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US Presidents 1993–2025

from Clinton to Biden
for A Level Edexcel Politics

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Teacher's Introduction

This pack is designed to provide students with an applied educational resource for the presidency module as part of their A Level Politics study of the United States.

Understanding the key individuals, circumstances and events associated with a selection of modern presidents is essential for learning about politics in the USA. Debates surrounding the attributes which make a president successful, the executive's relationship with other branches of government, and the limits on presidential power should become familiar to students studying this module. This pack will give vital context to many of these debates, providing students with examples to learn that are relevant to both the module and the wider course.

This pack will cover every president from Clinton to Biden, exploring key elements of their presidency that are of relevance to the exam specification. Although this pack provides a detailed overview of each presidency, it is not designed to be comprehensive, instead focusing on events and debates that may be of particular use to students when sitting their examination.

This pack has been designed to be either worked through in order, or dipped in and out of to support your own learning. The talking points and exam questions provided are designed to engage students while provoking critical thought and analysis that will be required in the examination. While students may be required to provide examples of presidential activity in their exams, they do not need to have an exhaustive knowledge of every president in this pack, so teachers may want to use their discretion to determine which examples are of most relevance.

I hope this resource can contribute towards an engaging and rewarding learning environment. Best of luck with your teaching!

Remember!

Always check the exam board website for new information, including changes to the specification and sample assessment material.

October 2025

Bill Clinton

Bill Clinton rode into office in an era of American dominance and optimism, his youth and charisma reflecting a confident and buoyant USA at the very peak of its global power and influence. With the Cold War conclusively over, the nation had lost its long-term adversary of the Soviet Union and was free to shape the world in its own image – a project Clinton pursued at an extraordinary pace.

At home, meanwhile, a booming economy kept citizens mostly content, and Clinton's approval ratings rising. In many respects, he was simply fortunate to inherit the presidency during an era of prosperity and relative peace. But Clinton, with a telegenic charm, also changed the office of the president through sheer force of character.

The American global order

Perhaps the major achievement of Clinton's presidency was the advancement of American leadership into almost every corner of global politics and economics. With the fall of the world's rival superpower, the Soviet Union, the USA could claim to have won an ideological fight for world domination, and most of the world's nations and leaders accepted this new reality.

Into this space came a revitalised project of global integration, which built on the ideological predecessor-but-one, President Reagan. The USA would champion free new massive trade deals removing barriers to trade and opening up economies to products, while allowing American corporations to access cheap foreign labour – part of a driving down of costs for American consumers and businesses alike, fuelling

Theory

The cultural theory could be used to understand some aspects of the Clinton presidency. This is because Clinton's approach to politics was very much in tune with the attitudes of his era. The end of the Cold War gave the impression that the USA had conclusively won an ideological battle – and that it was the only economic model that chimed with Clinton's personal brand as being 'post-ideology'.

In particular, the North American Free Trade Agreement, or NAFTA, became a symbol of new global relations. Coming into force during his early years in office, it created one of the closest relationships in history between the USA, Canada and Mexico. It was enthusiastically promoted by Clinton's 'middle way' approach to politics, which aimed to strike a compromise position between liberal and Republican policies.

But the drive towards an American global order went beyond the economic realm. Clinton pushed for a world in their own liberal image – promising that the Western model would bring peace and stability to the rest of the world, much of which was unfamiliar with democracy.

Clinton oversaw the reinvention of the NATO institution – previously a bulwark against Soviet aggression – under his leadership into a force for the advancement of liberal democracy. It quelled the new independent states that had broken away from the Soviet Union, while also supporting military intervention in conflict-ridden states in Europe and beyond, establishing a 'new world's policeman'.

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And the resolution of age-old conflicts became a top priority, with Clinton becoming a master of diplomacy and negotiation. His personal intervention in Northern Ireland played a key role in securing an agreement which was secured in the long-contested territory. His administration oversaw a complicated settlement which ended a brutal genocidal war being waged in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and a viable peace process in the intractable Israel/Palestine conflict, setting out a path forward which offered hope to many at the time.

In all of these projects was a common thread – a strong belief in the power of international cooperation and the exercise of American power. This was a period of relative peace and prosperity, and a time of bipartisan cooperation. Clinton is remembered as a global leader who sought to symbolise the start of a new era of peace and prosperity.

Failure in Congress

Despite Clinton's far-reaching influence abroad, his record on domestic politics was mixed. In his first two years of his tenure in office did Clinton enjoy unified government, where both the executive and legislative branches were controlled by his party, the Democrats.

A primary part of Clinton's legislative agenda was healthcare reform, which he had campaigned on during the 1992 presidential election. Once in office Clinton unusually put his wife, Hillary, in charge of the reform programme, while the details of the scheme were worked out in private. This led to increasing criticism from Congress throughout 1993 due to the perception it was being done without the participation of legislators.

The long period of behind closed doors discussion also gave opponents of the legislation time to dominate the public debate. Conservatives, in collaboration with the health insurance industry, launched a public campaign opposing reform. The lack of detail provided by the Clinton administration, and the complicated nature of the legislation, allowed his opponents to frame the public debate in a way that undermined its chances of passage in Congress.

Ultimately, the healthcare reform wasn't put to a decisive congressional vote until August 1994, just before mid-term elections which threatened to end Clinton's advantage of unified government. The reform failed – despite Democrat control of Congress – in an embarrassment for the Clinton administration. It demonstrated the importance of cooperation with Congress over legislation, and that this should be a goal throughout an electoral term, rather than simply during an election period. Queen Elizabeth II, who was not traditionally given responsibility over policy, also created consternation and slowed the legislation's progress.

At the 1994 midterm elections the Republican Party campaigned heavily on Clinton's record, successfully galvanising opposition against them, and effectively killing off any chance of a second term. The Republicans sensationally took control of both houses of Congress – a position they held throughout the rest of the Clinton presidency, thus limiting the president's ability to push his agenda.

And once Republicans returned to control of Congress, they engaged in tactical brinkmanship to an extent not previously seen in Washington DC. House Speaker Newt Gingrich developed a strategy of confrontation over cooperation, and sought to flex his own legislative muscles. Rather than working with their own legislative agenda, entirely separate to that of the executive's. During this time they introduced 10 hefty bills related to Clinton's agenda which took up much of the legislative agenda.

Though this strategy was largely doomed given the president's ability to veto legislation, it did create a period of legislative gridlock in Washington DC.

This more combative, showboating and uncompromising approach to the legislative process acted as a blueprint to what would eventually become the norm in American politics. It demonstrated that even when a party did not control the White House, it could still engage in a serious conversation and significantly restrict their opponent's power.

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The personal touch

Nevertheless, despite such restrictions on Clinton's exercise of power, his popularity throughout his presidency. Though an initial wobble saw his approval rating fall below 50%, his popularity was otherwise seen to rise throughout his presidency, peaking at 66% in 1995. Upon leaving office, Clinton had the highest end-of-presidency approval ratings of any president since Franklin D. Roosevelt.

One reason for this record-breaking popularity is his 'littler person' persona. Clinton became the first president elected to office in the USA, a role which reflected his extraordinary presence on the political scene.

