

2017 specification
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US Presidents 1993–2025

from Clinton to Biden
for A Level AQA 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 multinationals 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 era. 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 Democratic 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 overhauled 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 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. The Clinton administration's restrictions on the executive, and the use of bipartisanship regarding American foreign policy. Clinton is remembered as a global leader who sought to symbolise the start of a new era of international 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 president and both houses of Congress were Democrats.

A primary part of Clinton's legislative agenda was healthcare reform, which he had promised 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 a chance 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 undermine its chances of passage in Congress.

Ultimately, the Clinton administration wasn't put to a decisive congressional vote until August 1994, before mid-term elections which threatened to end Clinton's advantage of unified government. The Clinton administration failed – despite Democrat control of Congress – in an embarrassment for the Clinton administration that demonstrated the importance of cooperation with Congress over legislation, and that this should be 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 which slowed the legislation's progress.

At the 1994 midterm elections the Republican Party campaigned heavily on Clinton's record, and successfully galvanising opposition against them, and effectively killing off any chance of Clinton's re-election. 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 legislate.

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 1995 they introduced 10 hefty bills unrelated 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. Clinton demonstrated that even when a party did not control the White House, it could still engage in a meaningful 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 Dwight D. Eisenhower.

One reason for this record-breaking popularity is his 'relatable' persona. Clinton became the first president elected to office in the USA, a 'baby boomer' who reflected his extraordinarily large generation 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 in the 1992 election against opponents – George Bush and Bob Dole – who were conversely perceived as more establishment. Clinton was the first of the large 'baby boomer' cohort to take on the presidency, and his communication style, 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 also the first 'explainer-in-chief' by Barack Obama for his ability to engage and persuade across party lines.

This casual, almost chummy approach to governance in office was new – but will be familiar to those who remember the premiership of Tony Blair, a fellow 'baby boomer' political traveller who both emulated and cultivated Clinton's approach. However, Clinton's personalisation of the presidency had consequences. The line between presidential politics and his personal affairs began to overlap after he was seen in a public 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, and were more reliant on special advisors, and their approach to decision-making. They also shared a commitment to a 'third way' approach, a middle course between traditional left-wing and right-wing positions, which radicalised the political parties that their political parties had traditionally relied on.

Though personally embarrassing, the subsequent launching of impeachment proceedings by a Republican-controlled Congress only served to bolster, rather than diminish, his popularity. Clinton disapproved of the way in which the presidency had begun to take on the tone of a 'celebrity' role, 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 face 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 term, while inflation stayed low and relatively stable. Tax rates were reduced for the majority of Americans, and the number of people receiving welfare payments fell by half.

On top of that, the unemployment rate 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 services. This was a state of affairs, particularly in America, that had not been seen in 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 military 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

Explain and analyse three factors that 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 the one in charge.

Yet international events soon conspired to give him the second highest presidential approval rating in history. 84% of Americans backed the wartime 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 Iraq while Congress was debating the McCain–Feingold Bill to regulate spending in federal elections. He took an aggressive stance against some parts of the world.

But by May the unemployment rate had risen to 4.5%, the highest rate since 1992. James Jeffrey became an independent, temporarily shifting the balance of power in the White House. Bush's early speech was 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. In the USA, the prime minister's character is still an important factor.

Everything changed for Bush – and America – on 11th September 2001. Two jetliners were hijacked by Islamic extremists into the World Trade Center, and the second was deliberately crashed into the Pentagon. A third 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 own choosing.

The attacks swept aside dislike of Bush; across the world many national political leaders were 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. 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 the war 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 February 2002 Bush finally got support from Congress for the invasion of Iraq on the basis of the intelligence claims that the Iraqis were developing weapons of mass destruction. Congress was 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 to do what he saw fit 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 its constitutional powers, and reduced checks and balances on its own activity. The Constitution explicitly mentioned in the Constitution, but Congress has previously legislated to give the president 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 acting without approval for an extension of its own powers.

