

GCE



Revised GCE

# Government and Politics

## Student Course Companion

AS 21: The British Political Process

For first teaching from September 2016  
For first award of AS Level in Summer 2017  
For first award of A Level in Summer 2018





## AS Government and Politics Course Companion

### Unit AS 2: The British Political Process

*“Just because you do not take an interest in politics, it doesn’t mean politics won’t take an interest in you.”*

Pericles (430BC).

#### **What is this unit about?**

This unit looks at how Britain is governed. You could say the unit is about **power**. Who has power? Who decides things? When things happen, who says so? As “power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely”, it is also about how those in power are controlled. What **limits** are there on those who have power?

So, to take an extreme example, if the Prime Minister wants to declare war on the USA, what is there to stop him?

## What are the main areas I need to study?

### Section A: (Compulsory)

- The Legislature
- The Executive

### Section B:

- The British judiciary

Or

### Section C:

- Pressure groups in the United Kingdom

Section A is compulsory; Students can then choose whether they answer the questions in Section B, The British judiciary or those in Section C, Pressure groups in the United Kingdom.

In studying the above you need to consider how they are connected and affect one another. Certain concepts such as power, authority and scrutiny are key strands that run through the unit.

In *theory*, it is Parliament that is supposed to be the dominant part of the British system, but what is the *reality*?

Politics is a subject in which there can be two (or more) different views on any question or issue. You therefore need to be able to understand and look critically at both sides of any arguments.

## The Legislature

### Essential knowledge and understanding:

- What is Parliament and how is it chosen?
- What are its representative, legislative and scrutiny functions?
- How effective is Parliament in performing its functions?
- To what extent is Parliament independent of the Executive?

## The Executive

### Essential knowledge and understanding:

- How is the Executive created?
- What is the role of the Prime Minister, what are his/her powers and what are the limits to those powers?
- What is the role of the Cabinet and how effective is it in performing this role?
- To what extent does the Executive control the Legislature?

## **The British judiciary**

### **Essential knowledge and understanding:**

- What is the judiciary and what is its political function?
- How can the judiciary hold the Executive to account?
- What limits the power of the judiciary?
- How effective is the judiciary in performing its political role?

## **Pressure groups in the United Kingdom**

### **Essential knowledge and understanding**

- What are pressure groups and what are the main types?
- What is the role of pressure groups in the political process?
- What tactics do pressure groups employ?
- Are pressure groups an asset or a threat to democratic government?

### **How will I be assessed?**

The exam lasts 1 hour 45 minutes.

You have to answer five questions worth 4, 10, 26, 5 and 15 marks.

Total marks for the paper is 60.

The paper has **three** sections. All candidates must answer the 3 questions in Section A (Parliament and the Executive) and then choose between Section B (The British judiciary) or Section C (Pressure groups in the United Kingdom).

#### **Section A: Parliament and the Executive.**

This section must be answered by all. It will have three questions worth 4, 10 and 26 marks. There will be a choice of one from two possible options for the 26 mark question.

Now a choice must be made between Section B and Section C.

#### **Section B: The British judiciary**

This will consist of two questions worth 5 and 15 marks.

#### **Section C: Pressure groups in the United Kingdom**

This section will have two questions worth 5 and 15 marks.

As with other units, questions can be answered in any order.

**Pay attention to the following instructions when answering each question:**

**Section A: The British Executive and Legislature**

**Q1: 4 marks**

- The command word is “identify” so it is only necessary to name or list two things: no explanation is required.
- You have to identify **two** things about the British Executive or Legislature.
- QWC is **not** being assessed so a two bullet answer is acceptable.
- About 5 minutes should be spent on this question.

**Q2: 10 marks**

- The command word is “explain”.
- This question will require the explanation of two things, e.g. two criticisms, ways, reasons or features.
- A paragraph on each explanation is enough to achieve full marks.
- Examples will contribute to a full explanation.
- QWC is **not** being assessed; about 15 minutes should be spent on this question.

**Q3: 26 marks**

- The command phrase is “discuss the validity” or “assess the accuracy”.
- The question will consist of a statement that is presented as a quotation.
- A balanced essay answer is required.
- Examples and evidence are essential to a full answer.
- You should spend at least 40 minutes on your answer to this question.
- You have a choice of two possible questions: take time to make the correct choice.
- QWC is being assessed.

**Sections B and C: The Judiciary and Pressure Groups**

**Q4 and Q6: 5 marks**

- The command word is “explain”.
- The question will require the explanation of a political term.
- A paragraph length is enough to achieve full marks
- A relevant example can contribute to a full explanation.
- QWC is **not** being assessed; about 5 minutes should be spent on this question.

**Q5 and Q7: 15 marks**

- The command word is “explain.”
- Explanation of an argument or point of view.
- Examples and evidence should be part of an answer.
- A short essay response is needed: about 25 minutes should be spent on this question.
- QWC **is** being assessed.

## **How can I make the most of my ability?**

Government and politics affect the lives of everybody. To develop real understanding you need to relate what you study in class to the national political events and issues that are reported in the media. Following the tips below will help to develop your interest in and understanding of the content of this unit.