He had been elected Governor of Arkansas at just 31 years old, and with no prior political office. In the mid-1980s he had burst onto the national political scene as governor, and was widely touted as a potential presidential candidate at the 1988 contest in which he decided not to run. Throughout his pre-presidential career, Clinton was seen as exploiting his youth and charisma for political popularity, and for adjusting his public persona to the national mood of the moment.

By age 46 he had been inaugurated president, becoming the third youngest president in US history. His youth and approachable demeanour were particularly advantageous against his opponents – George Bush and Bob Dole – who were conversely perceived as more establishment figures. Clinton was the first of the large 'baby boomer' cohort to take on the presidency, and his style of communicating increasingly chimed with what was becoming the largest generation in the USA.

Clinton also widely became known as the USA's first 'soundbite president', able to communicate in an accessible, succinct and often humorous way which would disarm his opponents. He was the 'explainer-in-chief' by Barack Obama for his ability to engage and persuade across party lines.

This casual, almost chummy approach to governance was new – but will be familiar to anyone who has seen the premiership of Tony Blair, a fellow political traveller who both emulated and cultivated Clinton's approach. However, Clinton's personalisation of the presidency had consequences. The line between the president's public duties and his personal affairs began to overlap after he was seen in a private setting with a young secretary in the White House.

USA vs UK Comparison

Clinton's approach to governance resembled Blair's in a number of ways. They both focused more on special advisors, were more reliant on special advisors, and had a more informal approach to decision-making. They also shared a commitment to a 'third way' approach, a course between traditional left-wing and right-wing positions, which radicalised the political coalition that their political parties had traditionally relied on.

Though personally embarrassing, the subsequent launching of impeachment proceedings against Clinton by a Republican-controlled Congress only served to bolster, rather than diminish, his popularity. It was seen as a disapproval of the way in which the presidency had begun to take on the tone of a largely unfamiliar territory, though such an approach would later come to dominate US politics.

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It's the economy, stupid

But Clinton's popularity did not simply rely on his own character traits. In the famous words of his advisors, 'It's the economy, stupid.' The central Clinton doctrine was ensuring strong economic growth from which everything else would follow.

And most presidents would envy the economic conditions he oversaw. On average, the economy grew by 4% every year of his presidency. By the end of his presidency, Clinton had overseen the longest period of economic growth in American history. Household income increased by 13% over his presidency, while taxes stayed low and relatively stable. Tax cuts were reduced for the majority of Americans, while welfare payments were halved.

On top of this, unemployment fell every year of Clinton's presidency, across all demographics. By the end of his presidency the American government was consistently in surplus, meaning it was generating more money in tax than it was spending on government. This was a state of affairs, particularly in America, that had not been seen for decades.

In short, Americans got richer and their lives got easier throughout the Clinton years. The government had more money at home than it knew what to do with, and abroad it had more power like never before.

So perhaps in this context it's not so hard to understand why Clinton's political opponents tended to be victims or beneficiaries of their circumstances – and Clinton's could have been too.

Discussion Questions

- To what extent did Clinton take the lead or follow events during his presidency?
- Were Clinton's personal attributes or economic conditions a bigger factor in his success?
- To what extent did Clinton's economic policies result in the 1994 midterm losses?
- Did Clinton's promotion of peace and diplomacy improve his standing with the public?
- Was Clinton's success reliant on formal or informal powers to achieve his goals?
- Can Clinton be considered an imperial president?

Exam-style Question

Analyse whether personal attributes alone determine the success of a US president or UK prime minister.

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George W. Bush

Not many presidents have swung from one extreme to another in terms of popularity quite like George W. Bush. He was elected as president in 2000 as the loser of the popular vote – and only assumed the presidency on the basis of a highly contentious Supreme Court ruling. His inauguration was clouded by angry protests and cries of illegitimacy. At first, his administration simply seemed relieved to be there.

Yet international events soon conspired to give him the second highest pre-inauguration approval rating in history. 84% of Americans backed the war leader Bush, dizzying heights which he rode into a second term. And with those highs came hubris, and crisis, which saw his presidency end with the second lowest approval ratings in history. It's fair to say that Bush's presidency was dominated by an event out of his control, though it was the nature of his response that ultimately precipitated his dramatic downfall.

A wartime leader

Bush had a shaky start to his presidency. His policy agenda began to take shape in the early months. Bush had already unveiled his plans for educational reform and created the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives. He planned to cut taxes over 10 years, and towards Iraq was becoming evident. In February he ordered military strikes against Sudan and Iraq. While Congress was debating the McCain–Feingold Bill to regulate spending in federal elections, Bush took an aggressive stance against some parts of the bill.

But by May the unemployment rate had risen to 4.5%, the highest rate since 1992. James Jeffrey, a close advisor, became an independent, temporarily shifting the balance of power. Bush's early speeches were very clumsy and he seemed too ill-at-ease. By June he had a change of heart, and nearly five years, and far too many weeks were being spent on his ranch in Texas. He was uncomfortable with the politics of Washington. Things did not look particularly good, and some authorities were already talking of an inevitable replacement at the next election.

USA vs UK Comparison

The USA's presidential system means voter intentions are generally more dependent on the character of a single individual. In the UK, the parliamentary system means voter intention is traditionally more dependent on people's opinions of different parties. The prime minister's character is still an important factor.

Everything changed for Bush – and America – on 11th September 2001. Two jetliners, hijacked by Islamic extremists, were flown into the World Trade Center, and a third was deliberately crashed into the Pentagon. A fourth jet was brought down in Pennsylvania before it could be directed against the Congress. Thousands of people died, and Bush immediately assumed the stance of a war leader, protecting the country. Three days later he declared that the conflict was begun on the timing and terms of his choice. At an hour of such crisis, his leadership was crucial.

The attacks swept aside dislike of Bush; across the world many national political leaders expressed support for the USA, and his approval ratings skyrocketed. Bush had said little to nothing about foreign policy at his appointment, but now he found himself as Commander-in-Chief against the shadow of terrorism inspired by Osama Bin Laden and Al Qaeda. Bush seized the opportunity to say that the fight against terrorism would be the priority of his administration. And this would mean bringing in emergency powers.

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He called on the Taliban in Afghanistan to surrender Bin Laden. On 7th October the camps in that country. Much of the world was solidly behind the Bush administration in Afghanistan, with the French newspaper *Le Monde* declaring 'We are all American'.

Bush was now a major player on the world stage, setting the agenda and growing influence. He addressed the United Nations General Assembly in November, and military tribunals for foreign nationals. In December he announced that the USA would be pulling out of Iraq. Between the USA and Russia, the first time the USA would do this.

What many did not know was that Bush was already drawing up plans for another of his greatest mistakes. In March 2002 Bush finally got support from Congress for the basis of the invasion. His claims that the Iraqis were developing weapons of mass destruction were virtually unanimous in both houses, underlying the power that Bush had. However, the lack of restraint and scrutiny placed on his actions during this period pushed him further down the line.

Executive overreach?

