

The Think Tank

Up-to-date analysis of exam-relevant issues for A Level Politics

January 2026 | Issue 85

Conventions in
US Politics

Key Ideas of
Proudhon

Is China a
Superpower?

AND MORE

Will
Reform UK
Break Through
in 2026?

Springboard 1

'We will run the country until such time as we can do a safe, proper and judicious transition... We're going to have our very large US oil companies, the biggest anywhere in the world, to in, spend billions of dollars on the badly broken infrastructure, the oil infrastructure, and start making money for the country and we are ready to stage a second and much larger attack if we need to do so.'

▲ President Trump claims the US will run Venezuela after capturing its president, Nicolás Maduro, in a raid in which 32 Cuban soldiers who were protecting Maduro were killed.

Discussion Points

- To what extent do you think it is true that this military action is about a 'war on drugs'?
- Trump seems to claim control over Venezuela without actually having control of anything. Do you think the threat of further use of force will be enough for Venezuela to acquiesce to US demands?
- According to the US Constitution, only Congress can declare war. What does this say about the strength of checks and balances in the US?
- Given the apparent justification of a 'war on drugs', and the pattern of attacking countries, does Trump's policy represent a real departure from the US's long-term foreign policy?

'What Venezuela... that violates international law... government... with us... cooperate... framework... law.'

▲ Acting President Nicolás Maduro Rodríguez

Springboard 2

'We regard Maduro as an illegitimate President and we will work towards the end of his regime.'

I reiterated my support for international law this morning. The UK government will discuss the evolving situation with the days ahead as we seek a safe and peaceful transition to a new government that reflects the will of the Venezuelan people.'

▲ Prime Minister Keir Starmer's statement on the US capture of Maduro. Maduro's wife, Corina Machado, had been banned from participating in the 2024 election – the reasons the 2024 elections were regarded as neither free nor fair. Machado received the Nobel Peace Prize – apparently coveted by Donald Trump – for her work as the champion of democracy.

Discussion Points

- Why is it difficult for a UK prime minister to criticise the US government?
- Does a UK statement like this weaken international law?
- In the apparently unthinkable but not impossible scenario that the US tries something like the annexation of Greenland, which as an autonomous territory of Denmark is a US ally through NATO – what would be the consequences?

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A Word from the Editor

2026 begins with a crisis as the US tries to take over Venezuela by capturing its president. We've tackled this in the springboard and I'm sure we'll be seeing more on this in the next few issues.

Surprisingly stable polling that puts Reform ahead (but not with enough support to win an election) means it's time for everyone to take a serious look at the Labour and Conservative parties' competitors. So, our focus on political parties in this issue begins with Reform UK (overleaf) and Your Party (page 8).

This also marks the start of a 2026 series on devolution – with the next big electoral markers being elections to the Scottish and Welsh parliaments in May. We're starting with an overview of the Scottish Parliament (see page 16) and will continue with more on Wales and other parties this year.



After this year's devolved votes, 2027 looks relatively quiet for planned elections (although it may feature more locals than usual with lots of reform to boundaries), while the 2028 London mayoral election will no doubt be a key one. And if the next general election is not held that year, it'll be in 2029.

But the most important vote that happens in the next year *could* be one internal to the Labour Party – if, as many predict, Starmer resigns before the end of the year. While this shouldn't be happening just looking at election results, his popularity is stubbornly low, and poor May election results could be the first trigger for either a challenge or resignation. That's something to watch in 2026!

*We welcome feedback and contributions at SamFrancis@PublishMeNow.co.uk
If you have any ideas for the magazine, or articles you'd like to write, please get in touch!*

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Reform UK

a breakthrough in 2024

Graham Goodlad asks whether Reform UK can build on its remarkable success in 2024

Both Edexcel and AQA encourage students to study minor or emerging parties and their impact on UK politics, and the emergence of a multi-party system. Understanding the rise of Reform UK, the country's leading party of the populist right, and its prospects, is therefore worthwhile for A Level Politics students.

Reform UK achieved remarkable success in July 2024 with the election of five MPs (see Table 1). Previously it had just one, Lee Anderson, who joined Reform after being suspended from the Conservative Party over claims that London had been taken over by Islamists. The UK's first-past-the-post voting system meant that its 14.3% vote share was not translated into a proportionate number of seats, but it was still a significant achievement. In the May 2025 local elections, Reform secured 41% of the council seats that were up for election, and took control of 122 councils. In two areas – Greater Lincolnshire, and Hull and East Yorkshire – a Reform UK mayor was elected.

There are a number of signs of success for Reform UK. It averages 27% in most opinion polls – roughly 10 percentage points higher than either of the two

main parties. In the 2024 European elections, Christopher Harbour won the seat of the largest single donor to the party. Reform also reported a record vote in the 2024 local elections, with its support comfortably overtaking

RE
UK

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Table 1: Reform UK MPs

Name	Constituency	Still a Reform MP?	
Nigel Farage	Clacton, Essex	Y	Party leader
Richard Tice	Boston and Skegness, Lincolnshire	Y	Party leader deputy
Lee Anderson	Ashfield, Nottinghamshire	Y	Left the party in July 2024; no longer an MP
Rupert Lowe	Great Yarmouth, Norfolk	N	Suspended from the party in July 2025 following allegations of sexual assault; now organising a right-wing party
James McMenamy	South Basildon and East Thurrock, Essex	N	Left Reform in July 2024 following allegations of sexual assault; received a suspended sentence
Sarah Pochin	Runcorn and Helsby, Cheshire	Y	Elected to Reform UK in July 2024
Danny Kruger	East Wiltshire	Y	Former Conservative minister; elected to Reform UK in September 2024

Not surprisingly, the party leader, Nigel Farage, is in buoyant mood as we enter the new year, and he has told his followers to be ready for a general election before the officially expected date of 2028–29. A YouGov poll in September 2025 predicted that Reform would emerge as the largest party in a general election, falling just short of an overall majority. How secure is the progress made by the party, and what does the future hold for it?

