Past Paper Questions
Do you agree with the view that, although Wolsey appeared the dominant figure in the government of England in the years 1515–29, in reality he merely followed Henry’s bidding?
Do you agree with the view that in the years 1515–25 Henry VIII wholly surrendered power in government to Cardinal Wolsey?

What is the debate?
Did Wolsey or Henry have the authority?

Henry had the ultimate authority but there was conflict
Conflict shows that Wolsey backed down and could not simply do what he wanted.
- In 1522, Wolsey proposed a surprise attack on the French Navy but Henry stopped him
- In 1528, Wolsey and Henry fell out over who should be appointed abbess to the nunnery of Wilton, Wiltshire. Wolsey had to apologise
- They fell out over the Amicable Grant and ultimately relations broke down over Wolsey’s failure to get a divorce

Henry had the authority
Recently historians have argued that Henry was in ultimate charge and Wolsey was only an advisor.
- Wolsey was forced to change his mind if Henry did not agree – Wolsey was originally against war with the French but had to change his mind when Henry was clearly pro-war
- We tend to see him as a ‘prime minister’ but this is anachronistic i.e. using a term or idea that does not belong to the period

Wolsey had the authority
This is the traditional line. Wolsey made the policy between 1515 and 1529 and was, therefore, the dominant figure or ‘alter rex.’ Evidence for this is:
- Henry was young and inexperienced and Wolsey took advantage of this
- The council of the early years vanished leaving Wolsey as Henry’s chief minister in this period
- Literary sources, e.g. Polydore Virgil and poet John Skelton, suggested that Wolsey distracted Henry with gifts and Henry played a passive role at court
- Wolsey had enormous wealth, the largest disposable income in England his palace, Hampton Court, rivalled Henry’s
- Wolsey was ruthless in his treatment of the nobility e.g. Polydore Virgil and the Duke of Buckingham

Conclusion:
1. Traditionally Wolsey was seen as dominant
2. Recently this has been challenged
3. They had conflict – quite an equal relationship – but Henry was ultimately King