9/11 had turned Bush into something of an imperial president, empowering the executive branch under the guise of national security. Bush began to push his Constitutional powers under the umbrella of emergency powers. He signed into law the Patriot Act in October 2001, which considerably strengthened the power of the Federal Government to combat terrorism at the cost of some individual freedom.

Theory

The structural theory could be used to explain the way in which the Bush administration expanded constitutional powers, and reduced checks and balances on its own activity. Powers explicitly mentioned in the Constitution, but Congress has previously legislated to limit the right to enact emergency powers - and these have been interpreted fairly broadly by subsequent administrations. The Patriot Act is another example of the executive branch seeking approval for an extension of its own powers.

The executive branch introduced measures to limit congressional enquiries to those working in the executive branch. It prevented presidential documents being released and allowed the executive branch to conduct a trial (until this was declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court in 2004). Calling detainees 'combatants' allowed the government to treat them without regard to the Geneva Convention. The Patriot Act had opened the door to a wide range of undercover operations.

It has not been uncommon for presidents to use foreign crises to establish themselves in the office. Emergency powers are a classic means by which presidents may get round the Constitution. At first the American public and Congress largely went along with the president's actions, pumped-up patriotism, albeit with some misgivings.

Then the realisation that there were no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq turned the public against the president. They had been misled by Bush for his own purposes. When reports surfaced of statements in 1999 that the time had come to remove Saddam Hussein, partly because he had threatened the Gulf, Bush senior, many became suspicious of his motives. For ordering the invasion of Iraq, Bush claimed that in doing so he was relieving the world of a tyrant, but soon rather few US companies were expected to be making a fortune from reconstructing Iraq.

The extreme cost, both financially and in terms of human lives, and the lack of oversight in the style of foreign policy, left the president with serious questions to answer. What was the basis of national security suddenly looked like extraordinary executive overreach.

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It is fair to say that Bush was not a constitutional expert. Indeed, his own political notion that he was not an expert at all – it meant his voters could identify with a. Instead, he was known as an affable individual with a dry and homespun sense of. If Bush had a strength that had been with him all his life it was the ability to ‘wipe separating himself from total strangers’ (Draper). These are qualities that may w not necessarily equip you well to lead global wars against foreign adversaries be be reasonable to argue that Bush, as wartime leader, was of his depth.

Lame duck

The poor outcome of the and the distaste when no weapons of mass des were shaping the Commander-in-Chief’s policy. Bush was accused and 2005 was a political year that turned many undecided voters against the Repu It was the year of Hurricane Katrina, when the Bush administration dithered while Orleans. It was the year of Harriet Miers, a bizarre choice by the President to repl Supreme Court. Miers was an old friend from Texas who had never held a post as the nomination in the face of obvious Senate opposition.

What had also come to light by 2005 was the practice favoured by Bush of writing had signed bills into law. This practice became common during the Reagan presid president will sign a whole bill into law without using a veto, but will reserve to hi parts of it that he believes are unconstitutional when it comes to his own powers.

According to some legal experts in America, Bush quietly challenged over 1,000 p through over 150 signing statements, far more than all other presidents put toget Commander-in-Chief and therefore in control of virtually all things military (by far such statements), but many saw this practice as yet another way of drawing even branch – a kind of line-item veto by the back door.

As Chief Executive, Bush was effectively giving instructions to the Federal bureau should be carried out. This meant that he was interpreting the Constituti this way, Bush felt he could defy Congress and even the Supreme Cour constitution that he believed he had.

By now the budget deficit amounted to \$236 billion, and however much Bush’s ac the figures, the fact remained that sections of the public were rapidly turning aga sinking fast and by 2006 had collapsed to below 30%. The midterm elections of th Party recapture power in both houses of Congress and Bush’s influence over Cong was straining with the price of houses falling, and while a number of factors were both parties in Congress, the banks themselves, and the policies of Clinton, most blame should fall on the Bush administration for not controlling the markets and

Bush was accused of appointing people to the Treasury Department who had no and who at the very least should have warned Bush about the major financial pro in 2007–2008. In some ways these criticisms are unfair. Many of the problems Bush’s control. He had, somewhat weakly, called for more regulation as early as that he should have done more, and reminding everybody of the failed businesses Texas, in his pre-presidential career.

Bush was just for a while, at least by public opinion polls, to be one of the modern tim. It these assessments were made at a disturbing and unique mo measure of how frightened people saw his performance in achieving a particular nation at a time of great danger.

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His success, however, cannot simply be determined by someone being able to implement matters whether those measures were desirable and beneficial to the people. Being about a great deal more than being a decisive Commander-in-Chief. We could argue that Bush's performance as Chief Executive and Chief Legislator was in many respects that 2001 proved to be short-term, ill-thought-out and confused, and the measures he implemented in Congress were in themselves badly planned.

Bush left office at the height of a global financial crisis, popularity of his administration ratings as low as 23%. We'll never know how he would have fared had 9/11 not happened, perhaps his weaknesses as a leader would have been easier to spot if his nation had

Discussion Questions

- Did Bush lead, or was he led by, events and circumstances?
- What do Bush's wild variations in popularity tell us about his governing?
- Did Bush engage in executive overreach, or act within constitutional limits?
- To what extent did questions around Bush's motives for the Iraq War emerge?
- Was Bush more reliant on formal or informal powers to achieve his aims?
- Did 9/11 make Bush an imperial president?

Exam-style Question

Examine the differences between congressional checks on the US president and parliamentary checks on the UK prime minister.

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Barack Obama

Barack Obama's sudden rise to the presidency of the United States was widely hailed as a historic moment for the country. As the first African American to take the presidential oath, he became a potent symbol of change in a nation consumed by its ongoing struggles with race relations, and its troubled history of slavery.

But while campaigning seemed effortless for the young senator and gifted orator, governing proved to be a far harder task. Riding into office in a wave of hope and an expectation for radical change, moderation and caution became Obama's modus operandi in office. It was a far cry from the initial promise of his candidacy that America had seemed to be crying out for.

Governing style

Obama's first exposure to national politics was at the 2004 Democratic convention. The newly elected Senator was said to have laboured for two weeks over his keynote speech, which he had been gifted by the party's establishment following his impressive landslide victory in a Senate primary. It was a golden opportunity for Obama to introduce himself to the American public – and one that he was determined to seize.

And so he did. The public response to his speech was immense, with pundits labeling presidential speculation immediately swirling around him. Obama's speech was one of the convention, around which the shadowing the appearance of that year's president.

There was a perception that Obama was a gifted speaker. His words and his delivery, emotions, and he consistently preached a theme of broad unity, which helped him rise above partisan factionalism. Indeed, Obama would consistently position himself above party politics. His famous refrain that there are 'no blue states or red states, but only Americans' summarised his ambition to be a leader for all Americans, rather than sections of partisan interest groups.

However, politics is often a combative game where competing interests exert the pressure to achieve their aims. In this sense, the actual nitty-gritty of politics was never always more comfortable sitting in the White House surrounded by executive power behind the presidential seal, than he was negotiating with Congress or balancing the interests of political stakeholders.

