock, Arkansas, instructing them to protect African American students who were being prevented from entering their school by white segregationists.

Unusually, this executive order from Eisenhower went against the wishes of the state government, as well as

many local people. Over 10,000 National Guardsmen have been deployed since 1992, or the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, but almost all have been with the consent of the state government.

Trump's recent deployment of the National Guard in conflict with the state of California, against the wishes of Gavin Newsom, has been described as 'purposefully inflammatory', 'escalating tensions and erode public trust'. Muriel Bowser, similar to Newsom, has described the deployment as 'unsettling and unpredictable'.

These kinds of federalisation of the National Guard with Trump going as far as declaring martial law in Newsom should be a 'bad job'. Unlike previous presidents, Trump's have not only been used for law enforcement being oversteered by the government refusing to follow the law.

By deploying the National Guard, Trump creates a powerful visual association between Democrat-run cities, lawlessness and poor governance

support the Trump administration. Crime is at its lowest in Los Angeles, meaning the deployment of the National Guard to the lowest homicide rate in the country.

Similarly, in Chicago, places where Trump has deployed the National Guard next to some of the lowest crime rates occurring in recent years. He has dismissed these officers and replaced them with his own.

A UNIQUE APPROACH
In Washington D.C., the deployment of the National Guard is dramatic. Alongside the assumed direct control of the President means that it is the federal authorities – that is, the President – making the enforcement decision.



Trump thanking officers in Washington, D.C., August 2025

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This scale of federalisation would in theory not be possible in other parts of the US; however, D.C. is a little different. Unlike every other part of the continental United States, the capital city is not part of a state. Instead, the region is categorised as a 'federal district', the District of Columbia.

Due to this special status, D.C. does not enjoy the same kinds of rights and protections as fully fledged states. Most notably, D.C. cannot elect members of Congress, leaving it unrepresented in the federal legislature. Similarly, it does not enjoy the same level of autonomy as states and lacks a governor, with the city's mayor given a reduced portfolio of powers.

As a result, Trump does possess broad powers over law enforcement in D.C., of a kind he does not elsewhere. Mayor Bowser acknowledged as much in her response to the deployment, when she conceded that the Constitution allows the federal government 'to intrude on our autonomy in many ways'. In some ways, this makes D.C. the perfect testing ground for Trump. He can push at the limits of his extra-constitutional powers to see where they give, and what effect they have.

By contrast in California, which has its own autonomous system of governance, Trump ran up against some very real constitutional limits. Within days his deployment was found to be illegal by a Californian court. This ruling was later overturned by an appeals court – such is the highly politicised nature in which the US judicial system now functions. The case, known as *Newsom v Trump*, is now back again in a higher federal court, with its eventual outcome likely to be influential in terms of Trump's broader strategy.

IS FEDERALISM IN DANGER?

To the extent that all constitutional arrangements are in danger from such a norm-busting president, the short answer is yes.

However, the big picture is more complicated.

On 25th August Trump signed an executive order establishing 'specialized units' in the National Guard to address crime in cities. On the face of it, this seems to be an attempt to redefine the purpose of the National Guard as some kind of federal government militia – and expand the role of the military in policing American cities.

Trump's aim seems to be fomenting a perception of lawlessness within, and asserting greater control over,

Democrat-run cities: a sign of the strongest opposition.

However, given what the president is the operator, this doesn't seem to be in line with the federal system's aim to undermine state autonomy and approach to governance in the substance.

The televisual image of the president being deployed in the streets is the main goal. Trump understands the power and projects his own image, and his opponents. By doing so, he creates a powerful visual of lawless run cities, lawlessness.

Meanwhile Trump is motivated by favourable public opinion; the role of hero; strongman; the political salience of the issue, as well, and his opponent's weakness. American news media

But while Trump may be creating a federal crisis for any given day, that doesn't mean his troops won't have greater control.

Ultimately, the President's actions are matters of law and order, and when the President's cooperation. It is not to work. ■

Discussion Questions

1. Is National Guard deployment an executive overreach?
2. What does President Trump's 'crime' tell us about the role of the military?
3. How should Democratic cities respond to these deployments?

Exam-style Questions

- Evaluate the extent to which Trump's actions undermine US federalism.

Dominic Glover is a freelance writer.

