

# Assessing British Democracy

The Political System of the United Kingdom



## Intro

### The State of British Democracy

What have we covered?

Assessing British Democracy

## Summary & class questions

# Recent events

## Recent events

- ▶ Conservative attack on the BBC
- ▶ Cameron's anti-Islamism/anti-Terrorism speech
- ▶ 20bn cuts in public sector spending announced
- ▶ Labour rebellion over voting with/against the government
- ▶ ...

## Last week

- ▶ Interest groups as political actors
- ▶ Judges as policy makers?

## This week

- ▶ Looking back, looking ahead: democratic governance in the UK (?)

# Framework

1. Introduction
2. The British Tradition
3. The Constitution

# Core institutions

1. The Core Executive
2. Ministers, Departments, Civil Service
3. Electoral System(s) and electoral reform



# Political Actors

1. Parties, party systems, and the 2015 GE
2. The media
3. Pressure groups & judges

## What questions can we ask?

- ▶ Looking at Polity/Freedom House/etc. scores not useful
- ▶ Britain classified as democratic for roughly 130 years
  - ▶ Institutions
  - ▶ Rights
- ▶ Is that all?
  - ▶ Quality of democracy
  - ▶ Scope of democracy

# What have governments recently done to improve quality?

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- ▶ Human Rights Act
- ▶ Devolution
- ▶ Regulation of donations
- ▶ Freedom of information
- ▶ Parliamentary reforms & Fixed-term Parliaments Act

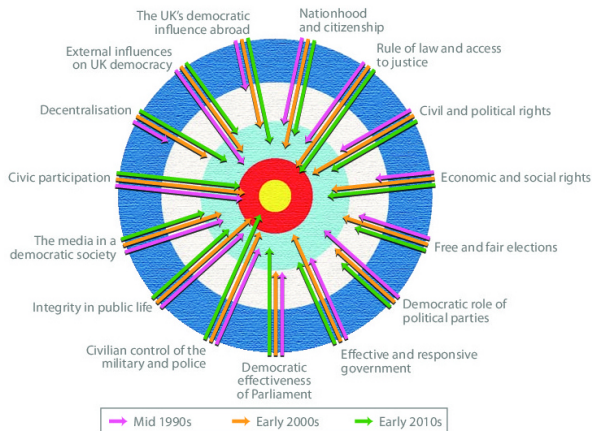
## The “Democratic Audit”

- ▶ Pioneered by David Beetham in the 1990s at the University of Essex
- ▶ Now an independent research organisation
- ▶ For audits (1996, 1999, 2002, 2012)
- ▶ Two key questions:

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- ▶ For audits (1996, 1999, 2002, 2012)
- ▶ Two key questions:
  1. How far do the people exercise control over decision-making/decision-makers?
  2. Political equality: How far is there political equality in the exercise of this control?
- ▶ Applied to 15 separate domains

# Dimensions and findings



**FIGURE 1** Extent that areas of British democracy have moved towards, or away from, the very best standards found internationally

Do you agree? Source: Wilks-Heeg 2012:9

## Problematic areas (according to the “auditors”)

- ▶ Free and fair elections
- ▶ Democratic role of parties
- ▶ The Media
- ▶ Integrity of public life



## The UK in comparison

- ▶ On quantitative indicators, UK performs worse than EU-15 & OECD-34 average
- ▶ Particularly stark contrast with Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden)

# The UK in comparison

**TABLE 1** Cross-national comparison of democracy datasets

	United Kingdom	Nordic average
Turnout in parliamentary elections (average, 2000s)	60%	79%
Proportion of the electorate who are members of political parties (late 2000s)*	1%	5%
Proportion of MPs who are women (2010)	22%	41%
Global ranking for levels of press freedom (2011; Freedom House index)	26th	2nd
Global ranking for absence of corruption (2010; Transparency International index)	20th	4th
Compliance with human rights (2010; score out of 22 on CIRI Human Rights Index)	19	21
Full-time employees earning <2/3 of median gross annual earnings (2006)*	21.6%	7.9%
Proportion of the labour force who are members of trade unions (2010)	26.5%	69.2%
Proportion of tax revenue raised by sub-national government (2009)	5.3%	25.4%
Overseas aid as a proportion of national income (average, 2000s)	0.4%	0.8%

Note: \* in these cases, the Nordic average is for Denmark, Finland and Sweden only.

Source: Wilks-Heeg 2012:10

## Five contemporary concerns

1. Unstable constitutional arrangements
2. Low and decaying trust in public institutions
3. Growing social, political, economic inequality
4. Corporate power
5. Decline of representative democracy (turnout, party membership etc.)

# Summary

- ▶ UK democracy average at best by Western standards?
- ▶ Do you agree? Do you see other problems?

## Class questions

- ▶ What have *you* learned?
- ▶ What else should have been in the box?