Obama had spent only four years as a national legislator – barely enough time to gain experience before he was elevated to the highest office in the nation. He was untested as a president, as a dealmaker. The choice of Washington DC veteran Joe Biden as his vice president was a sign that he needed help finding his way around the nation's capital.

This was a weakness in Obama's arsenal that would be exposed almost immediately. Congress quickly started to complain that he was a lofty and distant president, too much policy to devote any time to his rank-and-file legislators. His personal brand always prioritised his party's, and many on his own side would quickly come to feel left behind.



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As shown by his breakout speech in 2004, he was also clearly meticulous in his preparation. A true believer in process, Obama was never one to break protocol or cut corners for political interests. A president with sharper political instincts may have recognised that the way to achieve your goals isn't necessarily the noblest. Successful presidents tend to focus on the 'ends' rather than the 'means'.

Obama's calculation may have been that his significant message from the 2008 campaign, with his soaring oratory, would be enough to sweep his opponents of Congress into disrepute. He would be associated with his youthful and optimistic personal brand. But Congress is a different beast – it came to learn – circumstances can change very quickly.

Congressional Gridlock

Obama had some initial legislative success during his presidency. Assuming the office in 2009, during the financial crisis, he was left with the unenviable task of rescuing the American economy as financial institutions across the country were crumbling. While his predecessor George W. Bush had taken the course through the crisis by bailing out the banks with public money, Obama was left with the task of working out how to prevent the economy falling into a deep recession.

Obama had one huge advantage in this task – Congress was on his side. The Democrats had gained a firm majority in the House of Representatives, and an even more impressive victory in the Senate with 57 Senators to the Republicans' 41. This meant that Obama could enjoy some legislative success during his presidency. Alongside the economic rescue package, which was widely credited with stimulating growth and preventing greater unemployment, Obama also set his sights on healthcare reform.

Reforming the American healthcare system had long eluded Democrats, becoming a major theme of his previous spell in the White House under Bill Clinton. Obama had campaigned strongly on the issue, intending to significantly increase the scope of federal funding for health insurance for millions of Americans going without protection. The passage of his bill was not without controversy, involving a surprising amount of negotiation given his party's dominant position in Congress. The Affordable Care Act – 2010's Affordable Care Act – represents a high point in Obama's presidency, an enduring achievement.

Healthcare expansion and the high cost of the recovery bill, over \$800 billion, infused a low-tax, low-spending economic model. The spending package in particular was met with strong republican opposition to Obama, already a deeply unpopular figure among the general public. That opposition movement organised under the banner of the Tea Party, and advocating a return to government intervention in the economy – a more radical form for governance than what was argued for at the time.

The organised nature of opposition to Obama proved highly fruitful at the 2010 mid-term elections. Democrats were sensationally swept out of Congress on a scale few had anticipated. A landslide in the House of Representatives, while Democrat losses in the Senate left them on a knife-edge. Overnight, Obama had lost control of Congress – a position he would never regain.

Incoming congressional Republicans were something of a different breed to those of 2009. Many had succeeded in their primaries due to support from the radical Tea Party. They had a clear mandate from their voters to do everything possible to obstruct and frustrate Obama's agenda.

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Did he achieve his aims?

As legislative gridlock began to set in, and facing a divided Congress, the initial promise Obama had ushered in seemed to fade. In contrast to Obama's early commitment to bipartisanship, politics had become more confrontational than ever, and with trenches dug deep to attract support from sides.

Obama the president had also proven to be a very different actor from Obama the campaigner. The campaign had heavily suggested favouring a deal with the status quo, in office he was more interested in gradual, incremental change. Once stating that his job as president was to 'make things work', Obama seemed to have become increasingly detached from the campaign rhetoric. He went on – focused more on the function of government, rather than capturing the imagination by exercising change instead of pushing for a politics of change.

Even on foreign policy – an area in which Obama particularly sought to make his mark – there was little major change of direction. The War in Afghanistan intensified, the intervention continued, and the closure of Guantanamo Bay detention camp never a primary achievement – to end the War in Iraq – seemed more like political necessity than the last American troops had left.

Meanwhile, his Republican opponents became ever more intransigent. House Republican faction entered Congress with a radical agenda – prepared to shut down the government if they didn't get the concessions they were after. On two occasions, in 2011 and 2013, the standoff between executive and legislative threatened to escalate into a major debt crisis if escalations averted disaster.

House Speaker John Boehner, though more moderate than his Tea Party colleagues, was extracting small concession from Obama – forcing him to restrict his spending plan for the government. Instead of leading a pro-reform coalition revival, Obama found himself in a position of negative campaigning against his opponents. Where once bipartisanship was his strength, it became more of a liability.

USA vs UK Comparison

Unlike in the British model, where the prime minister must command a majority in the House of Commons, American presidents are frequently unable to control the legislative branch. It means that generally presidents are less powerful than prime ministers in determining domestic policy.

And Republican opposition would only become more pronounced as his presidency progressed. When Democrats lost the Senate in 2014, new Republican Senate leader Mitch McConnell used obstruction by reinventing the Senate filibuster – a device used to stall laws. When 'talking out' legislation – meaning senators would need to actively waste debating time – McConnell the mere threat of a filibuster became enough to make the executive branch cautious. The result was that laws now needed a 'supermajority' of votes in the Senate to pass, and a filibuster could end a bill.

As a result, Obama became increasingly dependent on executive orders in order to get things done. While it meant he could determine policy from the comfort of the White House, it also left him vulnerable. As executive orders can be implemented by the stroke of a pen, they can also be reversed.

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Many key parts of Obama's policy agenda therefore failed to last much longer than immigration, Obama's signature move had been to normalise the residency of non-USA since childhood. On climate, the signing of the Paris Agreement was intended to lead the global fight against climate change, and a symbol of the president's global leadership. Obama's pushing through of stricter background checks sought to address the increasing mass shootings that were plaguing the nation. And in foreign affairs, a highly competitive world where other powerful nations seemed to minimise the risk of future war in the Middle East, Obama's relations with a long-term adversary.

All of these policies were quickly and easily reversed by his successor, President Trump, leaving a policy legacy in tatters and increasing the risk of relying on executive actions to effect change.

Theory



The structural theory can be used to explain how President Obama's policy agenda was limited. Wherever Congress or the Supreme Court took an opposing position, Obama was forced to choose between his policies either by using legislation or by setting constitutional precedents. The limited executive power meant that many of his policies lasted only as long as he was in office.

In addition, one critical policy area that Obama had campaigned strongly on in 2008, the corrupt and lobbyists too powerful, also proved to be out of the president's reach. The *United v FEC (2010)* Supreme Court ruling, which essentially established a constitutional right to campaign spending, gave Obama little room to tackle the key public perception that the system was rigged in favour of the sense that government works for the powerful, but not for the little guy.

Perhaps the expectations placed on President Obama had been too high. After all, he was the first African American president, one person to be able to challenge an entire political system. In his memoirs, Obama wrote that after his jubilant initial campaign, he felt like 'at some basic level, people were no longer seeing me as a person, but as a symbol taken possession of my likeness and made a vessel for a million different dreams and hopes, many of which when I would disappoint them.'