Opportunities and challenges

Reform UK's main support comes from male rather than female voters, and from older rather than younger age groups – although it also attracts a significant minority of 18–30-year-old men. Polling suggests that those who opt for it do so because it is different from the two main parties, both of which have proved disappointing in office. It offers radical solutions and adopts a tone that speaks to many of these voters. Predictably, the key issue most often cited is immigration – the failure of Conservative and Labour governments to ‘stop the boats’. This links to a wider concern among older, less affluent voters – many of them living in east coast constituencies now represented by Reform MPs – about the pace of social and cultural change in recent decades.

The party faces some significant challenges. One issue has been the quality of its candidates, with a number ordered to step down in the run-up to the 2024 election after embroiled in social media posts from them that were criticised. Insiders claim that vetting and vetting procedures have improved since then. However, negative stories have continued to come out. In December 2025, Farage himself was at the centre of allegations that he had indulged in racial abuse as a school pupil in the 1970s.

Farage is a ‘Marmite’ political figure. Support for Reform increased after he took over the party leadership from Richard Tice during the 2024 election campaign. Farage’s down-to-earth, straight-talking, pub-going persona appeals to a significant audience. He has even started to gain traction in Scotland – a part of the UK where, as leader of UKIP in 2013, he once had to escape from hostile demonstrators in Edinburgh. On the other hand, a sizeable section of public opinion regards him as a divisive figure. He has attracted controversy not only for his views on immigration and the EU but for his criticism of the environment and his admiration for Donald Trump. His high profile has also led to accusations that Reform is a ‘one-man band’, with few substantial figures at the top.

Another issue is how well-prepared Reform is for government. There have been suggestions that its

economic policies do not add up, and that it will row back from early promises. It has also cited the state of the economy as a reason for not also pledged to return to the EU, without giving a clear timeline. The French government has said that it expects the UK to make a deal with the EU, and that it expects the UK to make a deal with the EU, and that it expects the UK to make a deal with the EU.

Present opponents

Over the last year the party has lost several defectors from the Conservative Party. A serving Conservative MP, Reform last September, and several Conservative MPs have left the party. Among them are some of the party's most prominent figures, including Nadine Dorries, Sir John Heald, and Sir John Jenkens, now Reform MPs. Reform also has one member of the House of Lords, Lord Jenkens, in the upper house, Lord Jenkens, in Scotland.

However, there is still a significant number of politicians, motivated by a desire to win, who support Reform. Reform is sensitive to the possibility of a rebranding exercise, but it would not be to its advantage to do so. Supporters of the party see it as a vehicle for change, which they see as necessary in the areas of immigration, taxation, and the environment.

The relationship between Reform and the Conservative Party is complex. Conservatives, however, have moved on its right wing. At the December 2025 Party Conference, Reform was not a major issue, as Reform was not a major issue. Reform was not a major issue in the Conservative Party, as Reform was not a major issue. Reform was not a major issue in the Conservative Party, as Reform was not a major issue. Reform was not a major issue in the Conservative Party, as Reform was not a major issue.

Farage was quick to respond to the end of 2025 that the Conservative Party was not a major issue. He insisted that he cannot track record in the Conservative Party, as Reform was not a major issue. Commentators have suggested that, if it is to have power on its own, Reform must

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voting was demonstrated in two by-elections for devolved parliaments last year – at Hamilton in Scotland and Caerphilly in Wales. Labour took the former from the SNP, while Plaid Cymru won the other, hitherto a safe Labour seat. In Caerphilly, the size of the swing to Plaid (27.4%), and the unusually high turnout for a Welsh Parliament contest (50.4%), suggest that many voters supported Plaid to keep out Reform.

Where next?

Reform is tipped to triumph in the next big electoral test for UK parties – the May 2026 local elections. The Starmer government has had a disappointing first 18 months, dogged by policy U-turns, sluggish economic growth and slow progress on improving living standards. Similarly, the Conservatives remain in the doldrums, with Kemi Badenoch's leadership widely seen as uninspiring. But it is likely that we are still three to four years away from the next general election, and a great deal can change in the interim. It is an open question whether Farage and his party can sustain their current momentum for the long haul. ■

Discussion Questions

1. How far do you think the future of the UK depends on the outcome of the 2026 elections?
2. Will the UK's first-past-the-post system prevent Reform from winning a future general election?

Question in the Style of

- Evaluate the views of the main parties have limited influence. You must consider this view in a balanced way.

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Profile: Zohran Mamdani

Ideology: Democrat

Nationality: American

Career: Mayor of New York City

Personal Profile

Born in Uganda to a Hindu film-maker mother and a Muslim academic father in 1991, Zohran was given the middle name 'Kwame', after the first president of Ghana, an important figure in the postcolonial politics which is his father's academic focus. It was this name he used in his campus newspaper at Bowdoin College in Brunswick, Maine, writing on a range of topics in 'Kwame's Column'.

Mamdani's political activity began in earnest when his interest in race led to an article where one of his favourite authors discussed support for a local election. In 2015 he volunteered in a special election for New York City Council. Mamdani was subsequently elected to the City Council.

Competing in the 2025 mayoral elections against former Democratic Mayor Eric Adams, Mamdani represented the relatively radical left of the Democratic party, advocating for affordable childcare, affordable homes, and a \$30 minimum wage by 2030. He is a democratic socialist. During the campaign, President Trump threatened to cut federal funding if Mamdani was elected. Mamdani won the election with just over 50% of the vote.

Mamdani became the first New York mayor to take an oath of office on a holy book, in a ceremony in the old City Hall subway station on 1 January 2025, afterwards sworn in by Bernie Sanders, the left-wing independent Senator from New York.

'New York will remain a city of immigrants: a city built by immigrants, powered by immigrants, and, as of tonight, led by an immigrant. So hear me, President Trump, when I say this: to get to any of us, you will have to get through all of us.'

'I don't want to have to get through any of them.'

I am not a democrat. I am a socialist. I am a communist. I am a most of all, I am a person who will refuse to let any of them get through to me.'

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Party fell from 18% in July to 12% in November. However, the party's mere creation does enhance pluralism and the UK's increasingly multi-party political system, which should be good for voter choice and representation.

