**A Level Politics**

**Bridging tasks Summer 2020**

**There are three tasks for you to undertake for your Bridging task. Task 1 relates to unit 1 UK Politics. Task 2 relates to unit 2 US Politics. Task 3 relates to unit 3 Political Ideologies. Please do your best on each task.**

**When you have finished these tasks please feel free to make your own notes based on any additional reading or research that you do. For advice on further reading and research please look at the A Level Politics reading list which is at the end of this document.**

**Best wishes Mr Griffiths, Mrs Hallam and Mrs Penson.**

1.Watch the clip below and make notes about the key features of UK Parliament.

[**https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RAMbIz3Y2JA**](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RAMbIz3Y2JA)

**2a. Read the article below' Note down the main differences between the UK and US Political systems.**

**2b. Which difference would you consider to be the most significant for the respective population? Explain your answer with reference to both countries.**

volume 26, Number 1, September 2016

US politics

A beginner’s guide to studying US politics

Jeremy Taylor

How is US politics different from UK politics?

Before starting to study US politics it is easy to think that it must be similar to UK politics. After all, both countries speak English and the USA was born out of the British empire. Of course, in some ways, the US political system is similar to that in Britain. Both countries are liberal, representative democracies. Both have bicameral legislatures. In both countries, increasing ethnic diversity is having an effect on politics. Immigration is a major issue in both the USA and the UK.

However, despite this, the most striking thing about studying US politics is just how *different* the two systems are. This article outlines what some of those differences are and why they might be significant.

Constitutions

Arguably the crucial difference between the US and UK political systems is the constitutions. Britain has an uncodified constitution. Parliament is sovereign and thus the constitution is easy to amend. In contrast, the USA has a codified constitution. Linked to this, the USA has an entrenched Bill of Rights that states the civil liberties citizens possess. This gives Americans clear rights that are difficult to remove — freedom of speech, the right to ‘bear arms’ and freedom from ‘unreasonable search and seizures’ to name just three. So for example, many Americans were outraged when it was revealed that the National Security Agency (NSA) used programs that collected large amounts of ordinary Americans’ digital data. This was arguably an unreasonable seizure of their personal information and it led to amendments in the law which change the way the NSA targets potential terrorist suspects.

The Supreme Court

In the USA the role of the Supreme Court is highly significant. While the original constitution was vague about the role of the Supreme Court, in 1803 it acquired the power of judicial review. This is the right to decide whether a presidential or executive action, or a piece of legislation from Congress is constitutional or unconstitutional. This power reveals a major difference between the two countries — in the USA the constitution is the ultimate source of power and is thus sovereign, in the UK Parliament is sovereign.

The Supreme Court plays a critical role in enforcing individual liberties in the USA. This of course can be controversial as the constitution is open to interpretation. For example in 2008 the Supreme Court interpreted the Second Amendment as allowing the right of an individual to own a gun. In a country where mass shootings are common, the Second Amendment makes gun control more difficult.

Amending the Constitution

Although the US constitution has been amended 27 times since it was written in 1787, the core ideas that underpin the constitution are fundamentally the same 230 years on. The US constitution (unlike the British) is difficult to amend, requiring the support of two-thirds of both chambers of Congress and three-quarters of all the states. So for example, in 1995 and 2003 the UK Parliament passed Criminal Justice Acts to end the right to silence and the principle of double jeopardy. Removing such rights in the USA is almost inconceivable as this would require changing the Fifth Amendment.

Separation of powers and checks and balances

Arguably, the core principle of the US constitution is ‘limited government’. A criticism of the UK is that our prime minister is so powerful we effectively have an ‘elective dictatorship’, but this criticism could hardly be made in the USA in recent years. The US system is based on separation of powers and on checks and balances, where executive power is limited by Congress. As one or both of the chambers of Congress will often be controlled by a different party from that of the president, deadlock is a frequent. For example, in recent years, President Obama has regularly called for Congress to introduce laws on gun control and immigration reform. However, Republicans in the House of Representatives have refused to pass these Bills. The president has checks on Congress as well — for example, he can veto its Bills. And as mentioned earlier, the Supreme Court can check the power of the president and Congress too, through judicial review.

Federalism

Not only is the executive limited by the other branches of the federal government, the power of the federal government is itself limited by the fact that state governments play a significant role in determining policy within the state. This is called federalism and is a key difference from the UK, which is a unitary state. For example, despite the federal government being committed to the so-called war on drugs, the states of Colorado, Washington, Oregon and Alaska have legalised cannabis.