Had expectations of Obama been lower, maybe his presidency would be seen in a more realistic light. The early years in his presidency, were no doubt of significance. But it was a lofty ambition that had raised expectations so highly. The tragedy is perhaps that he is remembered for his own achievements and more for the extraordinary political battles he seemed to stir.

Discussion Questions

- To what extent did Obama over-promise or under-deliver?
- Did Obama's governing style undermine his ability to enact reform?
- Could Obama have taken greater action to limit the backlash to his policies?
- Was Obama's early presidency ambitious or complacent?
- Was Obama more reliant on formal or informal powers to achieve his goals?
- Do the limitations on Obama's power demonstrate an 'imperilled' presidency?

Exam-style question



Analyse how constitutional limits restrict the power of a US president or UK prime minister.

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Donald Trump

In many respects, President Donald Trump is a totally unique political figure. His explosive entry into politics and meteoric rise to the presidency defied all the predictions, expectations and norms of the existing political establishment, and of common political sense.

And his governing style is equally unconventional. Taking a heavily personalised approach, Trump eschews ideology and strategy, relying instead on his personal charisma and publicising publicity and loyalty as the basis for the management of the world's largest economy.

Trump's zero-sum approach to politics – in which everyone is either a subordinate or an enemy – has wreaked havoc both in the United States and across the world, as he has leveraged the immense power of the USA in pursuit of his scattergun and unpredictable presidential style.

But the inconsistency of Trump as a political actor should not disguise his incredible popular success. There is no other modern figure to have so effectively understood and expressed popular anger at a political establishment, nor to have so mercilessly exploited such anger for their own political gain. In this respect, Trump stands alone as a modern political pioneer.

The source of Trump's power

Trump established himself as a political maverick from the very first moment he declared his ambitions, using inflammatory language to smear Mexicans and promising to 'Make America Great Again'. He took him seriously, and he was right, though many overlooked the level of anger the Republican elite.

Fury reigned supreme among this voter base over the Republican failure to defeat Barack Obama on the American right – not just once, but twice. The general consensus among the different approach was needed. This sense became acute particularly as major party candidate of the unpopular Jeb Bush – brother of President Bush Jr, and son of President George H.W. Bush – that Republican leaders had learnt from the presidential losses that had so angered the

Enter Trump and his bold and simple demand for the USA to build a giant wall along the border with Mexico, which he promised Mexico would be forced to pay for. His theatrical, aggressive and confrontational approach in the news cycle, and created a juggernaut of support that the other candidates struggled to match. His unusual approach was not necessarily based on careful political calculation, nor on a deep understanding of the political system. Instead, he was consistently the most entertaining and provocative of the candidates, and he was able to make his rivals look foolish and making the entire contest revolve around him.

It worked. The more people spoke out against Trump, the more popular he became. His contempt towards the Republican establishment. Casual supporters were simply drawn to him. Trump. Name recognition was key in a presidential run, and nobody could compete with him. As his behaviour became more outlandish, the other candidates began to fall behind.

His outsider status, established through his lack of political experience and his distrust of politicians, meant he couldn't be associated with a political class that had become corrupt and out of touch with America. This outsider status became the source of Trump's appeal throughout his presidency. He presented himself as a break from the status quo, in contrast to Hillary Clinton's 'more of the same' approach.



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Trump carried the same energy into his presidency, maintaining public support by attacking a corrupt establishment, and legitimising his outsider status through his willingness to challenge established parties, and his tendency to adopt political positions rarely expressed by career politicians. His communication style, speaking in short emotive sentences and rejecting political correctness, was highly relatable to an electorate who felt little affinity with the complex liberal bureaucracy.

While Trump's constant attacks against political rivals proved exhausting for parts of the media, they were also idolised by his own supporters, meaning Trump increasingly played a central role in the narrative. One of the reasons among the Republican base is critical for understanding Trump's power. It gave him a loyal base in Congress, who were either threatened or incentivised into supporting him who would otherwise be critical.

Ultimately, Trump's power in Congress was not enough to ensure their own re-election, and Trump's strategy of turning Republican support into a personal loyalty test. This provided him with free rein to pursue his agenda, a power he has never had, enabling a highly unconventional accumulation of power.

USA vs UK Comparison

A critical difference between the UK and US political systems is primary. In the UK, elected representatives are more accountable and responsive to their core voters, as they are re-elected or deselected frequently for reselection. Because core Republican supporters are a significant part of the US electorate, they force Republican representatives to also demonstrate their loyalty. In contrast, in the UK, representatives are internally selected and rarely deselected. This means they can act in ways which their core voter base might not share.

An iron grip over his party representatives meant immunity from congressional action, which was meant to act as a check and balance on the executive, but Trump's domination of the party allowed him to circumvent this restraint. This allowed him to push constitutional limits without fear of impeachment, the first president in history to be impeached twice by Congress, but he could be assured of enough votes needed to prevent a conviction.

Did he achieve his objectives?

In terms of bringing the Republican Party into a vehicle of his own, Trump can be considered successful. It can be argued that this achievement is sufficient to conclude that he has achieved his primary objective, to the extent to which his personal ambitions surpass his shifting commitments on policy.

Theory

Donald Trump's governing style could be explained using the rational approach, which is usually based on whatever he perceives as beneficial to himself, and by extension, to his country. Because Trump has a 'zero-sum' approach (at least rhetorically), he believes that for himself and his country to be successful, somebody else must be to the disadvantage. Therefore, a key concept from Trump's viewpoint, and he rejects concepts of collective interest which would be emphasised by liberal politicians.

Viewed through a more traditional lens, however, Trump's policy record is mixed. One of his major achievements was a range of tax cuts passed by Congress in 2017. The cuts, which were a campaign pledge, primarily benefited wealthy individuals and corporations. The most significant was the fall in corporation tax, from an average of 35% to a flat rate of 21%.

Trump also focused on reducing levels of migration, thanks in part to visa restrictions and a ban on entry for migrant groups in the USA. In addition, Trump made good use of his executive power to end a number of Obama-era arrangements, such as global climate cooperation, increased residency rights for child migrants, and a diplomatic peace process with Iran.

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On other key first-term Trump pledges, the President seemed mostly content with substance. On his major pledge to abolish NAFTA – the North American Free Trade Agreement – he dramatically withdrew from the treaty, before signing a largely similar treaty with Mexico. On his border wall, Trump largely focused on replacing existing barriers, with only a small amount of new construction – funded by American, not Mexican, taxpayers. His much touted trade policy, which promised the US gaining concessions, and worsened the US trade deficit with their partners. Meanwhile, one of his biggest pledges became perhaps his biggest failure. Trump's lack of support of a Republican-controlled Congress to repeal Obama-era healthcare provisions was a major embarrassment for the President.

Perhaps Trump's defining first-term achievement, however, was his reshaping of the Supreme Court. The appointments to the Court mostly come down to the luck of timing – and in this regard, Trump was fortunate. He entered office with a vacant seat to fill, after Senate Republicans had blocked Obama's predecessor from appointing his own liberal justice. Trump's appointment of Neil Gorsuch ushered into office.