The significance of a small party depends partly on its size – which can mean membership numbers, but also and/or votes. Your Party already claims 5,000 members including 28 councillors, which is quite impressive considering Labour has 170,000 members since Zack Polanski became leader, and Reform UK now claims to be the largest UK party with over 200,000 members. (However, Reform is not a 'party' with 'members' in the usual sense, but rather a limited company with paying subscribers and a lack of internal democracy; and they, too, have had internal disputes and have lost MPs.) Small and emerging parties are usually relatively unimportant in terms of seats at Westminster, because – as the source says – the first-past-the-post electoral system tends to under-represent them, while over-representing the main parties. For example, in the 2024 general election Reform UK won 14% of the votes but under 1% (five) of the seats, while Labour won two-thirds of the seats on one-third of the votes. This apparent unfairness may boost support for proportionate representation, especially among the growing number of voters who are turning to the smaller parties. At the time of writing, Your Party is too new to have stood in any elections; the May 2026 local, regional and general elections should be its first significant tests. However, even if small parties get few seats but sizeable voting support in the country, that may be enough to prompt the main parties to steal some of their policy ideas. In the same week as Your Party's November conference, Labour announced the abandonment of their two-child benefit cap, a move supported by Your Party and by many of Labour's own backbenchers. Indeed, Zarah Sultana lost the Labour whip in 2024 precisely for voting against Labour in the Commons on this issue. Your Party – currently with four MPs in the Commons – intends to hold the Labour government accountable in Parliament and the courts, and many Labour backbenchers quietly welcome some of its more explicitly socialist policies – for example, nationalisation of energy, water, rail and mail, a wealth tax, council house building programme, denunciation of arms sales to Israel, and rigorous party grassroots democracy. Your Party is also trying to persuade some left-wing Labour MPs, e.g. in the Socialist Campaign Group, to defect and join them.

Small parties, finding 'kingmakers' by entering the main party (e.g. the agreement 2017–18 between the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats in 2015). Many Conservative MPs have lost out of electoral politics. The current party leaders are not many Labour backbenchers. Your Party's proposed leadership, no Labour of pact with Your Party, hinted at a desire for a coalition with the Green Party, getting the keys to Downing Street could create a more balanced UK party politics. Many Party can get itself a more donors and address its lack of clear leadership. limit its media and purpose label could be. Commission reported complaint that it was. However, the new political scene, and it could voter choice and – may pose potential government. The UK party system and its important roles. ■

Examiner's Comments

There was not always for/against argument there was occasional material – which, even could not gain comprehensive use useful detail on some in the formation of information on the case say did explicitly refer titles in the final paragraph

AO1: 9

Moyra Grant is an experienced textbook author.

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THE KEY IDEAS PIERRE-JOSEPH PROUDHON

Marxism examines what the French anarchist brought to politics

Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1809–65) – a printer by trade – was a left-wing French philosopher and an advocate of mass, peaceful resistance as a strategy to bring down the state (similar to Mahatma Gandhi's doctrine of 'non-violent direct action' in India). He advocated common ownership of the means of production, but did not entirely oppose personal ownership. His core idea of 'mutualism' envisaged a highly decentralised federation of cooperative workers' communities, with a national 'people's bank' to redistribute funds among them.

He is credited with coining the word 'anarchy' – literally 'no rulers' – to mean natural order, in his book *What is Property* (1840). He worked with Karl Marx and other revolutionaries to establish the First Workers' International in London in 1864; but Marx ultimately and scathingly labelled anarchists like Proudhon as 'utopian socialists' in contrast with his own objective, materialist theory of 'scientific socialism'. By this he meant that their theories were based upon emotion and moral value judgements (for example, Proudhon's famous statement that 'property is theft') rather than, upon hard, factual analysis. Proudhon rejected Marx's idea of a temporary state after revolution. Despite his anti-statism, Proudhon briefly became a member of the French Parliament after the revolution of 1848 (when he described himself as a 'federalist').

PROUDHON'S KEY IDEAS

MUTUALISM

Proudhon proposed his central idea of 'mutualism' as an economic and social system – to replace market capitalism – where individuals and independent, collective associations of workers, craftsmen and peasants traded and cooperated with each other in voluntary, equitable, non-exploitative and mutually beneficial ways. As such, he is often seen as a bridge between collectivist and individualist anarchism, though his ideas lean more in the direction of collectivism. His statement that 'property is theft' referred to capitalists and landowners who 'stole' the profits from the workers who had created them through their labour. However, he contrasted private property for private profit – which was exploitative – with personal property including people's homes and what he called 'possessions', e.g. workers owning their own tools, hence non-exploitative. He was not, therefore, a wholesale anarcho-communist. He also advocated a national 'people's bank' to provide interest-free loans to workers and peasants.

HUMAN NATURE

Here again, Proudhon was being sceptical of the idea of selflessness – and in favour of a combination of egoism and collectivism. He believed that the 'vehicle' through which we achieve our capacity for moral growth is the pursuit of freedom in the face of conflicting instincts – he believed, the driving force of human nature.

THE STATE

Anarchists all view the state as undesirable, even the stateless society as the 'first step' towards a mere six thousand stateless societies and so on. Proudhon saw the state as oppressive, and in favour of freedom and the natural order. In *Idea of the Revolution* he wrote: 'The state, watched over, inspected, regimented, closed, controlled, assessed, all by creatures that have no virtue'. (This is only a stream of invective against government; that is not the capitalist state, he said for the few at the expense of the many. Proudhon believed, however, that the bourgeois state and its violence were its own end rather than 'with

Anarchists are often seen as destructive and nihilistic. Proudhon was one of the first to oppose their opposition to the peaceful abolition of the state and the reorganisation of the communes and free trade. His influence was acknowledged by Marx and innovation and economic development, its state-sponsored, so the sacrifice of its citizens.