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The UK's Changing Voting Environment

Graham Goodlad examines the changes in prospect over the next few years for the UK's different electoral systems

Three major changes are in prospect over the next few years which will affect how people vote in the UK. The Labour government has announced that it will lower the voting age to 16 for Westminster Parliament elections. The Additional Member System (AMS), which has been used since 1996 for Senedd (Welsh Parliament) elections, will be replaced with a closed list proportional system. Finally, English mayoral and police and crime commissioner elections will revert to the Supplementary Vote (SV) after a brief period in which first-past-the-post (FPTP) has been used.

With the Scottish Parliament retaining AMS, FPTP continuing for general elections, and STV for the Northern Ireland Assembly, this means that the UK will have an even greater variety of electoral systems. This article examines each of these three changes and reviews the arguments for and against them.

Votes at 16

Lowering the voting age to 16 was a Labour Party manifesto commitment at the 2024 general election. The issue has become something of a left/right dividing line, with the Liberal Democrats and Greens backing the change, while the Conservatives and Reform UK oppose it.

The arguments on both sides have been well-rehearsed over the years. Labour's case is based on the idea that at 16, young people can work and pay taxes, so they are entitled to a say in how the money is spent and who governs the country. It would also be a logical step to take because 16-year-olds can already vote in Scottish and Welsh local elections and in elections to the Scottish Parliament and the Senedd.

Opponents point out that in practice, many rights enjoyed by 16-year-olds are limited. They can join the armed services, for example, but are not allowed to serve on the front line. Some rights cannot be exercised until a person is older – the age at which someone can be a parliamentary candidate is 18. In fact, the general trend has been towards raising the age at which certain rights can be accessed. Young people are expected to be in some kind of education or training to be 18. The right to marry (with parental consent) at 16 was ended by legislation in 2023, largely to protect young people from forced marriage.

Underlying the debate is the question, are 16 and 17-year-olds mature and knowledgeable enough to vote? Some people (including many teenagers) feel that they do not have enough knowledge of politics. On the other hand, supporters of the move argue that it will promote political participation. This is by no means certain – turnout

among 18 to 24-year-olds in the last general election, so voters will not necessarily vote differently from their parents. Some argue that the change is a disadvantage – in 2024, Labour won 57% of the vote, while only 29% of 18 to 24-year-olds voted for them.

Whatever you feel about the biggest change to the voting age, it was the year when 18, in recognition that 18 is the age of adulthood. It is a change that Labour's Labour Party has made – the Conservative Party will not make the change in the following year.

Closed lists in Wales

From May 2026, when the current scheduled, Wales will switch to a closed list system since the current system means that the FPTP element will disappear. Instead, Wales will be divided into 16 constituencies, each to return six members to the Senedd.

This means increasing the number of members – which is a change that the Welsh government's plan to increase the Senedd to 30 members need to increase the number of members. Political parties will list candidates in order of preference in each constituency – independent candidates will not be allowed to stand. Voters will be asked to vote for a party or an independent candidate used to ensure that the Senedd reflects the share of the vote.

The Welsh government grounds that closed lists will better reflect the rank ordering of candidates and will better reflect the rank ordering of candidates, giving voters a voice in who is placed at the top of the list – and thus more likely to be elected.

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Return to SV

The Supplementary Vote (SV) was the system originally chosen for mayoral and police and crime commissioner (PCC) elections. The system gives voters two preferences. If no candidate secures 50% of first preference votes, all except the top two candidates are eliminated and their second preferences are allocated to the remaining two candidates. This process produces a clear winner.

In 2022 Boris Johnson's government announced that FPTP would replace SV in the next set of mayoral and PCC elections. The Conservative Party argued that SV was too complex, leading to a higher number of spoiled voting papers, and that FPTP was simpler and more effective in enabling voters to hold public officials to account. There is some evidence that the change was designed to favour the Conservatives, given that there was more division on the left between Labour, the Liberal Democrats and Greens, than on the right. FPTP enabled the Conservatives to benefit from this splintering of the opposition to them, winning several PCC races on a simple plurality. Only five of the 10 mayors elected in 2024 won a majority of the vote.

The advantage of SV is that the winning candidate is usually elected on a sizeable share of the vote – for example, Ben Houchen was elected mayor of Tees Valley in 2021 on 72% of the vote, compared with 53% when FPTP was used in 2024. Given the high profile of mayors, it is important that they are seen to command broad support. Supporters of SV also argue that it gives voters a wider choice than FPTP.

The proposed return of SV for mayoral and PCC elections has led to a revival of calls for scrapping of FPTP in Westminster elections, especially as the Labour government won 57% of the seats on just 34% of the vote in the highly disproportionate 2024 general election. However, there is little indication that this is on the cards. Party advantage is likely to shape thinking in this, as in so many other areas.