The executive branch introduced measures to limit congressional enquiries to those working in the executive branch. Executive orders it prevented presidential documents being released and allowed the president to try to impeach a trial (until this was declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court in 2004). Calling on the president to try to 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 opinion. They had been misled by Bush for his own purposes. When reports surfaced of statistics as 1999 that the time had come to remove Saddam Hussein, partly because he had been a threat to the world, Bush senior, many became suspicious of his motives for ordering the invasion of Iraq. He claimed that in doing so he was relieving the world of a tyrant, but soon rather few people believed him. Several US companies were reported 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 had been 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 bureauc should be carried out. This meant that he was interpreting the Constitution this way, Bush felt he could defy Congress and even the Supreme Court constitutional limits 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 ag 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 removed 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. Beyond that, 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 passed by Congress were in themselves badly planned.

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



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 style?
- Did Bush engage in executive overreach, or act within constitutional limits?
- To what extent did questions around Bush's motives for the Iraq War affect his popularity?
- Was Bush more reliant on formal or informal powers to achieve his aims?
- Did 9/11 make Bush an imperial president?

Exam-style Question

Explain and analyse three 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 considered the highlight of the convention, arguably overshadowing the appearance of that year's presidential nominee.

There was no doubt that Obama was a gifted speaker. His words and his delivered 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 their power in order 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 negotiator and 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 focused on 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 value the 'ends' over 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 out of Congress into the wilderness. 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 role 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 one 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 goal of his previous spell in the White House under Bill Clinton. Obama had campaigned strongly on the issue and intended to significantly increase the scope of federal funding for health insurance, particularly for Americans going without protection. The passage of his bill was not without controversy, but a surprising amount of negotiating, given the party's dominant position in Congress. The Affordable Care Act – 2010's Affordable Care Act – represents a high point in Obama's presidency, enduring a long and difficult path.

Healthcare expansion and the high cost of the recovery bill, over \$800 billion, influenced the shift to 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 advocated for less 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. There was 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 fully regain.

Incoming congressional Republicans were something of a different breed to those of previous years. Many had succeeded in their primaries due to support from the radical Tea Party. They had a clear mandate from their voters to do anything 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 appeared to have become increasingly detached from the issues he went on – focused more on the function of government, rather than capturing the public imagination by exercising it, 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 rift between executive and legislative threatened to escalate into a major debt crisis if the escalations averted disaster.

House Speaker John Boehner, though more moderate than his Tea Party colleagues, was extracting small concessions from Obama – forcing him to restrict his spending plans for the government. Instead of leading a pro-reform coalition revival, Obama found himself increasingly isolated. It was unsurprising that by the time of the 2012 presidential election, Obama had become a target of negative campaigning against his opponents. Where once bipartisanship was his strength, it was now 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 process. 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 the threat of a filibuster.

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 a result, many executive orders can be implemented by the stroke of a pen.

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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 for 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 other powerful nations seemed to minimise the risk of future war in the Middle East, 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 often limited. Wherever Congress or the Supreme Court took an opposing position, Obama used his policies either by using legislation or by setting constitutional precedents. His reliance on 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, campaign finance, corrupted and lobbyists too powerful, also proved to be out of the president's reach. The 2010 *United v FEC (2010)* Supreme Court ruling, which essentially established a constitutional right to free speech in campaign spending, gave Obama little room to tackle the key public perception trust issue. 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 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 taken possession of my likeness and made a vessel for a million different dreams, some of which I would disappoint them.

Had expectations of Obama been lower, maybe his presidency would be seen in a more realistic light. Particularly early in his presidency, were no doubt of significance. But it was his early 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 challenges that 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 advisers to achieve his goals?
- Do the limitations on Obama's power demonstrate an 'imperilled' presidency?

Exam-style question



Explain and analyse three ways that constitutional limits restrict the power of a US president.

