Discuss **at least two** factors that have been shown to affect conformity. Refer to evidence in your answer (16 marks)

One factor that has been found to influence conformity rates is group size. Asch manipulated the size of the majority to record the effect it had on the participant. Using his original procedure, he varied the number of confederates in the group. He found that conformity was only 3% when there was one confederate, 13% when there were two confederates and 33% when there were three confederates. Conformity did not increase much beyond three confederates, but in some conditions, a larger group of 15 confederates led to slightly less conformity. As Asch’s original study is thought to support the existence of normative social influence, these variations are useful for understanding the optimum number needed in the majority to exert those pressures on the minority. This could be used in schools to make sure that children with problematic behaviour are grouped with three others whose behaviour is more desirable in the hope that the problem behaviour will be modified by the presence of the larger group. The observation that the larger group of 15 was less influential backs up the idea that large majorities are no more influential and possibly less influential than smaller ones, although we have to be cautious about Asch’s finding as it may have been caused by the real participant becoming suspicious that ‘something was going on’ when the majority is too large. This highlights one of the problems of using lab research to understand the influences behind real-life behaviour.

Another factor that has been found to influence conformity rates is unanimity. Asch found that when one confederate gave the right answer before the real participant answered, conformity dropped to 5.5%. Interestingly, Asch also found that when the confederate dissenter gave a different answer from the majority, but that the answer was still incorrect, this was equally effective in reducing conformity in the participant, suggesting that social support for deviating from the majority gives the participant confidence to break away from the majority, even if they are still the only person giving the right answer. This has implications for those attempting to influence minorities in everyday life as it suggests that if the majority are not unanimous in their message, then they may fail to influence the minority, for example in a business setting, where a management committee may be attempting to influence a new member. It also alerts us to the increased pressure of those who are subjected to unanimous majorities, for example in a jury situation. It may be particularly difficult for one or two jurors to express their true opinion if faced with 10 or 11 people who are all in agreement. This also has useful applications as it shows the importance of allowing jurors write down whether or not they believe a suspect to by guilty, rather than declare it to the group.

Lastly, one other factor that has been found to have an influence on conformity is the difficulty of the task. Conformity increases when the task becomes more difficult. Asch found an increase in conformity rates when he made the length of the lines more similar. This can be explained through informational social influence – as the task becomes harder, there is a greater need to look to others for the right answer. This can be useful knowledge for those working in education, as it suggests that when students are working on a difficult assignment, they would benefit from being in a group, thus increasing their accuracy in the task.