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SOCIETY

Proudhon's vision of the good society (he rejected the word 'utopian') was based on free association between highly decentralised – federal – communes, with freedom 'not the daughter but the mother of order'. Anarchists favour direct democracy on the grounds that 'representative democracy' is neither representative nor democratic, because it entails people voting to surrender their personal power to self-serving elites and, in the process, colluding in their own oppression. Proudhon specifically favoured local, direct, democratic communes, workers' self-management and equal rights. What anarchism particularly should not do is participate in the mainstream, orthodox, ballot box and party politics, since this would be subscribing to the politics of the state. However, Proudhon briefly became a member of the French Parliament after the revolution of 1848, which he saw as an opportunity to dismantle the state from within, even as he distrusted it. His radical ideas were popular, but – or maybe therefore – he was imprisoned a year later from 1849 until 1852 for his open opposition to French President Bonaparte.

In summary, Proudhon was the first to announce proudly in 1840, 'I am an anarchist' – as an advocate of direct self-government, personal freedom and rejection of all forms of power. Anarchism is widely assumed to mean chaos and disorder, but it was also Proudhon who devised the circle-A symbol for anarchism to mean 'order in anarchy', and who wrote 'as man seeks justice in equality, so society seeks order in anarchy'. He is often seen as the father of anarchism, which he summarised as 'order without power' and its ultimate goal as 'order without ruler under the single law of reason'.

THE INFLUENCE OF PROUDHON'S IDEAS

Proudhon's often complex advocacy of individual liberty and collective equality has influenced many; for example: twentieth-century cooperative associations; the profusion of communes in the 1960s and 1970s; the contemporary 'fair trade' movement; and many current and diverse pressure groups which are anarchistic and anti-capitalist in their aims, e.g. Anarchist Federation, Solidarity Federation, Class War and Freedom Press (who still have a bookshop in London); or in their organisation and methods, e.g. various environmentalist, feminist, anti-nuclear and animal rights groups. He also influenced other key thinkers: Peter Kropotkin and his idea of 'mutual aid', Mikhail Bakunin and Emma Goldman – although they did not share his pacifism – and he inspired anarchist movements in Spain and the USA.

APPLYING P

CASE STUDY 1: PALESTINE ACTION

The 'non-violent' protest was banned by the UK terrorism legislation. The properties of arms companies were targeted. Hardware to Israel. One person has been arrested. Expressing support for the protest. On remand awaiting trial. Debilitating hunger strike.

WHAT WOULD P

Proudhon would strongly oppose the overreach of state power. Arrests of peaceful protesters. State to silence public opinion. However, the protest might give him a chance to speak.

CASE STUDY 2: POPULISM

'Populism' is a leading demagogue, which is against established liberal democracies, full of inequities, cultural classism. Critics say that it may be a step towards a new order.

WHAT WOULD P

Proudhon opposed nationalism. He advocated direct democracy. Faith in people's autonomy and fair decisions. He opposed democracy because, in their sovereignty – the personal power to new – or perhaps especially democracy enable and often authoritarian decisions. US President Trump.

Discussion Points

1. Why do anarchists oppose the state? Oppressive?
2. Does anarchism have a role in contemporary society?

Exam-style Questions

- 'The state can be abolished.' Discuss this statement, using the ideas of anarchist thinkers.
- To what extent is the state a necessary part of a free society? Discuss this statement, using the ideas of anarchist thinkers.

Moyra Grant is an experienced textbook author.

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Conventions in the US system

Richard Leese, *argues the most important constitutional norms in the US system*

With a codified Constitution, conventions are not normally so strongly associated with how the USA operates; however, there are a number of aspects that would fit a UK-type definition of these important political norms. In the UK, conventions are numerous – an outcome of an uncodified Constitution where not all elements of the system and how it should operate are immediately clear to see. Conventions have developed over time, filling in the gaps and typically helping to ensure democracy or accountability in some way. A recent contribution to *The Think Tank* was able to quite easily offer a top ten of UK conventions. I would struggle to do the same for the US; however, there are a significant few worthy of consideration. The following seeks to outline how the three selected areas fit the definition of convention, why they have developed over time, and the significance of each.

As a starting point, my working definition of a convention is an 'accepted norm', often something which has been recognised and adhered to over a long period of time. Conventions are neither legally binding nor, in the US context, something which is referenced in the Constitution directly, and they typically go beyond it. They are one of the things that allows the US Constitution to be flexible despite being recognised as entrenched and rigid.

Convention 1:

Executive orders and agreements

The power of the President to sign executive orders and agreements has become the increasingly expected and accepted norm. While the subject of such an order might be controversial and the legality of an action may be debated, the use of the instruments to begin with are not. They are now without doubt a convention, utilised by every President in modern times – acceptable it seems being justified under the vagueness of Article II which asserts 'executive power shall be vested in a President of the United States'.

Executive orders can be controversial at the moment of signing as they circumvent the checks and balances – signing unilateral orders without any need to refer to Congress whatsoever. The President need not bargain or persuade Congress to pass a bill when executive orders can achieve something by themselves. Executive agreements, despite being a clear alternative to negotiating treaties, are also an accepted norm, completely sidestepping the Senate's power to ratify treaties as would normally be the case.

There are some safeguards against the President's powers from the Congress, but the absence of formal checks and balances allows the President to undo an executive order or the Supreme Court to rule an order unconstitutional. The danger will be reactive and therefore made in the first place between signing (and challenge during which partly had an impact v

What would the federal presidential tools? I imagine over tyranny would orders and agreements suggestions that presidential tools with which to be

The absence of presidential tools in the Constitution means there is an uncodified convention

Convention 2:

Congress ignores presidential orders

When it comes to formal checks and balances, the President given the Congress the power to declare war on Japan followed immediately shows that Congress does not bother to allow the White House centre. This is now the

On the face of it, the unwilling or unable to make some practical reluctant – more common which it is judged. A

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be tainted with a foreign policy failure of a President with the same party label. They will gain re-election or not based on issues within their congressional district. Alongside this, Congress recognises reacting to international crises requires flexibility. Sometimes the US needs to act swiftly. The very slow-moving legislative process in the US cannot respond effectively and quite obviously lends itself to individual (or very small group) control. You cannot have 535 Commanders-in-Chief.