In 2018 the resignation of swing vote Anthony Kennedy gave Trump the chance to make-up, appointing conservative Brett Kavanaugh following a series of highly controversial hearings. Significantly, however, the death of liberal justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg at the very end of the term ensured a firm shift to a 6–3 conservative majority with the appointment of Amy Coney Barrett. Trump got the chance to appoint three justices across two terms, let alone one.

All three Trump justices have proven to be loyal to their appointer, reliably voting for conservative landmark rulings, including abolishing the federal right to abortion, finding federal programmes unconstitutional, expanding gun rights, narrowing federal protection of the environment, and most importantly for Trump – establishing broad immunity from prosecution for his actions.

Waxing and waning of power (COVID-19)

Trump's presidency gives us a useful case study in the waxing and waning of presidential power. In 2020, Trump's re-election year, he had seemed to be in a fairly strong position. He was popular, solid, and Trump's approval ratings were the highest of his whole presidency.

However, the emergence of the coronavirus pandemic proved to be a crisis that Trump struggled to handle. His freestyling, gut-instinct, attack-laden approach to governance gelled with the public's desire for careful planning, clear messaging, and preventative measures being taken. Rather than a steady tone, Trump made a series of conflicting statements regarding the seriousness of the crisis, oscillating between assertions that the crisis was overblown, and proclamations that COVID-19 was a 'total victory' for the president fighting an invisible enemy to 'total victory'.

Ultimately, the President was torn between dual obligations: the need to manage the crisis as a head of state, and the urge to satisfy his adoring base who were inclined to downplay the seriousness of the crisis.

As a result, he frequently publicly rebuked his own administration's medical and scientific advice, and occasionally questioned the necessity of the public health plan he was supposed to follow. He withdrew from the World Health Organization at the height of the pandemic, when the US had the highest coronavirus death toll of any nation. Trump was widely ridiculed for his suggestion that the virus could be tackled through the injection of disinfectant.

National emergencies have the potential to unite a nation and greatly boost the popularity of a president. A classic example is President Bush's enormous increase in popularity in late 2001, following the 9/11 terrorist attacks. But the careful management of the coronavirus pandemic required of Trump worked against him. It conflicted with his impulsive style, and – rightly or wrongly – associated him with the deaths of large numbers of people. This was a bad look in a re-election year – and Trump subsequently lost the 2020 presidential election.

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Return to power

Perhaps Trump's most impressive achievement is his return to power four years after leaving office. Only the second person in US political history to serve non-consecutive presidential terms, he managed to outmanoeuvre a Republican political establishment. And he once again won the presidency, beating opponent Kamala Harris this time outright in the popular vote. He has rebranded his brand of politics and himself as a political actor.

Trump's second term is likely to be different from his first. He is more experienced and has a more ideologically coherent team working around him. His politics have also evolved, with a more expansionist territorial approach and demonstrating an increasing willingness to challenge traditional foreign allies.

He can be expected to push the US constitution to breaking point, knowing that the courts will likely rule in his favour. Perhaps the ultimate test of Trump's resolve will come at the end of his second term, when he must relinquish power. Based on his track record, term limits seem unlikely to curb his president's ambition.

Discussion Questions

- To what extent is Trump's approach to power unique, and why?
- Has Trump been successful in circumventing the Constitution?
- Was Trump's first term successful, and did he achieve his aims?
- To what extent were Trump's Supreme Court appointments his greatest achievement?
- Is Trump more reliant on formal or informal powers to achieve his aims?
- Does Trump's control of his party make his an imperial presidency?

Exam-style Questions

Examine the similarities between US presidential primaries and UK leadership elections.

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Joe Biden

The archetypical Washington DC veteran, Joe Biden's four years in America's top office followed his 36 years as a Senator, and eight years as President Obama's vice president. And it was this experience and longevity that propelled him upwards – first to the vice presidency alongside a young and inexperienced senator, and then on to the presidency, defeating a volatile political opponent.

Despite his decades of experience, however, Biden's presidency turned out to be a series of contradictions. Extraordinary success at breaking through congressional gridlock and implementing a domestic agenda contrasted strongly with catastrophic failure abroad and personal unpopularity at home. And ultimately, Biden's spell in the Oval Office came too late in his long career, with questions over his health and mental acuity coming to dominate his tenure and spectacularly collapse his re-election campaign – handing power back to the very man he had sought to define himself against.

Domestic policy success

Biden entered office at the height of the coronavirus pandemic crisis, and had an immediate economic conundrum to resolve. With large numbers of people unable to work due to the requirement to stay at home, both families and businesses across the country were facing financial ruin.

In his election campaign Biden had promised a large stimulus package for the economy, and in this task he gained a significant advantage. A run-off Senate election gave him a second Democratic senator, giving his party narrow control of Congress. This ensured that his American Rescue Plan Act – the first in a series of huge legislative packages that would pass – allocating \$1.9 trillion to tax relief, welfare provisions and direct payments.

This early action was not unlike the start of President Obama's administration, in 2009. Obama had quickly passed a large stimulus package to deal with the aftermath of the financial crisis, with the aid of a united Democratic Congress. However, Obama's success was short-lived, with the rest of his presidency, with the former president failing to build the right relationships.

Biden was determined not to make the same mistake again, though the initial mood was promising. Two Democratic senators, Joe Manchin and Kyrsten Sinema, came out of the shadows, opposing Biden's spending plans and dug in, denying Biden the crucial votes he needed to push his agenda.

As his landmark 'Build Back Better' plan ground to a halt amid months of painstaking negotiations, something his predecessors had squarely failed to do – he looked across the aisle. In a surprise announcement, alongside Senate Republican Mitch McConnell, who had so stymied Biden's programme, Biden announced a bipartisan infrastructure bill. The legislation, which passed with the votes of 19 Republican Senators, allocated \$550 billion towards the reconstruction of the country. Biden had secured the support of enough Republicans to pass a significant piece of legislation, an extraordinary feat in an era of deep partisan divisions and congressional gridlock.

Almost a year later came another surprise announcement – a breakthrough in negotiating a bipartisan spending bill. Biden had finally secured the support of Democratic dissidents in the Senate, passing a version of his key legislation. The unassumingly named Inflation Reduction Act directed \$369 billion primarily towards green energy and other climate measures, as well as lowering costs for families and tackling tax evasion. The bill heavily subsidised clean energy initiatives, seeking to boost American energy production, and to bring down costs for consumers.

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Biden pulled one final legislative trick in 2022, once again persuading a number of spending plans – this time a large package of corporate subsidies, known as the CHIPS Act – which allocated \$280 billion towards the American microprocessor industry – an attempt to rival China's advanced computer components.

Biden's ability to pass massive pieces of legislation seemed to defy the recently established norm in Washington DC – that the parties could not work together. It was a vindication of Biden's deep knowledge of the intricacies of Washington DC – particularly in which he had worked for more than four decades. Biden had done the work to build strong relations, maintaining communication and compromising in the right places and at the benefit of competent people – notably his highly experienced chief of staff who had chipped away at the senators until they conceded.