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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 in favour of maximising publicity and loyalty as the basis for the maintenance 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 presidential ambitions, using inflammatory language to smear Mexicans and promising to 'Make America Great Again'. He took him seriously as a candidate, though many overlooked the level of anger the Republican base felt towards the political 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 voters was that a different approach was needed. This sense became acute particularly as a result of the 2003 presidential candidacy of the unpopular Jeb Bush – brother of President Bush Jr, and son of President George H.W. Bush. Republican leaders had learnt from the presidential losses that had so angered the voters that

Enter Trump and his bold and simple demand for the USA to build a giant wall along the border with Mexico 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 was it purely populist. Instead, he was consistently the most entertaining and provocative of the candidates. He distinguished himself from his rivals and making the entire contest revolve around him.

It worked. The more people spoke out against Trump, the more popular he became. His direct and contempt towards the Republican establishment. Casual supporters were simply drawn to Trump. Name recognition was key in a presidential run, and nobody could compete with his status. 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 distance from established politicians, meant he couldn't be associated with a political class that had become synonymous with the establishment in America. This outsider status became the source of Trump's appeal throughout his campaign. 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 alienate political parties, and his tendency to adopt political positions rarely expressed by career politicians. His communication style, speaking in short emotive sentences and rejecting political nuance, 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. A major factor in maintaining Trump's power is critical for his base. 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 want to ensure their own re-election, and Trump's base of support turned into a personal loyalty test. This provided him with free rein over the executive branch, which 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 US, elected representatives are more accountable and responsive to their core voters, who reelect them frequently for reselection. Because core Republican supporters are a significant portion of the US population, forces Republican representatives to also demonstrate their loyalty. In contrast, in the UK 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 circumvented 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 goals?

In terms of achieving the Republican Party into a vehicle of his own, Trump can be considered successful. It has been argued that this achievement is sufficient to conclude that Trump has achieved his goals 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 his country and himself must always be to the disadvantage of somebody else. Therefore a key concept from Trump's viewpoint, and he rejects concepts of mutual interest which would be emphasised by liberal politicians.

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

Trump also focused on reducing levels of migration, thanks in part to visa restrictions and a wall for migrant crossings into the USA. In addition, Trump made good use of his executive powers 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 and Canada. 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 to bring the US trade deficit to zero without 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 achievement, however, was his reshaping of the Supreme Court. His 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 Justices Gorsuch and Kavanaugh 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 contentious hearings. While this was a significant gain, however, the death of liberal justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg at the very end of Trump's 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, declaring federal environmental programmes unconstitutional, expanding gun rights, narrowing federal protection of civil liberties, and most importantly for Trump – establishing broad immunity from prosecution for his actions in office.

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 early 2020, Trump's re-election bid had seemed to be in a fairly strong position. He was popular, the economy was 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 a public that was not used to careful planning, clear messaging, and preventative measures being taken. Rather than a steady, calm tone, Trump made a series of conflicting statements regarding the seriousness of the crisis. He oscillated 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 advisors, and occasionally questioned the necessity of the public health plan he was supposed to be following. He dismissed the World Health Organization at the height of the pandemic, when the US had the highest coronavirus death toll of any nation. He was widely ridiculed for his suggestion that the crisis 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 directly 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 to be more expansionist territorially and globally, demonstrating an increasing willingness to support foreign allies.

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

Explain and compare three 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 rival.

Despite his decades of experience, however, Biden's presidency turned out to be a very contradictory one. Extraordinary success at breaking through the 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 Democratic majority, 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 – that allocated \$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 with the opposition.

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

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 for help. In a surprise announcement, alongside Senate Republican Mitch McConnell, who had so stymied Biden's infrastructure 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's infrastructure. Biden had secured the support of the entire Republican caucus to pass a significant legislative feat in an era of deep partisan divisions and congressional gridlock.