Congress does have some checks but they are pretty weak and increasingly redundant. Congress has the power to declare war, mentioned above, but has not been used since 1941 despite the fact the US has been active abroad ever since. Congress has to confirm all executive appointments and ambassadors but they are rarely not confirmed, and the National Security Advisor, a key foreign policy role, does not require Senate confirmation at all. Congress ratifies treaties but Presidents just use executive agreements instead. Congress controls the appropriation of finance but it is difficult to not fund something already instigated by the President.

This convention was tested in the 1970s by a 'resurgent congress' but to little effect – best shown with the War Powers Resolution of 1973 which stated that the President may commit US troops to hostilities only under certain specific circumstances. These were outlined as 1. if Congress has declared war, 2. Congress has passed some form of enabling legislation or 3. the US has been attacked. It also set out a timeframe during which the President must explain and during which Congress can approve or not of the action. The irony here is that the biggest domination of foreign policy in recent times – the Bush Doctrine – was supported by a President limited by the Resolution as the US had not been attacked. Alongside this, subsequent Presidents have largely ignored it, typically suggesting they are acting 'consistent with' rather than 'compliant to'. This is partly a result of how military action has evolved over time where military objectives are met via aerial strikes with no 'boots on the ground' required. Incidentally, this convention, like convention 1, tends to be centre stage of the imperial presidency idea.

Convention 3:

The Cabinet meeting

The Cabinet in the US, on the face of it, looks and sounds very similar to the UK experience: it is part of the executive branch, it is made up mainly of the heads of government departments, it meets in a cabinet room, it is appointed by the head of government. Here though is where the similarities end, with codified versus uncoded Constitutions and fusion of powers versus separation of powers ensuring a very different role in each. There is an easy case to be made for regarding the UK system as 'Cabinet government' as the Prime Minister is 'first among equals', the Cabinet is drawn mainly from the House of Commons with members therefore having their own mandate, and

it performs well-established norms (conventions – both of responsibility, for example).

In the US, the Cabinet meetings, is entirely the result, far weaker than the Constitution it states the opinion in writing of executive departments. It 'May require', therefore, a decision; 'in writing', so envisaged or articulated 'principal officer'. The President becomes the expected President Washington a meeting with his secretaries (the only ones at this time).

Unlike in the UK, the President's meetings are infrequent and widely criticised. The President's meetings also tends to be a mere photo opportunity for the administration. Clinton held 16 in his first term, and in his six years (including the Lewinsky affair), he only held 49 over his entire term. He attempted to appear at 16, on average 1 every 16 days. He held 9, 9, 4, 1. The fact that the President allows them to be seen in the White House makes them a UK PM who is just a shadow.

Discussion Questions

1. Does presidentialism suggest the checks and balances are too weak?
2. How far does accountability here add weight to the imperial presidency idea?

Exam-style Questions

1. Explain and analyse the US system that can be seen as a fusion of powers.
2. Explain and analyse the US Constitution and the role of the President (Conventions could be used here).

Richard Lawton is a teacher

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Is China a SUPERPOWER?

With one of the largest populations on Earth, and an increasingly important economic power, Angela Mogridge asks the constant question in global politics: just how powerful is China?

The question of whether China qualifies as a superpower has become one of the defining debates in global politics. As global power has moved away from the **unipolar** moment that followed the Cold War, scholars, policymakers, and observers increasingly view China as the most significant challenger to the long-standing dominance of the United States.

A superpower is traditionally understood as a state with the ability to project power globally across multiple domains – economic, military, political, and cultural. During the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union embodied this definition through their global alliances, ideological influence, and military reach. After the Soviet collapse, the United States stood alone as the world's sole superpower, with unmatched military bases, economic influence, and cultural penetration.

The position of the United States has, however, been challenged by China's rapid rise over the past four decades. Its economic transformation, military modernisation, and expanding diplomatic footprint have led many to argue that China is already a superpower. Others contend that while China is undeniably powerful, it has not yet achieved the global reach, institutional influence, or cultural appeal necessary to match the United States. The truth lies somewhere in between: China is a superpower in some domains, a near-superpower in others, and a rising challenger overall.

China's economic ascent is one of the most dramatic in human history. Since the late 1970s, market reforms have transformed it from a largely agrarian society into the world's second-largest economy. China is now the world's leading manufacturer, the largest trading nation, and a central component in global supply chains. Its **Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)**, spanning more than 150 countries, extends its economic influence across Asia, Africa, Europe, and Latin America. Through infrastructure financing, trade agreements, and investment, China has built a network of economic relationships that enhances its global reach. Militarily, China has undergone a major modernisation programme. It possesses the world's largest army, a rapidly expanding navy, advanced missile systems, and growing cyber and space capabilities. The People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) is now the world's largest by number of ships, and China's anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) systems challenge US dominance in the Western Pacific. China's military ambitions are most visible in the South China Sea, where it has built artificial islands, deployed military assets, and asserted territorial claims that place it at odds with neighbouring states and the United States.

China's technological prowess, particularly in infrastructure, artificial intelligence, and electric vehicles, further solidifies its status. Companies like Alibaba and Tencent have become global leaders, and massive investments in quantum computing signal long-term ambition. Geopolitically, China's growing network of bilateral and multilateral institutions, along with strategic partnerships, UN Security Council vetoes, and leadership in the Belt and Road Initiative, emphasises sovereign cooperation, appealing to many developing nations.

Yet China's global influence is uneven. Its political system, human rights record, and foreign policy have generated significant friction, particularly in Western democracies. While its economic and cultural appeal, global infrastructure projects, and technological attractiveness – lags far behind the United States.

To evaluate China's status, one must compare it to the United States' enduring dominance. The US remains the world's largest economy, the dominant global cultural power, and the world's most influential in science, technology, and cultural industries. Its global network of hundreds of bases and alliances projects power anywhere. The Quad, and AUKUS.

Unipolar: A single superpower, the United States, holds a dominant position in economic, military, and cultural spheres across the globe.

Multipolar: Where multiple powers hold significant influence, challenging the dominance of any one state, such as the United States. China's **Belt and Road Initiative** and 'The One Belt One Road' strategy aims to increase economic relations and infrastructure investment across Asia, Africa, and Europe.