Overall Biden had managed to allocate trillions of dollars towards a restructuring of the economy focused on advanced technology, green energy and infrastructure investment. His industrial strategy of a kind that the USA had not seen in decades. However, the long-term investment of this kind is that the economic gains take so long to come to fruition that they are never gained. Biden would need a second term to reap the political rewards he wanted, beyond his domestic agenda, things were not going his way.

Foreign policy failures

In many respects Biden's foreign policy outlook was surprisingly similar to that of his predecessor, having been a lone voice in the Obama administration for a decade against foreign interventionism, having been a lone voice in the Obama administration for a decade against the Afghan War. He was in favour of economic separation from China, seeing increased competition as a means of maintaining American economic dominance. And he was an ardent supporter of Israel, describing himself as a 'lifelong Zionist'. While these foreign policy commitments were in line with America, they would come to spectacularly disrupt his presidency over the course of his term.

An early disaster for the Biden presidency was the botched withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan. While Afghan withdrawal was a Trump-era policy, it was wholeheartedly supported by Biden's efforts to renege on the pace at which troops would leave the poorly defended country. Having fought the Iraq War, the 20 years of conflict in Afghanistan had been again, and he was determined to put an end to the highly costly and seemingly unwinnable war.

Yet American intelligence had failed to grasp the extent to which the Afghan state relied on US protection. As soon as US troops withdrew from regions of the country, they were overrun by the Taliban militia group that America had spent so long fighting.

The pace of the Taliban military campaign, and the ease with which they took control, outstepped the American military. As a result, American withdrawal was sped up to a frantic pace. The end result was chaotic scenes in which US troops were besieged at Kandahar, with no time to exit the country, and not enough time to extract their own allies and billions of dollars of equipment from the hands of their long-term adversary. The catastrophic Afghan withdrawal led to approval ratings to a level from which they would never recover.

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USA vs UK Comparison

The extent to which the head of government is in control of foreign policy differs between the USA and the UK. In the USA, the president is both the Commander-in-Chief and the Chief Diplomat. Constitutionally, they are supposed to consult Congress before declaring war or signing treaties – though in practice this rarely happens in the modern era. The president is able to conduct foreign policy without much legislative scrutiny. By contrast, in the UK, the prerogative powers which enable them to start wars and sign treaties. Yet in the UK, Parliament has more authority in these matters, with Parliament votes having to be passed to prevent or initiate military action, and recommendations from parliament shaping key foreign policy decisions.

Meanwhile, increased American separation from China was starting to push the E direction. At the sidelines of the 2022 Winter Olympics, Russian president Vladimir Jinping signed a 'no limits' partnership acknowledging a 'redistribution of power' in criticising the unilateralism of the United States.

Just a month later President Putin launched an extraordinary mass invasion of the full-scale state conflict on the European continent of a kind not seen since the Second invasion was a disaster for Russia, who failed to capture the capital Kyiv and were Western Ukraine. In response, NATO allies imposed significant sanctions on the Russian price of gas – a key Western energy source.

The sanctions compounded an already inflationary economic environment, driving lowering living standards. Suddenly, economic management became a crisis for the inflation undermining the president's argument that he was building a more stable

As the Ukrainian war ground on in the east of the country, the Biden administration involved in the supply of arms, aid and diplomatic cover for the besieged Ukrainian dollars handed over in the name of Ukrainian defence became an unpopular position isolationist American electorate, especially as the everyday cost of living rose.

Facing an unstable international environment, Biden's energy became increasingly policy dominating the second half of his presidential term. In October 2023 a Palestinian southern Israel launched a fresh outbreak of war between the state of Israel and the

The Israeli assault on Gaza put Biden in a painfully difficult position. His own instincts, different political era, were to support Israeli military action no matter what. However, the coalition felt very differently about the war – particularly among the swing states. In Pennsylvania, heavy concentrations of young and white voters with sympathies for the population risked losing the Biden administration in critical votes.

Meanwhile, ardent supporters of Israeli military action were mostly in the other corner whose support for Israel forms a core part of their belief, were some of the most vocal in the country. Biden's largely uncritical support for Israel placed him on the wrong side of a highly emotive issue at the start of a re-election year.

As the war steadily escalated and civilian casualties became catastrophic, questions of competence and handling of a military campaign involving a key US ally. And those questions were about to explode at the worst possible moment for the octogenarian president.

An age-old problem

In 2020 Biden had become the oldest US president in history, assuming the office came in part because his opponents were of a similar generation. His primary rival for nomination, Bernie Sanders, was a year older. His presidential rival, Donald Trump, was 77. This had enabled him to dodge questions over his age in 2020, particularly after poor performances at key debates throughout the year.

At times during his election campaign in 2020, Biden had mused that he would be the last generation of leaders. And that was true. At his early presidency, questions arose over whether he would stand for re-election. It was an inevitability for a first-term president. By the time he would be 81, he would be past the retirement age in most normal lines of work. By 2022, Americans already thought he was too old to do the job.

The Democratic performance at the 2022 midterm elections put pay to the idea that Biden was too old for the job. The elections were a surprisingly strong showing for the Democrats, taking back control of Congress, and vindicating Biden's first two years in the job. The re-election suggestions of Biden relinquishing power, and set him on course for a re-election.

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Theory

The cultural theory could be used to explain the way in which presentation, perception underpins the amount of authority a president commands. The more project strength, the more they are perceived as being 'in control' of events. As project strength became severely compromised as his public speaking skills in office. This projected an image of weakness and instability which was in control of events. This perception eroded his authority, ultimately forcing election year.

Yet niggling doubts remained and grew louder over the next 18 months as Biden's speeches, remarks, and key facts and figures, and became physically frailer. In conducted his own administration – which was intended to clear Biden of mishandled documents – also crushingly concluded that he was a 'well-meaning elderly man'. Subsequently, intense scrutiny was placed on his age – with every slip of the tongue besieged president.

Seeking to address the concerns head on, Biden pushed for an early presidential debate. But his plan dramatically backfired. In a catastrophic debate performance, Biden was disorientated, and struggled to complete sentences. His authority as president, eroded immediately drained away following the debate. Panicking Democrat insiders started to end his re-election campaign, and party unity fell apart. Less than a month later his vice president Kamala Harris for the presidency, unceremoniously ending an era of federal government.

Discussion Questions

- To what extent were limitations on Biden's power of his own making?
- What does Biden's record tell about the value of government experience?
- To what extent did Biden's foreign policy actually affect his popularity?
- How can party unity explain the extent of Biden's authority in office?
- Was Biden more reliant on formal or informal powers to achieve his aims?
- Was Biden in control of events during his presidency?

Exam-style Question

Analyse the importance of controlling the legislature for a US president or UK prime minister.

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Essay Questions

Question 1

Evaluate the view that the president sets the US political agenda.

Question 2

Evaluate the view that president's power is constitutionally limited.

Model Answer: Question 1

The president of the United States is the most high-profile figure in America, dominating the American political scene relative to any other individual actor. The president has more publicity and autonomy than their political rivals or allies alike. However, whether the president sets the political agenda in America is debatable. The US political system is dominated by many different actors, and based on a strict system of separation of powers - with each branch of government having a different power more broadly. It is therefore worthwhile investigating whether the president sets the agenda, as might be assumed.

