To what extent was the growth of democracy in Great Britain due to the influence of political pressure groups?

Democracy is a system of “government of the people, by the people, for the people” (Abraham Lincoln). In 1850 Britain was not a very democratic country since only one in seven men and no women could vote. However, after 1850 the government passed a series of reforms which gradually made Britain more democratic. By 1928 Britain had become a modern democracy with universal suffrage where all adults over twenty-one were enfranchised. Historians debate why democracy grew in Britain during this time. Some argue that it was because of the influence of political pressure groups such as the National Reform League, which put pressure on politicians and the Government to pass reforms. Others counter that argument, asserting that socio-economic changes or party competition were more important factors, or that WW1 played a key role. This essay will seek to establish how important each factor was in causing the growth of democracy in Britain. It will attempt to demonstrate that whilst political pressure groups played an important role, the root cause of political change lies in the wider changes which were taking place within Britain’s economy and society.

Many socialist historians argue that the growth of democracy was due to the influence of political pressure groups. Political pressure groups put pressure on politicians and the Government to pass reforms. Due to the politicisation of the working classes and women after 1850, many groups formed to campaign for further democratisation of Britain. Three groups stand out in terms of their influence.

One such political pressure group was the National Reform League – founded in 1865. It campaigned for the secret ballot, a more equal distribution of seats and enfranchisement of all men. They organised marches, some of which degenerated into riots, in Hyde Park during July 1866. Furthermore, by 1867 they had 65000 members and 600 branches nationwide – which showed the government the scale of the desire for political change. The historians Pearce & Stewart claim that their activities were “a popular outburst which any government would have found difficult to ignore”. This certainly seems to be the case as the League’s actions
appeared to result in the Government of Benjamin Disraeli passing the 1867 Reform Act – which gave the vote to one in three men. Historian Royden Harrison agrees, arguing that the popular response to the Reform League forced the government to pass reforms which enfranchised the upper working classes. There is certainly an argument therefore that the National Reform League was successful in extending the growth of democracy as its growth and actions can be directly linked to the 1867 Reform Act.

The Labour Movement also put political pressure on the Government for a more democratic society by providing workers with a political organisation to fight for their needs. In 1900, the Labour Representation Committee was set up and won two seats in Parliament. The Labour Party was formed in 1906 with its manifesto stating “The House of Commons is supposed to be the people’s House and yet the people are not there.” From within Westminster they campaigned directly to the Government for universal suffrage and salaries for MPs – which were introduced in 1911 and meant that some working class men could stand for election. Thus, the Labour Movement was also partially responsible for the growth of democracy. Indeed, after WW1, Labour became the second largest party in Parliament and was therefore able to apply pressure on the Government to pass future political reforms, including the 1918 and 1928 Acts which extended the franchise.

Finally, the Women’s Suffrage Movement put pressure on politicians and the Government to enfranchise women on the same terms as men. The movement was split into two factions: the Suffragists (or National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies) – which was set up in 1897 by Mrs Millicent Fawcett and campaigned using peaceful methods, and the Suffragettes (or the Women’s Social and Political Union) which was set up in 1903 by Mrs Emmeline Pankhurst and campaigned using violent and aggressive tactics. It is likely that the NUWSS’s methods proved more influential in swaying the opinions of MPs and the general public than those of the WSPU, although women still did not have the vote at the start of WW1. Whichever group was the most influential, if they had not campaigned for the franchise in the first place, it is doubtful that most women over thirty would have received the vote in 1918 or that all women over twenty-one would have been enfranchised in 1928.
Therefore, although it is difficult to argue that political pressure groups were solely responsible for democratic change, what is clear that if they had not applied pressure the government would have had less inclination to reform democracy in Britain.

Conversely, Liberal historians contend that social and economic changes in Britain after 1850 made political change inevitable. D.G Wright claims that "Parliamentary reform was largely a reflection of changes in the economic and social structure of the country". Between 1871 and 1911 the population of the UK grew rapidly from 31.8 million to 45.3 million and also urbanised – with 80% of the population living in the growing towns and cities. These people worked in the factories springing up all over the country. By the 19th century Britain was the "workshop of the world" due to this massive industrialisation. This economic success depended entirely on the businessmen who ran the factories and the millions of industrial workers. Taken together with the decline of agriculture, this meant that power in Britain was shifting away from the aristocratic land owning classes which had traditionally governed the country. The working classes were becoming increasingly aware of their own importance and of politics. Also, women were becoming increasingly important in British society and industry – by 1851 33% of the total British workforce was female. As a result of this, working class men and women set up trade unions to influence the government. Furthermore, compulsory education from 1870s onwards meant that the population was far better informed than their ancestors as they could read the daily newspapers which became available from the 1880s. For the first time, working class people could keep track of political developments and begin to demand change – and to achieve this, some set up political pressure groups. The working class’s and women’s social status had improved and they demanded that their political status should change to reflect that. Thus, it can be argued that socio-economic change led to the politicisation of the working classes and women and was therefore largely responsible for the growth of democracy in Britain.