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CATEGORY	UNITED STATES	
Economic size (GDP)	Largest in the world	Second
Economic influence	Global financial dominance; US dollar an international currency	Major
Military strength	Most powerful globally; extensive overseas bases; regular involvement in foreign conflict	Largest army
Global alliances	Extensive alliances, e.g. NATO	Limited for
Technological leadership	Leader in biotech, semiconductors and aerospace technology	Leaders in vehicle
Soft power	Strong cultural influence; dominant media globally	Limited; poor record in
Demographics	Stable population	Ageing
Political system	Democracy	

The US also possesses unmatched soft power. American culture – movies, music, technology, fashion, and higher education – shapes global tastes and values. English remains the dominant language of business, science, and diplomacy. The US political model, despite its flaws, continues to inspire democratic movements worldwide.

As can be seen from the table above, China does face structural challenges to any ascent to superpower status. China's population is ageing rapidly, with a shrinking workforce and declining birth rates. This trend threatens long-term economic growth and increases the burden on social welfare systems and high local government debt. And while China is investing heavily in improving its overseas image, its political system, corruption and human rights record limit its appeal in the West. In parts of Asia, the US has managed to strengthen its influence due to China's unwelcome activity in the South China Sea, the Taiwan Strait and along the Indian border.

Having said that, China is undeniably a major global power with significant economic, military, and technological capabilities. It has reshaped global trade, challenged US dominance in key regions, and positioned itself as a central actor in international affairs. In many respects, China already functions as a superpower – particularly in Asia and across the Global South. However, whether China has achieved *full* superpower status remains debated. Its global military reach is limited compared to the United States, its alliance network is thin, and its soft power remains constrained. The United States continues to hold a unique combination of economic scale, military dominance, cultural influence, and institutional leadership that China has not yet matched.

Thus, the most accurate assessment is that China is an emerging or potential superpower with the capacity to shape the world, but it does not yet equal the United States. The coming decades will see if China overcomes its internal challenges, gains global influence, and ultimately reshapes the world system into a multipolar one.

Discussion Questions

1. How far do modern states have the capacity to shape the world between superpowers?
2. To what extent is the US still the dominant superpower?
3. Can China now be considered a superpower?

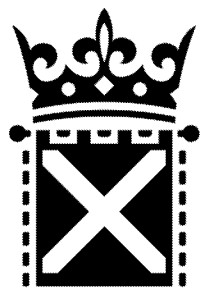
Essay Questions

1. Assess the view that the US is facing its greatest challenge from China.
2. Assess the importance of soft power in determining superpower status.
3. 'Superpowers rely on soft power more than military force.' Discuss.

Angela Mogridge is a retired teacher and author of 'China in the East Midlands. She has written for Government and Politics, Politics. She is also a long-time contributor for A Level Politics.

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A
short
history
of

Holyroo

With the next big elections in the UK to include those of Scotland's Parliament, Moyra Grant

The Scottish Parliament was founded in 1999 following a referendum – only in Scotland – on devolution. PM Tony Blair's 'new' Labour government held the devolution referendums (also in Wales and Northern Ireland) partly out of a genuine reforming zeal, but also to shore up their own party's support against rising nationalist sentiment in what were then Labour strongholds in Scotland and Wales, and especially to head off growing calls for complete Scottish independence. The 1997 Scottish referendum comprised two questions; on a 60% turnout support for a Scottish Parliament won 74% against 26%, and support for it having 'various powers' was 64% to 36%.

The Conservative Party opposed devolution until it had happened, fearing that it could be a slippery slope to the break-up of the UK. Nigel Farage's UKIP argued for the abolition of all the devolved assemblies as 'glorified forms of local government' and the return of their powers to Westminster. However, Farage has now accepted that 'devolution is here to stay'.

The Parliament is housed in an impressive new building in the Holyrood area of Edinburgh; it was prize-winning but controversial as its cost spiralled from an estimated £40 million to over £400 million. Unlike the Commons' laborious voting system, Members of the Scottish Parliament (MSPs) cast their votes via electronic consoles on their desks, so results are known within seconds. Other Holyrood procedures such as whipping, committing, passing of bills and scrutiny of government are similar to Westminster's.

Elections and Parties

The 'hybrid' Additional Member System (AMS) was chosen by the UK Labour government to elect the 129 MSPs; 73 are constituency representatives elected through first-past-the-post, and 56 are regional MSPs elected by the proportional party list system – where eight regions each contain seven 'additional members' – to make the overall results more proportional.

As Blair had hoped, since then the Scottish Scottish government of party which campaigned through civic nationalism government in 2011 – electoral system was therefore, the Westminster Cameron's UK government to hold a referendum side won by 55% to 45% leader and Scottish resigned and was replaced

Holyrood elections (changed from four (Reform) Act 2020). The SNP were still riding party balance of MSPs

- SNP: 60
- Conservatives: 2
- Labour: 21
- Greens: 7
- Liberal Democrat

Since 2021, the whole of exceptional flux, so significantly in Holyrood

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Holyrood's powers

The Scottish Parliament can pass primary legislation on devolved issues such as health, education, justice and policing, the environment, energy, transport, planning and some aspects of taxation. It cannot make laws on powers 'reserved' to Westminster, notably the UK constitution, defence and national security, foreign affairs, trade and industry, immigration, asylum and citizenship, equality, employment law, broadcasting and data protection.

UK PM Tony Blair in the 1990s coined the words of former Labour leader Gordon Brown – perhaps more in hope than expectation – that the devolution arrangements were 'the settled will of the Scottish people'. However, the desire of many Scottish voters for total independence was not extinguished with devolution. Scotland voted decisively against leaving the EU in the 2016 referendum by 62% to 38%, and ongoing resentment at being 'dragged out of Europe against their will' has helped to sustain calls for a second independence referendum. In efforts to appease nationalist sentiment and undermine SNP dominance at Holyrood, UK Conservative governments granted more powers to the Scottish Parliament, mainly through the Scotland Acts 2012 and 2016. Westminster has retained control over things like defence and macroeconomics, but the Scottish Parliament now decides Scottish income tax, has partial control over VAT, increased control over borrowing, more say over welfare laws and control of Scottish parliamentary and local government electoral arrangements. So, for example, 16–18-year-olds in Scotland were given the vote in the 2014 referendum, and in 2015 this right was extended to voting people in all Scottish elections (though MPs must still be over 18). Holyrood is now a powerful legislature, leading some commentators to describe the current UK arrangement as 'devo-max' or even 'quasi-federalism'.