**Watch the news!** Political issues and events are given a great deal of prominence every day on national TV and radio and in the papers. Paying attention to the news will not only increase your understanding but give you examples you can use in exams.

**Surf the net!** There is a lot of valuable information about British politics on the internet. The BBC and Guardian Politics sites are first class. Wikipedia is good too, with excellent links.

**Read!** There are many good textbooks on British politics and more become available on a regular basis. There are also several good political magazines and journals which have relevant and up-to-date information and articles. Politics Review and the Philip Allan Updates publications are particularly relevant for Politics students. Reading around what you discuss in class is an excellent way of deepening your understanding.

**Visit Westminster.** If you get the chance, visit the House of Commons, talk to your local MP and ask him or her questions. If not, you can follow Parliamentary debates and discussions on TV on the BBC Parliament channel. Alternatively, invite your local MP to come to your school.

**But there's so much information!** True, but to handle it you should:

- Organise your notes. Use the headings 'Parliament', 'Executive', 'British judiciary' or 'Pressure groups' to help you structure your work.
- Be clear on the key issues. Keep them in your mind throughout your study of this unit.
- Understand fully what the examiners expect you to be able to do. Familiarise yourself with specimen questions and mark schemes that CCEA has produced.
- Write practice answers to the different types of question and check them against your notes.

**Examination technique:** Exams can be stressful but by being well prepared and confident of how you are going to approach the paper, you can minimise the stress and make sure you get the best out of yourself on the day. Following the advice below will help:

- The time spent on the question should reflect the mark allocation. Don't write a page for a 5 mark question!
- Only do what the question asks you to do - there are no marks for including information that the question doesn't ask for.
- The 26 mark question must be answered with a balanced, essay answer. Make sure you address both sides of the issue - this means evaluating and being critical. This question will always be about one of the key issues of the unit.
- The exam is about a real political system so be sure to include examples and provide evidence to support your arguments.
- The exam is not just a test of your knowledge and understanding. It assesses how well you interpret questions and select relevant information. It examines how effectively you can analyse and evaluate and how clearly you can communicate your ideas.
- Remember! To score highly, you must answer the questions directly. Read and re-read the questions and make sure you understand exactly what they are asking before you start writing. Think carefully about the command words and what they require you to do, for example, explain, assess and discuss. In Question 3, think carefully about which of the essays you can answer more effectively.

## Glossary

The following is a list of key terms that you should know and use correctly.

**Authority:** A form of power based on consensus about who has the right to make decisions.

**Cabinet:** The most senior part of the Executive, made up of the 20 or so most senior Ministers who have responsibility for major government departments. Members of the Cabinet are chosen by the Prime Minister who normally chairs its meetings.

**Cabinet government:** The idea that the major government decisions are taken collectively by members of the Cabinet after proper discussion.

**Coalition Government:** This occurs when no single party has an overall majority in the Commons and two (or more) parties join together to form a government. After the 2010 General Election, the Conservatives formed a coalition government with Liberal Democrats.

**Collective responsibility:** The convention or unwritten rule that members of the Cabinet must accept and publicly support its collective decisions or resign.

**Conservative Party:** A centre-right to right-wing party based on the ideology of conservatism. Following the 2015 General Election, the Conservatives emerged as the largest party with a 12 seat majority after leading a coalition government following the General Election of 2010.

**Devolution:** This is when a government hands over certain powers to a region within the country to make its own policies and laws. The United Kingdom's Parliament has devolved certain powers to the legislatures of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

**Executive:** The government. That part of the political system that takes the decisions on policies to do with public finances, defence etc. In democracies, the Executive is elected by the people to make such decisions.

**'First past the post':** The system used to elect MPs to the Westminster Parliament. Voting takes place in single-member constituencies. Electors vote for one candidate only and the candidate with the most votes wins.

**House of Commons:** The lower chamber of Parliament where elected MPs sit and debate, legislate and scrutinise the Government.

**House of Lords:** The upper chamber of Parliament where peers sit. They spend most of their time considering and revising legislation.

**Insider groups:** This is a term used to describe pressure groups who have the support and attention of the government. Unlike outsider groups, insider groups are likely to attend meetings with the Government and be consulted regarding government policy. The British Medical Association, which represents the medical profession is an example of a pressure group which has often worked closely with the government in helping to develop policy which seeks to provide for high quality healthcare in the United Kingdom.

**Judicial Appointments Commission (JAC):** The independent commission that selects candidates for judicial office in courts and tribunals in England and Wales and for some tribunals that also operate in Scotland and Northern Ireland. The Commission was set up to strengthen judicial independence by removing responsibility for judicial appointments from the Lord Chancellor and making the process more open and accountable.

**Judicial independence:** The ability of judges to act without interference from politicians.

**Judiciary:** Judges. In the political system, their role is to decide if, and when, the Executive has acted beyond its constitutional and legal powers.

**Labour Party:** A centre-right to left-wing party with an ideological tradition based on social democracy. The 2015 General Election was disastrous for the Labour Party with the party securing only 232 seats and their leader Ed Milliband resigning because of his failure to lead the party to victory.