Almost a year later came another surprise announcement – a breakthrough in negotiating the Inflation Reduction Act. Biden had finally secured the support of Democratic dissidents in the Senate to pass his 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 the cost of energy and tackling tax evasion. The bill heavily subsidised clean energy initiatives, sought 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 – to allocate \$280 billion towards the American microprocessor industry – an attempt to rival China's investment in 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 relationships, maintaining communication channels, 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, leading to a return to foreign interventionism, having been a lone voice in the Obama administration to end the Afghan War. He was in favour of economic separation from China, seeing increased investment in 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. Efforts to rush the pace at which troops would leave the poorly defended country had fought the Iraq War, the 20 years of conflict in Afghanistan had been against all odds, 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 for time to exit the country, and not enough time to extract their own allies and billions of dollars worth 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.

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 the power to prevent or initiate military action, and recommendations from parliament shaping key foreign policy decisions.

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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’ and 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 down 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 coalition felt very differently about the war – particularly among swing states. In Pennsylvania, heavy concentrations of young and middle class voters with sympathies 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 a highly emotive issue at the start of a re-election year.

As the war steadily escalated and civilian casualties became catastrophic, questions competence and handling of a military campaign involving a key US ally. And those 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 come in part because his opponents were of a similar generation. His primary rival nomination, Bernie Sanders, was a year older. His presidential rival, Donald Trump 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 a generation of leaders. And that’s what his early presidency, questions arose over stand for re-election: it was an inevitability for a first-term president. By the time he would be 83, well past the retirement age in most normal lines of work. By 2022, Americans and thought he was too old to do the job.

The Democratic performance at the 2022 midterm elections put pay to the idea of re-election. The elections were a surprisingly strong showing for the Democrats, das back control of Congress, and vindicating Biden’s first two years in the job. The re 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 an election year.

Yet nagging doubts remained and grew louder over the next 18 months as Biden's speeches, remarks, and interviews often omitted key facts and figures, and he became physically frailer. In 2021, a report conducted by a think tank within his administration – which was intended to clear Biden of mishandling of 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 being a besieged president.

Seeking to address the concerns head on, Biden pushed for an early presidential inauguration. But his plan dramatically backfired. In a catastrophic debate performance, Biden was disorientated, and struggled to complete sentences. His authority as president, eroded and 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 he named his vice president Kamala Harris for the presidency, unceremoniously ending an era of a federal government.

Discussion Questions

- To what extent were limitations on Biden's power of his own making?
- What does Biden's record tell us about the value of government experience?
- To what extent did Biden's foreign policy actually affect his popularity?
- How do you think Biden's personality 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

Explain and analyse three ways the US president can influence the legislature.

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Essay Questions

Question 1

'The president sets the political agenda in the USA more than the prime minister sets the political agenda in the UK.' Analyse and evaluate this statement.

Question 2

'Presidential power is more constitutionally limited than the power of the UK prime minister.' Analyse and evaluate this statement.



Model Answer: Question 1

The US president and the UK prime minister are the most high-profile figures in politics. They tend to dominate the political scene relative to any other individual, with far more publicity and autonomy than their political rivals or allies. Both set the political agenda to different extents, and in different ways.

One reason to think that the US president has more agenda-setting power is their greater political mandate to do so. A presidential campaign is a heavily publicised event in which a high-profile individual specifically sets out a certain agenda to the public, with significant media attention and debate throughout the country in presidential election years. Voters then vote for the individual who is more persuasive, or whose agenda is more appealing. In the 2016 presidential election, for example, was heavily personalised. The debate was characterised by the character of Donald Trump, the mental acuity of Hillary Clinton, and the relative popularity of each. The winner therefore has a highly personalised mandate to set a political agenda.

In contrast the UK operates a system of parliamentary democracy, in which the prime minister rather than the president leads the government. This means that - at least in theory - the prime minister's authority is derived from their party's electoral performance, rather than from a direct mandate. In this sense, the UK prime minister has less power to set an agenda to a greater extent on their political party for authority. An example might be the 2024 general election, which was widely attributed more to the unpopularity of the Conservative Party than the popularity of Labour leader Keir Starmer.