However, other historians claim that WW1 was of great importance in explaining the growth of democracy in Britain. The conflict was a ‘total war’ which meant that every man and every woman of every social class was affected. Historian
Martin Pugh asserts that, “The experience and response of the mass of people during the First World War were of major importance in shaping the modern pattern of British politics.” Five million men served in the armed forces: three quarters of a million were killed; and one million seriously wounded. By 1918, it was untenable that men who had made such sacrifices for their country should not have a say in how it was run. Women also played a vital role during the war – replacing conscripted men in many professions, most importantly, in munitions factories. This demonstrated that women were responsible enough for the vote. Historian H. Winkler agrees stating that, “It is difficult to see how women could have achieved so much in anything like a similar time span without the unique circumstances arising from the war.” Subsequently, the Government was morally obligated to enfranchise those citizens who had given up so much for their country. The 1918 Representation of the People Act gave the vote to all men over twenty-one and 8.4 million women (those who were over thirty and a householder or married to one, or a university graduate). It is clear that this was, at least partly, a reward for those who had fought in the war as armed services veterans could vote when they turned nineteen. Therefore, WW1 acted as a catalyst which helped working class men and many women get the vote in 1918 and consequently, sped up the growth of democracy in Britain.

Party competition and the beliefs of individual politicians are often advanced by Conservative historians as reasons for the growth of democracy in Britain. Liberal politicians such as William Gladstone and Lord John Russell believed that granting the vote to the upper working classes would cause their ‘moral improvement’. Moreover, in the 1860s, concerns were rising in some political circles that the working classes would turn to socialism and possibly start a revolution. These politicians also assumed that the newly enfranchised men would vote for the Liberals – if they had enfranchised them. By giving them the vote, these politicians hoped to break the power of the Tory aristocracy as well as guiding the working classes away from radical ideas. For that reason, historians such as F.B Smith and Maurice Cowling regard party competition as a reason for the 1867 Reform Act. However, other historians argue that Conservative politicians also favoured democratisation as they believed it would gain them more votes. Historian
Gertrude Himmerlfarb believes that the future Conservative Prime Minister, Benjamin Disraeli, favoured reform because he embraced democracy. He also favoured it because he thought it would create popular Conservatism which would halt Liberal domination. Historian P. Smith states that “Modern Conservatism’s electoral success since 1867 would have been impossible without its capacity to command a significant working-class vote, and here one owed something to Disraeli’s sense of the necessity of accepting the enlargement of the political nation.” As it was his government which actually passed the 1867 Act, it is said that Disraeli “dished the Whigs and stole the Liberal’s clothes”. Later, in 1928, it was again a Conservative government (that of Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin) which extended the franchise further – to all women over twenty-one in the hope that the new voters would support the party which enfranchised them. Both the Tories and the Liberals hoped that extending the franchise would turn the working classes away from socialism and encourage people to vote for them. Hence, there is also an argument that party competition and the beliefs of individual politicians were partly responsible for the growth of democracy in Britain.

It is clear from the above analysis that there were many factors at work during the late 19th and early 20th centuries which had an impact on the development of democracy in Britain. The growth of democracy in Britain was partly due to the influence of political pressure groups. If these groups had never campaigned for change the government may never have thought it necessary to reform Britain’s political system. The National Reform League’s actions appear to have had a direct impact on the decision to enfranchise ‘respectable’ working class men in 1867 and there is no doubting that the creation of the Labour Party meant that the working classes could campaign for the vote from within Parliament itself. The influence of the NUWSS – who arguably played a vital role in enfranchisement of women in 1918 and 1928 - and the WSPU in particular, is more open to debate. However, the major socio-economic changes which Britain underwent during this period appear to be the root cause of the growth of democracy. The Industrial Revolution meant that the rapidly growing population were living increasingly in urban rather than rural areas. This concentration of people coupled with the increasing literacy rate meant that the working classes and women became more
politically aware and started to demand the right to vote. It was the driving force which enabled and encouraged the formation of political pressure groups such as the National Reform League, the Labour Movement and the Women’s Suffrage Movement. Moreover, industrialisation affected the nature of WW1 - it meant that it was in effect, an industrial war i.e. a competition between countries as to who could produce the most munitions etc. This type of war gave people from all sectors of society a chance, and indeed an obligation, to prove their worth and their right to the franchise. As a result, men over twenty-one and most women over thirty were rewarded by the Government with the vote in 1918. Finally, the politicians of the day realised that they had to be seen to be responding to socio-economic change as a means to avert the risk of revolution as well as gaining political advantage for themselves. Therefore, although political pressure groups played a vital role in influencing the growth of democracy, social and economic changes in Britain were the root cause of political reform.