HOW THE ADDITIONAL MEMBER SYSTEM (AMS) WORKS

Voters have two votes – one for a constituency member, using FPTP, the other for a political party. Parties are listed and the voter chooses one of them. For this part of the system, several constituencies are grouped together to form a region, and a set number of candidates are elected from that regional list. This element helps to make the outcome more proportional than with a purely FPTP system.

Another issue is persistent low electoral turnout. This is unlikely to change as a result of changing the electoral system. It was 40.5% in the 2022 London mayoral election and 42% in 2024. This suggests that there are deeper causes of apathy and disengagement from politics among the electorate. ■

The D'Hondt formula is named after a Belgian mathematician, Victor D'Hondt. It is used in the second round of the SV system. The formula divides the first preference votes cast for each candidate by the number of seats they have won, plus one. The candidate with the highest result has won, plus one of their votes are divided by two seats their vote is worth. The candidate with the highest total wins.

Discussion Questions

1. Present the argument for and against the changes outlined in the table.
2. Which of the various electoral systems in the UK – FPTP, AMS or SV – produces the best outcomes in your view?

Exam Questions

- 'Introducing proportional representation in Westminster elections would be a step towards addressing low levels of electoral turnout in the UK.' Analyse this statement.
- Evaluate the view that the current electoral system is the best way of improving representation in the UK. *You must consider both sides of this view in a balanced way.*

Dr Graham Goodlad teaches Politics and is a co-author of the Pearson Politics textbook for the second edition of which

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20 Questions

Twenty hints to test your knowledge or to play 'twenty questions' with a class



1. I am male.
2. I am a living public figure.
3. I was born in 1967.
4. I am American.
5. I am from San Francisco, California.
6. My father was a prominent Californian judge.
7. At school I was affected by severe dyslexia.
8. I attended Santa Clara University on a baseball scholarship.
9. I graduated in political science in 1989.
10. I volunteered to help elect Willy Brown as San Francisco Mayor.
11. Brown appointed me to the San Francisco legislative body.
12. I am a member of the Democratic Party.
13. In 2004 I was elected Mayor of San Francisco.
14. I gained national prominence in 2004 by authorising unlawful surveillance.
15. In 2010 I was elected Deputy Governor of California.
16. In 2018 I was elected Governor of California.
17. In this role I have overseen pandemic and wildfire relief.
18. I am considered a strong contender for 2028 Democrat presidential nomination.
19. In 2025 I opposed President Trump's deployment of troops to the Middle East.
20. I am currently embroiled in legal action against President Trump.

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15

What has changed now?

Despite this long history of obstructed diplomacy at the UN, Western leaders such as Macron and Keir Starmer believe that now is the correct time to push for recognition. But why now, almost 40 years since Palestine declared independence?

Well, according to Starmer, it's because the idea of a 'two-state solution' – in which a viable Palestinian state coexists alongside Israel – is once again the only option that appears to have waited until the very

last moment, and 'while there is still a state to recognise', to use the words of the UK's Foreign Affairs Committee.

Since 2023, most of the Gaza Strip has been turned to rubble by Israeli bombs. According to the UN, 92% of residential buildings have been damaged, while all critical civilian infrastructure has been destroyed.

In the West Bank, Israeli-backed settlers continue to intensify their annexation of Palestinian land. In 2024 tens of thousands of Palestinians were displaced from their homes, with the amount of land illegally seized by Israel over 12 months exceeding that of the previous 20 years combined. Palestinians who seek to defend their land from settlers are frequently injured or killed with impunity.

In this sense, this last-minute recognition of Palestine might already be too late. The 'two-state solution' has been on its last legs for so long that there is very little diplomacy or negotiation left to revive. Unilateral recognition in the context of this impasse, but it does little in terms of tackling the fundamental obstacle to achieving statehood: the fact that the Israeli government, and much of Israeli society, is firmly opposed to Palestinian sovereignty.

Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu has built his entire career upon opposition to the idea of a state for Palestine, and often publicly boasts of the importance of the formation of a State of Palestine. Research finds that just

The single factor preventing Palestine from achieving its statehood at the UN is the veto power of Israel's ally, the United States

the United Nations – and no doubt represents a viable Palestinian state. International pressure on the United States to be more resolutely opposed.