There are other restraints on the power of the US president, however, that limit their control over the political agenda, relative to that of the UK prime minister. The US has a strict separation of powers that is entrenched into the Constitution. This means that the president does not have total control of the federal government, and many different institutions can influence the political agenda. For one thing, the USA is a federal system, with state governments having the authority to challenge the agenda of the federal government. Congress can also challenge the presidential agenda - as is often the case if the president's agenda is unpopular. The Supreme Court - can also serve to limit the president's agenda. An example of this would be the 2022 *Dobbs v Jackson* court case, in which a majority of the Supreme Court ruled that the federal government's abortion rights were unconstitutional, paving the way for an overturning of *Roe v Wade*, which was a firm part of President Biden's intended agenda.

In contrast, the UK does not have a written constitution, or a strict separation of powers. This means that a UK prime minister with a comfortable parliamentary majority does have a greater degree of complete control over the institutions of central government. The only formal check on their ability to set the political agenda is Parliament - which can reject their proposals. However, this rarely happens as the prime minister always seeks to avoid a vote of no confidence.

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to destabilise the government. In addition, there are also areas of policy that can overrule the prime minister. These are royal prerogative powers, which give the monarch the power to set the agenda without checks and balances. For instance, in 2024 Rishi Sunak's election, despite not having the support of much of the governing party for

A final reason to argue that the US president may have more ability to set their own agenda is that once a president is elected, they are virtually guaranteed to remain in power. In the UK, a prime minister can in theory be removed by Congress, this very rarely happens. This means that a president can pursue their own agenda, without the fear that their party might remove them. In the UK, a prime minister's hope might restrain a first-term president, term limits also mean a second-term president has more autonomy in their position. In the UK, a prime minister can exercise power for a constitutionally limited period. George W. Bush, for example, continued to pursue an increasingly unpopular policy during his second term in the knowledge that he was no longer personally restrained.

In stark contrast, most modern UK prime ministers have lost power because they have lost the control of their political party. Prime ministers must constantly seek to win the support of their parliamentary party in order to remain in power. This can greatly influence the political agenda. In addition, opinion polls can force a prime minister to change policy dramatically, as poor polling often instigates internal rebellion against prime ministers. Margaret Thatcher's historically short premiership was defined by her inability to maintain control over her party, leading to constant U-turns on policy. This was largely because catastrophic opinion polls led her to lose confidence that her party would retain her in power.

On balance, we can see that the US president and the UK prime minister have different powers in different ways, making it complex to argue which has more agenda-setting power. While the US president has more autonomy from everyday politics in their position, they also have fewer formal powers. In the UK, a prime minister to implement their agenda. Overall, it can be contended that the US president has a greater mandate - which insulates them from internal party politics to a greater extent - and more formal powers than a prime minister.

Question Indicative Content

A01	A02	
Arguments for		
US presidents are limited to two presidential terms	The Constitution forces a president to relinquish power, unlike in the UK	A president is limited to two terms
Congress possesses the 'power of the purse'	A president cannot determine government spending alone, but a prime minister largely determines budget	A president has limited control over the budget
The USA has a strict separation of powers	This gives the president predetermined powers, whereas there is no written constitution in the UK	A president has predetermined powers
Arguments against		
The UK parliamentary system means a prime minister must listen to their party	This means a prime minister must listen to their party more	A prime minister is limited by their party
A prime minister's Cabinet appointments are restricted to parliamentarians	This means that a prime minister cannot appoint allies as easily as a president	A prime minister is limited in their appointments
A prime minister can be removed by a parliamentary majority	This makes it far easier to remove a prime minister than a president	A prime minister can be removed more easily

