

Evaluate the role that minor political parties play in UK politics. [30 marks]

The role that minor parties play in UK politics is significant. They are able to effectively challenge government policy by persuading voters to change their party preference. They also play major roles within devolved institutions, such as the Scottish Parliament, which is dominated by the SNP. However, since they rarely hold power in Westminster, some may argue that they have a limited ability to affect UK politics. Despite this, however, this essay will argue that minor parties, overall, have a large role in UK politics.

The first theme to consider is that of policy. Minor parties demonstrate a large role in UK politics through their ability to influence the policies of larger parties. This can be demonstrated through the rise of UKIP between 2009 and 2015. UKIP started gaining support significantly since the 1999 European Parliament election and went on to convince two Conservative MPs, Mark Reckless and Douglas Carswell, to defect to UKIP in 2014, winning subsequent by-elections. As a result, UKIP's main policy of holding a referendum on EU membership became a manifesto commitment for the Conservative Party to hold onto the support of Eurosceptic Conservatives who may switch to UKIP. The Conservatives won a majority at the 2015 general election, and despite UKIP winning 13% of the vote, they only won one seat of the 650. The significance here is demonstrated through their ability to indirectly shift the policy of a major political party, and have their main priority rise to the top of the policy list. In comparison, some may say that due to the nature of the UK's electoral system, smaller parties have limited opportunities regarding policy. UKIP had one MP elected in 2015, and their ability to challenge and amend legislation is limited as a result, leading some to suggest a democratic deficit due to the level of support they received at the election. However, the ability of minor parties to directly influence policy, as demonstrated by UKIP's changing of Conservative policy, leads to a strong conclusion that minor parties play a vital role in UK politics in bringing important issues to the forefront of political debate for the major parties.

Another area to consider regarding minor parties' influence in UK politics is through the devolved parliaments. In the 2011 Scottish Parliament election, the SNP won an outright majority of seats, heavily defeating the incumbent Labour government. The SNP have



pursued a policy of Scottish Independence, and their prevalence from this election victory allowed an independence referendum to be held in 2014. The referendum resulted in Scotland voting to remain in the UK, but the SNP have held a minority government in Scotland since 2016. A parallel can also be drawn to the 2007 Welsh Assembly election, where no party won an overall majority, resulting in a coalition between Labour and Plaid Cymru. This allowed Plaid Cymru to experience governance and power for the first time. The introduction of proportional representation systems in devolved parliaments has allowed minor parties, such as the SNP and Plaid Cymru, to experience governance for the first time, and brought important issues in specific regions, such as Scottish independence, to light. This demonstrates the impact that minor parties can have if they manage to gain power in a local area, and so it can therefore be said that minor parties have a relatively large role in UK politics.

The final area of debate is that of representation. This presents an opportunity for counter-arguments, as minor parties hold limited representation at Westminster, where most decisions are made for the UK's political system. At the 2019 general election, minor parties accounted for just 11% of seats and 13% of votes. Furthermore, since the First Past the Post electoral system usually results in majority governments, the ability for minor parties to influence government decisions is relatively limited. Voting against a government bill in a minority government, such as in 2017, could show the impact of minor parties being increased, but majority governments don't usually allow for this to occur, so minor parties play a limited role in this sense. However, minor parties can use other methods within Westminster to influence government decisions. This can be done through initiating private members' bills, engaging in parliamentary debate, or joining select committees. Therefore, MPs from all parties in the House of Commons can scrutinise the work of the sitting government, and so it can be said that, even with limited representation, minor parties have an influence on government decisions, and so play a vital role in the UK's political system.

To conclude, minor parties play a significant role in UK politics. The Scottish Parliament is dominated by the SNP, and the rise of UKIP since 1999 allowed the EU referendum to be held in 2016. This demonstrates the ability of minor parties to influence government decisions and pass laws through devolved assemblies. However, it is important to note



the nature of general elections in giving dominance to the two main parties. Despite this, minor parties can influence decisions in Westminster, and so the role that minor parties play in UK politics is significant.

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