

Edexcel GCE Government and Politics: Topic C Politics of the USA Jonathan Vickery

Content explanation and advice

The guidance below expands on the content of A2 Topic C, Politics of the USA, as outlined in the specification and in the 'Getting Started' booklet. It is set out in the form of an outline scheme of work, in which knowledge and understanding is built up within each theme. However, it should not be taken as providing an exhaustive account of the knowledge and understanding relevant to Topic C, nor is it prescriptive in that other approaches may be equally effective.

UNIT 3C - Representative Processes in the USA

Elections and Voting

Key themes:

Mechanisms

- Procedures for primary elections (closed and open) and caucuses, advantages and disadvantages of each
- Presidential candidate selection: significance of role of the invisible primary; the pattern of primaries and caucuses and extent of 'frontloading', reasons for and consequences of; different methods of financing campaigns, e.g. 'matching funds' and self-financing, arguments for and against; significance of role of national party conventions
- Presidential elections: significance of role of televised presidential debates; different methods of financing campaigns, e.g. federal grant and self-finance, arguments for and against; the workings of the Electoral College
- Referendums: role of initiatives and propositions, contribution to democracy; arguments for and against

Outcomes

- All Congressional elections: reasons for incumbent advantage; similarities/contrasts between midterm and 'presidential' years; extent of effect of presidential 'coattails'; extent of 'split-ticket' voting, reasons for and consequences of
- Midterm elections: significance, and factors which have affected the outcome of recent midterm elections
- Presidential elections: factors which have affected the outcome of recent presidential elections

Reform

- Debate over the role of the Electoral College and possible replacements (see e.g. <http://www.nationalpopularvote.com/>)
- Debate over the presidential candidate nominating system and possible replacements (see e.g. <http://archive.fairvote.org/index.php?page=773> <http://www.vqronline.org/articles/2006/summer/sabato-politics-americas/>)
- Debate over the extent to which US elections hold politicians to account: role of campaign finance, extent of success of recent attempts at reform, reasons for and consequences of (see e.g. <http://www.opensecrets.org/>) (*Note: campaign finance will not be the named subject of 45 mark questions*); lack of congressional term limits (see e.g. <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Reports/1994/08/BG994nbsp-Term-Limitsnbsp-The-Only-Way>); gerrymandering, reasons for and consequences of, possible reform (see e.g. <http://www.fairvote.org/redistricting>); low turnout in primary and general elections, reasons for and consequences of

Political Parties

Key themes:

Ideology

- Transformation of two major parties from broad non-ideological coalitions of 1950s and 60s into more ideologically cohesive parties of today, their values and policies; overlap and differences between them; effect of this process on the political system
- Extent of this process: current ideological divisions within the two main parties, e.g. between fiscal conservatives, social conservatives and moderates in the Republican Party, and between liberal activists, centrists and moderates in the Democratic Party; values, influence and success of the different factions within each party

Support

- Different groups of voters who typically support the two main parties, historical and contemporary reasons for this support; relative significance of different groups to the parties

Function

- Debate begun in 1970s over the continuing relevance of political parties; extent to which they continue to carry out their core functions and extent to which these have been taken over by other bodies such as pressure groups

Minor parties

- Factors which limit success of minor parties; impact they have had in state and national politics, particularly in congressional and presidential elections

Pressure Groups

Key themes:

Role

- Different categories of pressure group; institutional, demographic and cultural factors which give US pressure groups a significant role in US politics

Power

- Different access points within the federal system which pressure groups seek to influence; methods used, such as lobbying, campaign donation and direct action, and motives for choosing particular access points; extent to which activity by opposing groups is self-cancelling, and factors which conduce to the pre-eminence of some groups, e.g. NRA, AIPAC, AARP; power of pressure groups relative to other representative bodies e.g. political parties

Controversy

- Debate over role of pressure groups within the political system; how far they enhance democracy, give the opportunity to further the interests of all groups in society and disperse power, or whether they are anti-democratic and work to concentrate power for a few

Racial and Ethnic Politics

Key themes:

Racial equality

- Significance of political strategies to reduce racial inequality such as civil rights legislation, busing, majority-minority districts and affirmative action; problems they seek to resolve and extent of their impact and success, reasons for and consequences of (*Note: only affirmative action will be a named individual subject of 45 mark questions*); extent to which race continues to be a significant political issue

Representation

- Extent of minority representation in the different branches of government, reasons for and consequences of; significance of political movements which offer an alternative form of representation, such as black nationalism

Key issues

- Key issues in contemporary minority politics, such as immigration reform; policies of the main political parties on immigration reform and divisions between and within them; reasons for the controversy surrounding immigration reform, including: scale of undocumented /illegal immigration and changing demographics of the USA; increasing significance of the Latino vote; involvement of the Supreme Court in cases such as *Plyler v. Doe*; failure of recent attempts at reform such as the Bush 'guest worker' scheme, Comprehensive Immigration Reform Act of 2006 and the DREAM Act, reasons for and consequences of; the Secure Fences Act 2006, committing to build a 700 mile fence on the US-Mexican border; so called 'sanctuary' states and cities; competing state and federal legislation, including attempts by some states to strengthen enforcement against undocumented/illegal immigrants, e.g. SB 1070 in Arizona; proposed constitutional amendments on 'birthright citizenship'; debate between those advocating a path to citizenship for the estimated 12 million undocumented/illegal immigrants and those who regard such a policy as a reward to law-breakers
- Immigration reform frequently features in both the UK and US media: a recent Guardian article is a readable introduction (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/may/15/el-paso-barack-obama-immigration>); there is good collection of articles at <http://www.salon.com/news/immigration/>; and there are features on both the New York Times (*Immigration and Emigration* <http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/subjects/i/immigration-and->

[emigration/index.html?inline=nyt-classifier](http://www.nytimes.com/2006/03/31/us/immigration/index.html?inline=nyt-classifier)) and Washington Post websites (*The Battle over Immigration* <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/custom/2006/03/31/CI2006033101407.html>) which have regular updates on recent developments.

