

How far was Britain a democracy assignment



At the beginning of the time period, 1850, Britain was not democratic. There was not a lot of choice concerning the political parties, there were only two parties: The Liberals and the Conservatives. Women did not have any right to vote and were considered second class citizens. In England and Wales only one million and five hundred men could vote and some men could vote twice. The distribution of seats did not take into account the migration of Britain.

The House of Lords (HOLD) were aristocracy that were there because of their ancestry. Members were unpaid and had to own property so the poorer classes could not be Members and therefore opinions not heard. A democracy is one which has universal suffrage, equal distribution of seats, wide range of choice of parties that cover a wide range of issues, everyone has the right to be an MP and the HOLD should be trusted members of the public.

By the end of the time period, 1918, the majority of these had been overcome, lots of people had the right to vote, redistribution of seats made it more equal, there were now more than two parties, the property qualification in becoming an MP was abolished and they were paid salaries and the HOLD lost the right to veto laws and hold them for two years, they could only hold them for one year. In 1850 the only men who could vote were upper class men who owned property, this changed in the 1832 Reform Act meant that skilled working middle class men who owned or rented property above £10 a year got the franchise.

This Act doubled the amount of men who could vote and in the growing towns this number was even greater. However not everyone thought that this Act was beneficial as historian M. Pugh said that the 1867 Reform Act

Was never likely to be more than a temporary expedient to meet the needs of the government of the day, basically saying that the act was a means of avoiding a revolution, however 'immoral' according to the times. Although the franchise was increased by half the towns and counties and towns were different, the 1832 Reform Act gave the right to vote to skilled working males in the countryside.

This succeeded in no longer making the right to vote a 'class privilege'. Even though the franchise had increased significantly 40% of males could not vote and no women could vote. There was also such a thing as plural voting, this was where men who live in a different constituency than where they went to university got two votes from these places and also men who owned two houses in different constituencies got multiple votes. This didn't change until our time period.

At the end of our time period, 1918, all men over the age of 21 and women over the age of 30 who were married to land owners or own their own land or university graduates gained the right to vote, 22% of women over 30 were refused the franchise due to the property qualification. This was an improvement to 1850 but there was still far to come until Britain was truly considered democratic as women under 30 and 22% of over 30's still could not vote and men under 21 could not vote, furthermore plural voting was in existence. 1850 saw depopulated boroughs having political representation and cities like Manchester, Leeds, Liverpool and Birmingham only had one MP. This improved greatly in 1867, 1885 and 1918. The 1867 Reform Act abolished depopulated boroughs and gave 15 made the distribution of seats fairer however the distribution of seats was unfair as the south of England

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was over-represented in parliament but and the growing towns with hardly any seats. By 1918 constituencies were reorganized so that one MP represented as near to 70, 000 people as possible which made the distribution of seats a lot fairer and was a giant step towards democracy.

Corruption and bribery were large speed bumps in the road to democracy, in 1850 voting was done in public and candidates would bribe voters with money, meals out and job opportunities. Most men faced the possibility of losing their job if they didn't vote the same way as their employer. This changed in the introduction of secret balloting in 1872 which allowed voters to vote in secret polling booths rather than public stands which gave the voters the anonymity that allows them to vote for who they want to which, in turn, made Britain more democratic than before but obviously bribery and corruption was still in existence.

The Corrupt and Illegal Practices Act of 1883 improved this situation more by limiting how much candidates could spend during election time, banning practices such as buying food or drink for voters and candidates had to account for all election expenses therefore flagging up if they were bribing. The law also stated how many carriages could be used to carry voters to the polls! By 1918 Britain was more democratic than it had been but it was still far from being totally democratic as the franchise favored a PM that would make donations to their local teams, hospitals etc.

Jurors were unpaid for most of the nineteenth century and had to own land, although the property qualification ended in the 1830s but only wealthy upper class men could be Jurors. The working class could not afford to give

up their job to be a politician and that meant that their views and needs were poorly represented compared to the ones of the wealthy. This is clearly not democratic and wasn't changed until 1911 when Lords began to be paid allowing the House to become more representative and better representing everyone. The House has long been a topic of debate, even in present day, due to the fact that they are not elected but assigned.

In 1832 however they were roped in due to their lineage of rich aristocrat ancestors and therefore are extremely wealthy. The House had the right to veto (stop) bills they feel are not 'moral', in other words don't benefit them, and delay them for two years. The House lost these rights in 1911 when the parliament act reduced their power and stopped them being able to veto bills and could only delay laws for one year. This was still not democratic as the House was hereditary and were only wealthy men who only had their best interests at heart.

By the 1880s the working class electorate had increased, however they were still not represented in politics and therefore had no one to express their interests. The formation of the Labor party in 1900 happened due to an increase in socialist ideas and trade unionism, this offered a wider choice to the electorate and meant that Britain was more democratic as the Liberals and the Conservatives promoted the middle and upper class capitalist values and the Labor party focused on the working class's needs and views meaning that everyone was now represented.

Another important factor in Britain becoming more democratic was more access of information, which is a crucial in a democracy. Later in the

nineteenth century there was an increase of literacy following the education act of 1870, this meant that the public could base introduction to the railways helped spread information, like newspapers, nationally and this made the move towards democracy easier and quicker as members of the public now knew what they wanted and who to vote for.

In 1918 Britain had come a long way and was a lot more democratic than the mid nineteenth century due to greater access of information, wider choice of parties, the power of the House of Lords cut, the widening of the House of Commons, introduction to the secret ballot, redistribution of seats and widening of the franchise.

Despite this Britain still had far to go to be considered a true democracy. Universal suffrage was not achieved, plural voting was not abolished, corruption still happens to this day and the House of Lords was hereditary and not elected. To conclude, Britain was not democratic by 1918 but it was closer to being democratic than it had ever been.