Discussion Questions

1. What does Palestine tell us about its relationship with the United States?
2. Does unilateral recognition demonstrate that the United States is not committed to a 'two-state solution'?
3. By what other means could the United States revive a 'two-state solution'?

Exam-style Questions

- Analyse how realistic the idea of a 'two-state solution' is, given the importance of the United States.

Dominic Glover is a freelance writer.

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Profile: Zarah Sultana

Zarah Sultana was born in Birmingham in 1993. Her family are of Pakistani ancestry, and she is a practising Muslim. Sultana described her formative political moment as a trip to the West Bank when she was 17, where she watched Palestinians be humiliated at Israeli military checkpoints. She went on to attend the University of Birmingham, where she studied international relations and economics.

Sultana joined the Labour Party in 2011, in response to the coalition government's trebling of tuition fees and broader austerity policies. She became a strong supporter of Jeremy Corbyn, who was elected Labour Party leader in 2015, following the party's general election defeat that year. In 2019, Sultana was chosen as the general election candidate for the constituency of Coventry South, following the resignation of the sitting MP. She won her constituency with a majority of just 401 votes.

Following her election, Sultana became a prominent figure on the left of the party and was adept at social media, earning her the title of MP with the most TikTok followers. In 2022, Sultana was awarded the 'MP of the Year' award by the non-political Patchwork Foundation. She was overwhelmingly reselected by her constituency party to contest the 2024 election, in which she grew her majority to 10,000.

Following the election, Sultana was one of seven Labour MPs to be suspended from the party for her opposition to the government's two-child benefit cap. Despite being described as a six-month suspension, she was never re-admitted. In July 2025 Sultana left the Labour Party, announcing that she would form a new left-wing party with Corbyn.

"Every day the far right launch pogroms on hotel migrants, fuelled by grifters and amplified by the right. This hate comes from the very top. But our community must resist and fight back. ¡No pasaran!"



"The enemy of the working class is not the migrant dinghy, it's the private jet."

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TOP UK Constitutional Conventions

Richard Lawton takes a stroll through the conventions that keep the UK's uncodified constitution moving.

There are a number of sources of the UK Constitution, and while Statute Law is the most significant due to the nature of Parliamentary Sovereignty, conventions come a close second in shaping how the UK system operates and has developed over time. A convention is an 'accepted norm', often something which has been recognised and adhered to over a long period of time and more often than not focuses on ensuring democracy and accountability in some way. While conventions are not technically binding and can be ignored, to do so often results in controversy. What follows is a survey of some of the most important – some long established, others emerging in more recent times.

1. Royal Assent shall never be refused

The UK has developed over the last 200 years into a constitutional monarchy, and a number of conventions by the monarch have become the accepted norm. The monarch will invite the leader of the largest party following a general election to form a government and then ceremonially shake their hand, a formal gesture to signal the passing on of the royal prerogative powers to the democratically elected government. Both these actions are themselves conventions – they are the long-established and fully expected way in which the transition of power occurs following a general election. Alongside this delegating of the prerogative powers the monarch also rescinds the right to veto legislation. The final part of the primary legislative process – Royal Assent – is an absolute given, regardless of what that Bill seeks to achieve. The last monarch to refuse Royal Assent was Queen Anne in 1707 – a clear signal of its longevity and acceptance.

2. The prime minister shall be the leader of the largest party

If we simply list the Prime Ministers – Thatcher, Blair, Brown, Cameron, May, Johnson, Starmer, Sunak and Starmer – we have all been the leader of the party that has won the most seats in the House of Commons, and it is for this reason that they have all been PM. On only a few occasions in the last century or so did we have a PM briefly not at or not the leader of the largest party – (Asquith remained PM initially) and Winston Churchill (Chamberlain remained PM) – but the Conservative Party in coalition does not count.

3. Salisbury Convention

The Salisbury Convention states that the House of Lords should not block or delay legislation that the House of Commons (Parliament Acts) has passed. This is a democratic move to ensure that the House of Lords is subservient to its elected counterpart. The Salisbury Convention is a Parliament Act ensuring that the House of Lords will be able to hold up legislation for a maximum of one year, would be the maximum time for the legislative process to be delayed. The Salisbury Convention dictates that the House of Lords should not block or delay legislation that reflects manifest public opinion, that its unelected members should not block democratic safeguards.

4. Collective Responsibility

All members of the government must support the government's policy and decisions in public. This convention is known as collective responsibility and decisions in public must be at the level of the Cabinet or the Prime Minister. All decisions must be made by the government as a collective decision. If a minister does not support this should resign or be asked to resign.