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Mark Schemes

9-mark questions

Level	Mark	Description
3	7–9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>AO1 (knowledge)</i> Demonstrates in-depth knowledge of political ideas, institutions and issues with careful choice of knowledge. Gives extensive reasoning necessary, that support knowledge of political ideas, institutions and issues. • <i>AO2 (analysis)</i> Well-structured and organised answer on three clear points. Analysis at hand is clearly and creatively expressed. Answer is coherent and relevant to the question at hand.
2	4–6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>AO1 (knowledge)</i> Demonstrates sound knowledge of political ideas, institutions and issues with careful choice of knowledge, which, however, may not be extensive reasoning and appropriate examples, where necessary, to support knowledge of political ideas, institutions and systems. Further detail may be required. • <i>AO2 (analysis)</i> Mostly well-structured and organised answer on three clear points. Analysis at hand is clearly expressed. Answer is coherent and relevant to the question at hand. Answer is descriptive.
1	1–3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>AO1 (knowledge)</i> Demonstrates a limited range of knowledge of political ideas, institutions and issues with knowledge, but this may be inaccurate. Gives some examples to support knowledge of political ideas, institutions and issues. • <i>AO2 (analysis)</i> Analysis rarely stretches beyond description and does not appear to be well-organised. Organisation are weak.
0	0	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No content worthy of marking.

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25-mark questions

Level	Mark	Description
5	21–25	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>AO1 (knowledge)</i> The student demonstrates in-depth and extensive knowledge and understanding of political institutions and systems. Analysis of the issues is supported with careful knowledge. Points in the source are developed with sophistication. • <i>AO2 (analysis)</i> There is a well-structured and organised answer, consistently focused on answering the question. Analysis is evenly weighed and authoritatively expressed. Key points are clear and well structured. Judgements are based on well-chosen evidence, incorporating the source. • <i>AO3 (evaluation)</i> Clear evaluation leads to well-supported conclusions with clear links to the source. Pertinent points of view are considered and evaluated in order to form logical arguments.
4	16–20	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>AO1 (knowledge)</i> The student demonstrates sound knowledge and understanding of political institutions and systems. Analysis of the issues is supported with accurate knowledge and is comprehensive. Points in the source are developed with sophistication and are developed further. • <i>AO2 (analysis)</i> There is a clear answer, containing analytical points consistently focused on answering the question. Analysis is evenly weighed and clearly expressed, but may not be fully developed. Key points are clear and relevant. Judgements are based on pertinent evidence from the source. • <i>AO3 (evaluation)</i> Clear evaluation relates conclusions to the facts and analysis, although not fully supported. Pertinent points of view are considered and evaluated in order to form logical arguments. Evaluation may be developed further.
3	11–15	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>AO1 (knowledge)</i> The student demonstrates a range of knowledge and understanding of political institutions and systems. Analysis of the issues is supported with knowledge, but factual errors are present. Points in the source are developed with some balance, but are mainly descriptive. • <i>AO2 (analysis)</i> There is a structured answer, consistently focused on answering the question. Analysis is present, and not entirely one-sided, though often descriptive. Comparisons between key points are present, with limited evidence to support the source. • <i>AO3 (evaluation)</i> Conclusions related to the facts and analysis are presented, but with limited support. Pertinent points of view, which may contain those from the source, are present but links are limited.
2	6–10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>AO1 (knowledge)</i> The student demonstrates a limited range of knowledge and understanding of political institutions and systems. Analysis of the issues is supported with knowledge, but points are present. Points in the source are developed with some balance and lack support. • <i>AO2 (analysis)</i> The answer is somewhat structured, with limited focus on tackling the question. Analysis is not entirely absent or one-sided, though they tend to be descriptive. Comparison between key points is largely absent or unclear. Analysis is limited. • <i>AO3 (evaluation)</i> Conclusions are not entirely absent, but are generally unrelated to the facts and analysis. Pertinent points of view, such as those in the source, are mentioned, but using them to support arguments is limited.
1	1–5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>AO1 (knowledge)</i> The student demonstrates a limited knowledge and understanding of political institutions and systems. Much of what is presented is inaccurate, extraneous and irrelevant. Points in the source are developed descriptively, with little attempt at analysis. • <i>AO2 (analysis)</i> The answer is largely disorganised, failing to tackle the question. Analysis is largely descriptive, unsubstantiated and unbalanced. Links between points in the source is unbalanced and rare. • <i>AO3 (evaluation)</i> Conclusions, where included, are unrelated to facts and analysis. Pertinent points of view, where those in the source, are largely absent.
	0	No content worthy of marking.

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