**9a) Evaluate / Analyse the ways in which citizens can participate in the political system.**

**9b) To what extent are citizens able to have a significant influence on the political system?**

**9c) Evaluate / Analyse the influence of groups outside Government on the political system.**

The Democracy Index is an annual rank of countries compiled by the independent group the Economist Intelligence Unit. It measures the degree of democracy in countries according to electoral process and pluralism, civil liberties, functioning of government, political participation, and political culture. It’s most recent 2012 publication ranked the UK as 16th most democratic country of 165 countries ranked. While not perfect, it nevertheless ranks as a ‘full democracy’ and shows that the UK is open to democratic influence from citizens. This essay will consider the extent to which….exact wording of question.

There are a range of elected bodies which citizens can **vote** for, such as the UK Parliament which has power over reserved matters across the whole of the UK, like foreign policy and most welfare benefits; and the Scottish parliament which has powers over some devolved matters, like education and health in Scotland. The Scottish parliament uses a more proportional system of election, known as the Additional Member System, where voters can vote for an MSP for their constituency and vote for a party on a regional list, which usually means that more parties are represented in the parliament. A voter from Rutherglen constituency, for example, is represented by their Labour constituency MSP – James Kelly, as well as 7 additional MSPs representing their region of Glasgow, including Bob Doris (SNP), Ruth Davidson (Conservative), and Patrick Harvie (Green), giving a range of positions across the political spectrum influence and representation in the Scottish Parliament, whom voters can then contact and lobby according to their preference.

Voters can also exercise their vote in referenda. The 2014 Scottish independence referendum saw unprecedented levels of political engagement. Ordinary people campaigned on both sides by leafleting, door to door canvassing, debated on social media, and participated in televised debates and radio phone ins. Grassroots organisations such as Radical Independence Campaign and Women for Independence, who continue to be active since the No result. Turnout was 85%, the highest recorded for any election in the UK since the introduction of universal suffrage in 1928, and membership of the Scottish National Party now exceeds 100,000, significantly up from 25,000 on referendum day. Clearly therefore, Scottish citizens are currently engaging, participating and influencing politics on a scale unseen in recent years.

In contrast, the UK Parliament uses a First Past the Post voting system, which tends to produce disproportionate results. In the UK Parliament, citizens have just one MP representing their constituency. Voters from Rutherglen and Hamilton West constituency are represented solely by Labour MP Tom Greatrex. Here, supporters of parties other than Labour may feel they are not represented particularly well. In ‘safe seats’ where the winning candidate wins by very large majorities, apathy can set in. The constituency of East Ham was the safest seat in the UK in 2010, with Labour’s Stephen Timms winning by over 27,000 votes. All other votes were effectively wasted. Across the UK, supporters of smaller parties with widespread but not concentrated support may feel similarly disengaged and apathetic given that their votes have limited influence. Liberal Democrat leader and Deputy Prime Minister has said First Past the Post is ‘broken’. Despite gaining over 900,000 votes in the 2010 UK General election (3% of all votes cast), UKIP won zero seats. Some feel the UK political system has been unresponsive to their needs. In 2013, comedian Russell Brand said in an interview he had never voted as he feels the UK’s political system has created a ‘disillusioned, disenfranchised underclass that it fails to serve, and that politicians were only interested in serving the needs of corporations. The interview has been watched over 10 million times on Youtube and Brand has since been very active on political TV shows such as Question Time, which would suggest have struck a chord with enough people. Arguably, therefore, voting as a means to influence the political system is more effective in Scotland than in the UK. In saying that, turnout in the 2010 UK election (65%) was higher than in the 2011 Scottish Parliament elections (55%), which suggests that significant numbers of people in all elections evidently do not feel they have enough of a stake in the result to merit voting, which is unhealthy for democracy.

However, as Russell Brand pointed out, his refusal to vote is not because he is disinterested in politics. Quite the opposite, he is very interested and keen to participate but feels there are more effective ways to influence. It is true that there are many ways to engage to participate in and influence the political system other than through voting. Citizens can also sign petitions, join pressure groups and involve the media in their cause. In 2014 the Guardian newspaper backed a petition by the group ‘Equality Now’ who campaign against violence to women, urging the then Education Minister Michael Gove to take action against Female Genital Mutilation (FGM). As a result of the petition, which attracted 250,000 signatures, Gove promised to write to all schools reminding them to raise awareness of the issue and to remind schools of their duty to be pro-active in protecting school girls from this practice. Gove also agreed to consider how FGM can be taught in schools in an age-appropriate way. This example shows that the UK political system can be open to influence.

However, not all campaigns are influential. A petition on the website ’38 degrees’ calling on the UK Government ‘not to break up the NHS and hand it over to private healthcare companies’ has amassed over 620,000 signatures, and tens of thousands of people have marched against NHS privatisation throughout the UK in the last year. Although it remains overwhelmingly public – perhaps as a result of public resistance - the coalition government has pressed ahead with introducing elements of privatisation to the English NHS through the 2012 Health and Social Care Act. The amount of NHS money going to private companies has doubled since 2007, demonstrating the limits of public protest. While citizens may have been able to slow the pace of change desired by the Government, they have been unsuccessful in changing the overall direction of that change.

Overall, there are a variety of ways citizens can participate in and influence the UK political system. Voting is often considered the cornerstone of democracy, and mainly as a result of its proportional electoral system, Scottish politics is more open to engagement and influence from citizens than UK wide politics. However, it is important not to forget the other means of engagement; lobbying representatives, joining and campaigning for political parties, joining pressure groups and taking part in marches or demonstrations, all of which have been used to varying success.