This is pretty crucial to the UK's system of government, indeed to public confidence in the government. A recognised limitation of the convention is that it can be easily suspended with many an example in history, and Clare Short Iraq and the more recent Afghanistan and over cuts to international aid.

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5. Individual ministerial responsibility

This convention maintains that each minister is fully accountable to Parliament for their own conduct, the conduct of their department and the actions and/or perceived failings of their department. Failings in any of the above could lead to calls for resignation (or dismissal if severe enough). This convention is important in a democracy as responsibility and accountability are of course crucial. It is important that ministers are compelled to be open and honest to Parliament and important to hold them to service anonymity.

Just like collective responsibility there are countless examples of it functioning as expected, but it can come under strain as ministers have been known to sidestep responsibility, or even if accepting responsibility and resigning, popping back up in government with barely a lapse in service. Suella Braverman's resignation on 19th October 2022 as Home Secretary being reappointed on 25th October 2022 is probably the most startling example of this. Priti Patel achieved the biggest ignoring of it to date when she remained Home Secretary following bullying allegations and evidence of breaking the ministerial code.

6. Sewel Convention

The Sewel Convention applies when the UK Parliament wants to legislate on a matter within the devolved competence of Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland. Under the terms of the Convention the minister will 'not normally' legislate without the relevant devolved institution having passed a consent motion. Like all conventions, it normally functions as expected – but, like all conventions, it has been ignored.

One of the most divisive issues of recent times, Brexit, provides a good example. While accepting the convention applied to the EU withdrawal Bill, this was passed regardless of the fact that all three devolved legislatures denied consent. This partly stimulated the current Labour government in its 2024 manifesto to suggest the 'setting out a new memorandum of understanding outlining how the nations will work together for the common good' – a reference to Sewel for the future and an update to the 2013 memorandum.

7. Ask Parliament

Probably the most powerful power is the committee of inquiry, which has a life and death nature to it, and it is why it has become the most important body that should be consulted.

When Parliament was recalled early to consider airstrikes in Syria in 2015, the PM at the time, David Cameron – despite his conviction that it would be both legally and morally necessary – was keen to show consideration to the constraint to reflect the mood of both public opinion and Parliament. In theory he needed neither but it is increasingly the accepted norm that he needed to do both.

At the despatch box, he said: 'I believe in the need for the use of chemical weapons, but I will of this House of Commons that, while the House is clear to me that the views of the British people are against military action. I get accordingly.'

The convention, like Sunak's use of airstrikes, was to consult Parliament. The convention was a defence of his decision on the action, saying 'I did it as fast as I could... to protect the speed... to protect the speed... to protect the speed... adding that he had the earliest opportunity to consult the conventions, if not to accept that it will

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¹ 'C-in-C' means 'Commander-in-Chief', which is a title and power of the US President as commander of the armed forces. In the UK the equivalent power is technically the monarch's.

8. Ask 'the people'

If there is to be a significant constitutional change in the UK then that this is put to the people has become the convention. Devolution introduced in 1998 through Statute Law was preceded by a referendum in each nation to ask whether it was wanted. Scottish Independence was last considered via a referendum in 2014. When the SNP under Sturgeon wanted to try again – the proposed mechanism was to be another referendum. The last three nationwide referendums have been held in relation to significant constitutional change (1975, in-out EEC; 2001, change to AV; 2016, in-out EU).

9. Accept what 'the people' say

Shown with every single referendum outcome in recent times. If you are going to ask the question then you are also going to accept the answer without exception. The UK remained members of the EEC in 1975; the UK retained FPTP in 2011; Scotland remained part of the UK in 2014; and in 2016, the outcome led to Brexit. The latter, given the majority of MPs were 'Remainers', shows just how accepted this 'accepted norm' is.

10. Accept (with grace) what

'We accept the ruling that spoken words follow action by the executive. It applies to any case, whether government or government profile cases of recent Secretary of State for government could Parliament approve suggested 'First of all in and value the independent foundation upon which course we will respect

Johnson as PM was annoyed following Court's declaration attempt to prorogue Parliament in 2019 was unlawful. Nicola Sturgeon in 2022 was thwarted attempt to initiate second referendum on independence when he ruled the Scottish Parliament did not have the power to do so. Johnson was annoyed yet accepted the ruling as a good description of the situation. He held a press conference following the ruling in both cases.

Richard Lawton is a teacher

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