Policies

Significant examples of policy differences between Scotland and England include:

- Income tax – high earners pay more in Scotland (48% in Scotland and more income tax bands, compared with 45% in England)
- Free university tuition in Scotland, unlike England
- Universal free personal and nursing care for all adults in Scotland, unlike England
- Free medical prescriptions in Scotland, unlike England
- Different social welfare systems, e.g. Best Start Food policy in Scotland
- Distinct laws on issues like alcohol pricing (minimum unit pricing) and smoking bans

Westminster

However, disputes between the two governments have repeatedly demonstrated the limits of devolution and the importance of sovereignty. Examples include:

- The UK's Internal Market Act 2020 aims to regulate post-Brexit trade between the nations of the UK 'single market', as put it. The legislation was 'grabbed' by central government and implemented without consulting many sources. The aim is to prevent internal trade restrictions to restrict the legal powers of the devolved administrations. Nicola Sturgeon called it 'a betrayal of the spirit of devolution'. The UK government's response was? – a long-suffering Scottish Parliament will have to decide on devolved policy. The UK government has devolved parliament to the Scottish Parliament. The Sewel convention is a long-standing convention that the UK government will not legislate on devolved matters without the consent of the Scottish Parliament.
- Pro-independence legislation in the 2021 Holyrood Act announced plans for a referendum in 2023. The UK government would therefore have to allow the approval of the UK Supreme Court and the UK Supreme Court would therefore have to allow the Scottish Parliament to exercise sovereignty. Sturgeon (after eight years in office) is the current FM of the Scottish Government.
- Scottish gender equality legislation defined 'women' as 'women'. In April 2025, in a landmark ruling, the UK Supreme Court For Women Scotland. The Scottish government, the UK government, the terms 'man', 'woman', 'women' in 2010 are binary and not to gender. The ruling is primarily on the basis of extensive implications for single-sex spaces, toilets, prisons, shelters, changing rooms. The ruling reaffirms the law over that of the Scottish Parliament.
- Scotland has a high rate of drug deaths by harm-reduction measures such as supervised injecting, treating addiction, such as supervised injecting, decriminalisation, by Westminster law.

In every case, it is the right to set limits to the Scottish Parliament confirming Westminster law.

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Conclusion

If Scottish devolution was intended to end calls for independence in Scotland, it has failed: a recent NatCen survey in Scotland showed 47% favouring independence against 41% preferring devolution; and 'asymmetric' devolution across the four countries of the UK has caused some ongoing resentments and conflicts. However, a survey on attitudes in Scotland to the Scottish Parliament was conducted by the Scottish Centre for Social Research in 2025. It found that – while Scottish voters may not always like their government – confidence on some policy areas – over 60% – has consistently said since the Scottish Parliament's creation that it should have the most influence over how Scotland is run, compared with under 20% expressing a preference for either the UK government or local government. ■

Discussion Points

1. Has Scottish devolution gone far enough?
2. Why is there no Brexit?

Exam-style Questions

1. Evaluate the extent to which devolution has enhanced representation in the UK.
2. 'Devolution threatens the unity of the United Kingdom.' Westminster Parliament. Discuss this statement.

Moyra Grant is an experienced textbook author.

20 Questions

Twenty hints to test your knowledge or to play 'twenty questions' with your classmate. (Answer at the back.)



1. I am a woman.
2. I grew up in a left-wing family.
3. I grew up in Scotland as a child, and Leeds as a teenager.
4. I attended Oxford University.
5. I was President of the Oxford University Liberal Democrats.
6. I studied Politics, Philosophy and Economics.
7. After university, I worked in management for Shell.
8. I was elected as a Conservative MP in 2010 at my third attempt.
9. I was a junior minister in the Education Department during the coalition government.
10. I am strongly associated with the Thatcherite/Libertarian wing of my party.
11. I entered Cabinet as Environment Secretary in 2014, and I made a famously famous speech.
12. I endorsed the Remain side in the 2016 EU referendum.
13. I was appointed the first female Justice Secretary by Theresa May in 2016.
14. I supported Boris Johnson's leadership campaign in 2019.
15. I was Secretary of State for International Trade from 2019.
16. I became the Foreign Secretary in 2021.
17. I became Prime Minister on 5th September 2022 after winning the Conservative Party leadership.
18. Queen Elizabeth II died on 6th September 2022, the second day of my time in office.
19. My Chancellor, Kwasi Kwarteng, announced an infamous tax-cutting 'mini-budget' in September 2022, spooking the markets and leading to a crisis.
20. I resigned as Prime Minister after 49 days in the post.

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TOP 10

Most Controversial Uses of US Presidential War Powers

Angela Mogridge looks at past Presidents' use of their limited war powers.

Tensions between the United States and Venezuela rose sharply towards the end of 2018, with the US carrying out a series of military strikes against civilian boats in Venezuelan waters. Since the beginning of the year these tensions have escalated into the US forces removal of the Venezuelan president, with him and his wife being arrested and flown to New York for court proceedings. While a new president has been sworn in, the United States has made it clear that the US government intends to be fully involved in how the country proceeds. President Trump has even met with US oil executives to plot what some fear will be an American takeover of the Venezuelan oil industry. President Trump has even met with US oil executives to plot what some fear will be an American take over of the Venezuelan oil industry. President Trump claimed that this military action was aimed at disrupting drug trafficking which he accuses the South American country of turning a blind eye to.

This military action against Venezuela was not approved by the US Congress and has highlighted the question of which branch of government has the authority to send American troops into armed conflict.