The White House site on immigration is <http://www.whitehouse.gov/issues/immigration> and President Obama's address on immigration reform in July 2010 is available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-comprehensive-immigration-reform>

UNIT 4C - Governing the USA

Constitution

Key themes:

Character

- History of the revolution, Articles of Confederation and Constitutional Convention; principles of the constitution, such as separation of powers, checks and balances and federalism, reasons for and consequences of; extent to which the constitution is anti-democratic; circumstances of the addition of the Bill of Rights, reasons for and consequences of

Evolution

- Process of formal amendment, reasons for and consequences of, its advantages and disadvantages; ways in which the constitution has altered other than through formal amendment, such as judicial interpretation, and executive and legislative practice, e.g. extent to which the federal government has acquired power at the expense of the states, reasons for and consequences of; extent to which the practice of the modern constitution corresponds to the original principles

Effectiveness

- Impact of the constitution on US system of government, extent to which it produces 'gridlock' and ways in which it could be argued to be in need of reform; extent to which the rights contained in the Bill of Rights and elsewhere in the constitution are an effective guarantee of freedom

Congress

Key themes:

Constitutional provision

- Powers, background of post-revolutionary period, position as pre-eminent branch; composition, bicameral structure, different electorates and election intervals, reasons for and consequences of; shared and exclusive powers of House of Representatives and Senate in domestic and foreign policy, reasons for and consequences of; extent to which checked by other branches, reasons for and consequences of

Evolution

- Extent to which Congress has increased the reach of its power through expansive reading of e.g. the 'necessary and proper' and the 'interstate commerce' clauses, reasons for and consequences of; extent to which the role of Congress in the

constitution as the pre-eminent branch has weakened and the presidency correspondingly strengthened, reasons for and consequences of

Power within Congress

- Committee structure in both chambers and composition of party leadership; committee chairmen and party leadership as competing sources of leadership; extent to which party leaders have become dominant over the past 30 years, reasons for and consequences of

Effectiveness

- Extent to which legislative role affected by complexity of legislative process, growth of partisanship and partisan gerrymandering, increasing cost of elections, increasing use of procedural devices e.g. the filibuster, and preoccupation of representatives and senators with local interests over national interest; extent to which these produce 'gridlock', extent to which bipartisanship necessary and/or possible; extent to which oversight of executive branch driven by partisanship; extent to which foreign policy role ceded to the president

Presidency

Key themes:

Constitutional provision

- Powers, background of monarchical tyranny, vaguely defined, all significant powers checkable by Congress

Evolution

- Growth of presidential power in the 20th century, reasons for and consequences of; sources of contemporary power, extent to which the presidency may be considered 'imperial'; significance of, and extent of changes to, role of vice-president, e.g. during tenures of Dick Cheney and Joe Biden, reasons for and consequences of

Power within the executive branch

- Federal bureaucracy, composition, sources and extent of power, problems of presidential control, reasons for and consequences of; influences on composition, role and extent of influence of Cabinet and Executive Office (*Note: the federal bureaucracy will not be the named subject of 45 mark questions*)

Effectiveness

- Extent to which the president still restrained by checks and balances despite increased expectations of role; extent to which the president is dependent on the 'power to persuade' and extent to which able to circumvent checks through e.g. power as commander in chief, signing statements, executive orders and recess appointments; extent to which checks more significant in domestic than foreign policy, reasons for and consequences of; extent to which the president dependent on factors outside his control to be considered a 'success'

Supreme Court

Key themes:

Judicial review

- Constitutional powers, 'the least dangerous branch'; creation of judicial review, reasons for and consequences of; procedure for selecting, hearing and deciding cases; sources of and constraints on power, extent to which the power of the court has increased to make it an 'imperial judiciary'

Composition

- Constitutional provision; recent division of court into competing liberal and conservative blocs, reasons for and consequences of; influences on presidential choice of nominees, recent politicisation of confirmation process, reasons for and consequences of

Judicial interpretation

- 'Judicial activism' and 'judicial restraint' as means of characterising decisions, justices and courts, criticisms of and arguments for; distinction between strict and loose constructionism, and originalist and 'living constitution' approaches to judicial interpretation, criticisms of and arguments for

The Roberts Court

- Direction of the Roberts court since 2005; significance of recent decisions, such as *Gonzales v. Carhart*, *Meredith v Jefferson*, *United States v. Stevens*, *Commonwealth of Massachusetts v. Environmental Protection Agency*, *Boumediene v. Bush*, *Ricci v. DeStefano*, *DC v Heller*, *Citizens United v FEC* etc; significance of recent appointments, e.g. Roberts, Alito, Sotomayor and Kagan; significance of Kennedy as the 'swing justice'

Controversy

- Debate over the role of the court as an unelected body in a democracy; e.g. extent to which the court has been using its power to impose its own values, extent to which it has been fulfilling a necessary function of keeping the values of the constitution relevant to modern society
- Debate over whether the court is a political or judicial institution; e.g. extent to which justices have abandoned judicial neutrality in the pursuit of their own political agenda, extent to which decisions will inevitably be labelled 'political' by opponents