One reason to think that the US president sets the agenda is because they are the only person to do so. A presidential campaign specifically sets out a certain agenda to attract widespread attention and debate throughout the country. In presidential elections, a presidential candidate is then expected to follow through on their agenda, with the executive branch of government following - either by giving consent or by applying scrutiny. One example is Joe Biden, who was elected on the basis of making climate change a large public priority. He has made this economic agenda as central in the political debate for four years.

On the other hand, it is argued that other presidents were not afforded the same ability to focus on their own executive agenda once in office. Sometimes a president is forced to respond to global events that have little to do with their own political agenda. George W. Bush, for example, entered office focused on priorities such as cutting taxes. However, the events of 9/11 forced Bush to respond with large-scale military action that had little to do with Bush's original agenda. A president is not always able to follow an agenda of their own choosing.

Another reason to think that the US president sets the agenda is because they often dominate their political party, giving them significant power in Congress. In the USA, Congress can sometimes splinter when in opposition to the White House, but the party often coalesces around the president's administration. Even in cases where a party is not behind their leader, as with President Trump's first term, the president was able to get congressional members to back his agenda and amplify his power.

Having said that, it is also clear that having your own party inside does not guarantee that you can set the political agenda. This is because Congress frequently blocks the legislative agenda of the president. Congress is often able to command enough political power to disrupt a presidential agenda. Congress's exclusive powers - in particular its 'power of the purse' - require presidential approval to pass their domestic plans. President Obama was particularly successful in Congress during his first two years in office, with Republican Senators often refusing to compromise with the White House. Setting the political agenda is not always the president's gift.

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A final reason to think that the US president sets the agenda is because 'persuader-in-chief'. Far more than any other political figure, the president sets the rhetorical course for the country, build a narrative of progress, and explain the current situation. Put simply, the public look to the president - and the president alone - for direction. Republican leaders learnt this the hard way in the late 1990s, when they took the presidency with impeachment proceedings, seeking to shift the narrative onto the president. Ultimately the move backfired, with the American public prioritising the country's needs over the president's message discipline over and above his personal affairs.

However, it would also be wrong to paint a picture of US politics as revolving around the president. The reality is that many different actors play a part in shaping the political landscape. The USA is a federal system, with states able to assert their authority to challenge the federal government. Another key actor - the Supreme Court - can also serve as a significant disruption to the sitting president's agenda. A key example of this would be the court case, in which a Mississippi law restricting abortion rights was found to be unconstitutional, leading to an overturning of abortion law that was firmly outside of President Biden's control.

Overall, then, we can say that while a president may dominate the political landscape, they are not in full control of it. While they may have unique advantages, such as a major role in setting the agenda and a personal relationship with the public, this does not give them supreme power. The political landscape is contested, and every president will have to contend with circumstances that may limit their ability to set the agenda.

Question 2: Indicative Content

A01	A02	
Arguments for		
US presidents are limited by presidential terms	A president cannot govern indefinitely, unlike in other countries	This limits the president's power
Congress possesses the 'power of the purse'	Very little federal funding is accessible without congressional approval	A president cannot spend federal money without congressional approval
The Supreme Court determines what is constitutional	The Supreme Court can overrule executive actions, preventing or reversing their implementation	A president's actions can be challenged and overturned by the Supreme Court
Arguments against		
The US president can issue executive orders	Executive orders give the president broad power to make changes with little oversight	In practice, executive orders can be used to bypass Congress
The US president can veto legislation	It is very hard for Congress to overrule a presidential veto, and happens rarely	The president can block legislation passed by Congress
The Constitution mostly leaves foreign policy up to the president	In practice, the president can conduct foreign policy without any oversight	The president has significant power in foreign policy

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Mark Scheme

12-mark questions

Level	Mark	Description
No level	0	Student produced no material worthy of a mark.
Level 1	1–3	• AO1 – Student portrays surface knowledge and understands basic concepts surrounding US and UK politics, with little or no analysis. • AO2 – Student shows little or no reasoned comparative analysis of theories, making simple links between material and concepts.
Level 2	4–6	• AO1 – Student portrays some knowledge and understanding of concepts surrounding US and UK politics, which are sometimes used in evaluation. Some relevant general points are made. • AO2 – Student shows some signs of comparatively analysing theories, making some relevant links between material and concepts.
Level 3	7–9	• AO1 – Student portrays accurate knowledge and understanding of concepts surrounding US and UK politics. Knowledge is used to the broader analysis and evaluation. Mostly relevant points are made. • AO2 – Student shows mainly reasoned comparative analysis of theories, making relevant links between material and concepts.
Level 4	10–12	• AO1 – Student portrays detailed and accurate knowledge and understanding of theories and concepts surrounding US and UK politics, which are used effectively to relevantly support analysis and evaluation. Points are made. • AO2 – Student shows consistently good, reasoned comparative analysis of political concepts and theories, making multiple reasoned links between material and concepts.

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30-mark questions

Level	Mark	Description
No level	0	Student produced no material worthy of a mark.
Level 1	1–6	AO1 – Student portrays surface knowledge and understanding of concepts surrounding US politics, with little or no analysis. AO2 – Student shows little or no reasoned analysis of theories, making simple links between material and concepts. AO3 – Student engages in little or no evaluative work, leading to poorly reasoned arguments. Many of these arguments are based on simple judgements.
Level 2	7–12	AO1 – Student portrays some knowledge and understanding of concepts surrounding US politics, which are sometimes used in analysis or evaluation. Some relevant general points are made. AO2 – Student shows some signs of analysing political theories, making some relevant links between material and concepts. AO3 – Student engages in formulating some evaluation, leading to some relevant judgements. Some of these arguments are based on simple content, leading to poorly reasoned arguments.
Level 3	13–18	AO1 – Student portrays accurate knowledge and understanding of concepts surrounding US politics. Knowledge is used in the broader analysis and evaluation. Mostly relevant points are made. AO2 – Student shows mainly reasoned analysis of theories, making relevant links between material and concepts. AO3 – Student builds a mostly reasoned evaluation on the basis of strong judgements and arguments throughout. This leads to generally reasonable conclusions.
Level 4	19–24	AO1 – Student portrays detailed and accurate knowledge and understanding of theories and concepts surrounding US politics, which are effectively used to support analysis and evaluation. AO2 – Student shows consistently good, reasoned analysis of theories, making multiple reasoned links between material and concepts. AO3 – Student builds an almost fully relevant evaluation on the basis of strong judgements and arguments throughout. This leads to reasoned conclusions.
Level 5	25–30	AO1 – Student portrays accuracy with a visible attention to detail in knowledge and understanding of theories and concepts. This wealth is integrated consistently to support analysis and evaluation. The result is convincing general points throughout. AO2 – Student shows strong perception in formulating political concepts or theories, making consistently good links between material and concepts. AO3 – Student engages in building an entirely relevant evaluation, making strongly effective and reasoned judgements and arguments. Conclusions are entirely reasonable as a result.

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