Under the US Constitution (Article II, section 2) Congress has the power to declare war and to raise and finance the armed forces. However, section 2 stipulates that the President is the 'Commander-in-Chief' and thus leads the armed forces in defence of the United States. The President has the right to sign or veto a Congressional declaration of war, while Congress has the power to override any presidential veto. As with most of the Constitution, this ensures that no one branch of government can take unilateral action. This dual structure was designed to prevent unilateral military action, ensuring that decisions of war would reflect both democratic deliberation and executive leadership. American presidents, however, have routinely stretched their war powers, often bypassing Congress completely. These actions have sparked fierce criticism within Congress and in wider society, with debates about constitutional limits, democratic accountability, and the balance of power.

Since 1973, the US President's power to take a country to war has been checked by the War Powers Resolution Act. The President must notify Congress within 48 hours of committing the country to military action. Any such military action cannot exceed 60 days without congressional authorisation for use of military force (AUMF). Every President since has challenged the resolution's constitutionality, arguing that it infringes on the Commander-in-Chief's powers. The ongoing dispute reflects the unresolved tension between executive flexibility and legislative oversight.

Here are 10 examples of presidential war powers.

1 The Korean War
President Truman sent the US Navy's 7th Fleet to the Korean Peninsula authority with the UN. He justified the intervention as the urgency of repelling the North's swift action.

By bypassing Congress, Truman gave Presidents to engage in military action without formal authorisation. This has cost over 36,000 American lives and the use of unilateral presidential power.

This episode also revealed the limits of such action such as UN resolutions. The US action without congressional approval shaped the Cold War. Presidents could act on their own, even at the expense of the Constitution.

2 The Vietnam War Resolution (1964)

The Vietnam War escalated after the US Congress authorised the President to send US troops in the Gulf of Tonkin. President Lyndon B. Johnson used this resolution to justify 'necessary measures' to prevent the spread of communism in Southeast Asia.

Johnson used this resolution to commit US troops dramatically, committing over 500,000 troops. Critics later argued that the resolution was misrepresented, and the war was handed over to the military.

The war dragged on for over a decade, costing lives, and fuelling distrust. The Vietnam War Resolution became a symbol of how presidential authorisations can be used to launch campaigns far beyond the limits of the Constitution.

3 Cambodia Bombing

President Richard Nixon authorised the bombing of Cambodia into Cambodia without congressional authorisation. Nixon argued that the country was a sanctuary for the Viet Cong, and that the bombing was necessary to protect the South Vietnamese territory as a sanctuary for the Viet Cong, and that the bombing was necessary to protect the South Vietnamese territory as a sanctuary for the Viet Cong.

This episode highlighted the limits of executive secrecy in military operations, but Nixon's actions showed that Presidents could circumvent Congress. The bombing was a tactical necessity, but it was a tactical necessity.

The Cambodia bombing contributed to the subsequent atrocities. The bombing was a tactical necessity, but it was a tactical necessity.

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4 Grenada Invasion (1983)

President Ronald Reagan ordered US forces to invade Grenada to protect American medical students and restore order after a coup. The operation was swift and successful, but Congress was not consulted beforehand.

Critics argued that Reagan violated the War Powers Resolution by failing to seek authorisation. Supporters countered that the urgency of the situation justified immediate action.

The Grenada invasion demonstrated how Presidents often justify unilateral military action by invoking humanitarian or emergency rationales. It also showed how quick, decisive victories can mute criticism, even when constitutional questions remain unresolved.

5 Panama Invasion (1989)

President George H.W. Bush launched Operation Just Cause to remove Panamanian leader Manuel Noriega. The invasion involved over 20,000 US troops and resulted in significant casualties.

Bush did not seek congressional authorisation, arguing that protecting American lives and combating drug trafficking required decisive action. Critics questioned whether the scale of the operation was proportionate and whether bypassing Congress undermined democratic accountability.

The Panama invasion reinforced the pattern of presidents using broad justifications to expand executive powers. It also highlighted how military intervention could be framed as law enforcement action, blurring the line between war and policing.

6 Kosovo Air Campaign (1999)

President Bill Clinton ordered NATO bombing of Serbia during the Kosovo crisis without congressional approval. While Congress debated the issue, it never formally authorised the campaign.

Several members of Congress sued Clinton, arguing that he violated the War Powers Resolution. Courts dismissed the lawsuits, citing 'lack of standing' – insufficient proof that harm was caused by the action – leaving the constitutional question unresolved.

The Kosovo campaign highlighted the difficulty of enforcing war powers limits when courts avoid direct intervention. It also underscored how humanitarian crises can be used to justify military action without congressional approval.

7 The Afghanistan War (2001)

After the September 11 attacks, Congress passed the Authorization for Use of Military Force (AUMF), granting President George W. Bush authority to use 'all necessary and appropriate force' against those responsible. Ever since, the AUMF's broad language has been interpreted by successive Presidents to justify military operations worldwide against terrorist groups, even those not directly

linked to 9/11. Critics argue it has become a blank cheque for endless wars.

Supporters contend that the war is necessary for combating global terrorism. However, the war has become America's longest conflict, and prolonged authorisations can lead to mission creep with no clear endpoint.

8 The Iraq War (2003)

President George W. Bush sought congressional authorisation to invade Iraq, claiming Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction. Congress approved, but the war's justification collapsed.

The Iraq War became a defining moment in modern history, raising questions about the use of intelligence to secure national security. The war was misled and the intelligence was flawed.

The war's long-term impact on the Middle East, thousands of deaths, and trillions in costs – underscores the consequences of unilateral decisions. It remains a cautionary tale about how claims can shape congressional action and global impact.

9 Libya (2011)

President Barack Obama authorised military action in Libya, arguing that it was necessary to apply because the operation was limited. Critics accused Obama of circumventing congressional oversight.

10 Syria Strikes (2017)

President Donald Trump authorised strikes in Syria as an example by launching a limited missile strike against 70 targets, including fighters, infrastructure.

In the words of the then Vice President Mike Pence: 'This is not the beginning of a new era of vengeance. The United States will defend our people.'

This action resulted in a limited strike. The Committee on Foreign Relations, which had requested authorisation from Congress, was not consulted.

With the military action, the question of who is ultimately responsible for the US military into conflict remains unresolved.

Angela Mogridge is a retired teacher and author in the East Midlands. She has written on Government and Politics, with a focus on the UK. She is also a long-serving member of the Level Politics team.

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