Elections

The USA has far more elections than Britain. The president and both chambers of Congress are all elected. A huge number of state and local officials are also elected. For most of the key elected positions, there are primary contests beforehand. Primaries are elections where the public have the chance to choose the candidate that each party will run in the actual election. This is different from the UK where party members, not the public, choose candidates. In the USA, the effect of primaries is enormous. They make the election process much longer than we are used to in Britain. Due to the length of the campaigns, US elections are phenomenally expensive. In 2012, Obama and Mitt Romney combined spent almost $2 billion on their campaigns. This money has to be raised from somewhere — from individuals, corporations, trade unions and pressure groups — and thus campaign finance has become a huge issue in US politics.

Pressure groups

This in turn links to the role of pressure groups. In the USA pressure groups play a much greater part in elections — for example donating money. However, US pressure groups have other advantages. Because of the federal system, there are far more access points for pressure groups than in the UK and they can make a real difference to US politics. The National Rifle Association (NRA), for example, has been a major factor in why Congress has not introduced gun control in recent years.

Parties

As a result of the nature of US elections, US politics has arguably become more candidate-centred over the last 40 years. Traditionally, US parties were seen as broad groupings, lacking a clear ideology. However, since the mid-1990s, the parties have become much more ideological, with conservative Democrats and moderate Republicans both in decline — a process that has accelerated in recent years. Ironically, this process of polarisation has happened at the same time as British parties have (at least pre-Corbyn) arguably become more ideologically similar. Donald Trump is probably the most extreme candidate the Republican Party has ever nominated for president. While Hillary Clinton is a moderate, she was run very close by democratic socialist, Bernie Sanders, in the Democratic Party primaries — a surprising development in US politics.

Conclusion

While there are similarities between US and UK politics, this article has argued that the differences are far stronger. It is these differences that make studying US politics in Year 13 interesting and enjoyable.

Find out more

It is key to keep up to date with recent developments. This can be hard for students living in the UK, as the British media tend to ignore US politics except when it is a presidential election year. However, the internet is a great resource.

**Real Clear Politics** is excellent for news and articles. It is also good for following opinion polls at election time. If you want to see the number of votes each candidate obtained in the recent primaries this is a good place to go: <http://www.realclearpolitics.com/>

**Open Secrets** is a superb resource for finding out how much money candidates have spent on their election campaigns. It is also great for researching where candidates get their money from: <https://www.opensecrets.org/>

**270 to win** is a useful website when studying elections – especially the topic of the Electoral College which some students may find challenging. This website contains excellent maps of past residential elections, showing which candidates won which states. The maps are interactive and allow you to predict the results of future elections: <http://www.270towin.com/>

The **US news section of the Guardian** website is a good place to keep up to date with US political developments: <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news>

However, the best newspapers to follow are of course US newspapers online, such as the **New York Times** (<http://www.nytimes.com/>) and **Washington Post** (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/>).

US television has produced some excellent series that will enhance your understanding of US politics, for example ***House of Cards*** and ***The West Wing***.

Jeremy Taylor is Head of History and Politics at Bishop Thomas Grant School

3. Make notes about the history, key ideas, and key people in the development of at least one of the following political ideologies: Liberalism/Conservatism/Socialism/Feminism/Environmentalism. Produce 1-2 sides of notes about each ideology.

**A Level Politics reading list**

**Key texts students should purchase if possible:**

**For the Autumn term:**

* **UK Government and Politics by Philip Lynch/Paul Fairclough/Toby Cooper (Hodder)**

**For the Spring term:**

* **US Government and Politics by Anthony Bennett**
* **Political Ideas by Neil McNaughton**

**Other useful texts:**

* Aiming for an A in A-level Politics by Sarra Jenkins
* My Revision Notes: AQA AS/A-level Politics: UK Politics by Rowenna Hammal
* My Revision Notes: AQA AS/A-level Politics: US and Comparative Politics by Rowenna Hammal
* My Revision Notes: AQA AS/A-level Politics: Political Ideas by Adam Tones
* AQA AS/A-level Politics Student Guide 1: Government of the UK by Nick Gallop
* AQA A-level Politics Student Guide 4: Government and Politics of the USA and Comparative Politics by Simon Lemieux
* AQA A-level Politics Student Guide 3: Political Ideas by Simon Lemieux
* UK Politics Annual Update 2020 by Nick Gallop
* US Politics Annual Update 2020 by Anthony Bennett

**Wider reading and research:**

**UK Politics:**

* BBC News
* Channel 4 News
* The ‘broadsheets’ (the Guardian, Telegraph, the Times)

**US Politics:**

* Politico
* Washington Post, New York Times

**Global Politics:**

* Al Jazeera
* Financial Times, The Economist

**Podcasts:**

* The A Level Politics Show by Nick de Souza (an excellent podcast presented by an A Level Politics teacher and an examiner)
* BBC Newscast/BBC Americast
* The Guardian UK: Politics Weekly