**Legislative role:** Another function of MPs. It involves the creation of new Bills which become Acts once approved by both Houses of Parliament and pass into law once they have received Royal assent.

**Legislature:** That part of the political system that is representative of the electorate. It makes laws and tries to ensure that the Executive does what it was elected to do.

**Liberal Democratic Party:** A centre-left party based on the principles of social liberalism. The 2015 General Election was disastrous for the party with many political commentators attributing the reduction of 57 seats to 8 to the leader Nick Clegg's decision to enter a coalition government with the Conservatives following the General Election of 2010.

**Limits on power:** Ways in which the power of the Executive are limited or checked to prevent it becoming too powerful.

**Member of Parliament (MP):** The elected representative in the House of Commons of a parliamentary constituency.

**Minister:** A member of the government in charge of a particular department. Ministers are usually members of the House of Commons or the House of Lords.

**Ministerial responsibility:** The convention that Ministers have the ultimate responsibility for the actions of their departments even if they had no knowledge at the time of the actions taken on their behalf by civil servants.

**Outsider groups:** This is a term used to describe pressure groups whose aims do not receive the support of the government. They are therefore unlikely to receive the government's attention or to attend any meetings where they will be consulted. The outsider status of a group does not necessarily mean that the aims of the group are dubious but that the government of the day does not share their aims. The outsider/insider distinction influences the way that the group may operate to achieve their aims. Outsider groups are more likely to resort to direct action in their attempt to raise awareness of their cause. Fathers 4 Justice and Outrage are examples of pressure groups often referred to as outsider groups.

**Parliament:** This is the name of the British legislature. It is made up of the House of Commons and the House of Lords.

**Parliamentary constituency:** The geographical area that each MP represents.

**Political party:** A political organisation that tries to achieve power in government by winning elections. Parties are often distinguished by the particular ideology or vision that they follow although some are also coalitions of various interests.

**Power:** The ability to get other people to do what you want them to do. In governmental terms, to be in power is to have the right to form the government, to appoint Ministers to run government departments and to bring forward legislation.

**President:** A political leader who dominates the Executive. Many believe the British Prime Minister is becoming more “Presidential.”

**Pressure group:** A group of people with a common interest or concern who organize to influence public opinion, the government and other powerful organizations such as businesses in order to secure favourable outcomes such as legislation and change in policy.

**Prime Minister:** The Prime Minister is the head of the government and leading member of the Cabinet. The PM chooses the Cabinet members and chairs its meetings. The PM in theory is ‘first among equals’.

**Referendum:** This is a form of direct democracy in which the entire electorate can vote on a single issue. Voters are asked to either accept or reject a particular proposal. In the United Kingdom’s system of parliamentary democracy, referenda are rarely used and are reserved for major constitutional matters such as membership of the European Union, devolution of power from Westminster or a change to the voting system.

**Representation:** One of the functions of the MPs who make up the House of Commons. It involves representing the constituency which elected them.

**Scrutiny:** The act of holding the Executive to account for its actions. It is Parliament’s check on the power of the Executive.

**Social Movement:** This is a term used for a large grouping of individuals, organisations or pressure groups who organize to campaign on a specific political or social issue. An example of a social movement would be the Occupy movement which was an anti-capitalist campaign which saw global protests against social and economic inequality with demands for tighter banking industry regulations and measures to end tax evasion by wealthy firms.

**Supreme Court:** This is the final court of appeal in the United Kingdom for civil cases and for criminal cases in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. It hears appeals on arguable points of law of the greatest public and constitutional significance.

**The European Union (EU):** A political and economic union of European countries. Its main institutions include the European Commission, Council, Parliament and Court of Justice. In some areas the EU only makes decisions by agreement between member governments. In other areas, its bodies can make decisions without the agreement of all members.

**The Government:** The United Kingdom's executive, that is, the institution that runs the country. It is responsible for formulating policy and introducing most legislation in Parliament. The Government is formed by the party that gains the most seats in the House of Commons at a General Election.

**The Opposition:** The parties in Parliament other than the Government. The party that obtains the second highest number of seats in the House of Commons is known as the Official Opposition and its leader is referred to as the Leader of the Opposition

## Revision checklist

As a final check before the exam, make sure you can do the following:

You should be able to:	✓	Notes
<b>Demonstrate</b> knowledge and understanding of key political terms and concepts (see the glossary).		
<b>Explain</b> what functions Parliament performs.		
<b>Analyse</b> and <b>evaluate</b> different views of how well Parliament performs these functions.		
<b>Explain</b> how the Executive can try to control Parliament.		
<b>Analyse</b> and <b>evaluate</b> different views of how much control the Executive has.		
<b>Explain</b> how the Prime Minister can try to control the Executive.		
<b>Analyse</b> and <b>evaluate</b> different views of how much control the Prime Minister has over the Executive.		
<b>Explain</b> the political role of the Judiciary or Pressure and Interest Groups		
<b>Analyse</b> and <b>evaluate</b> different views of how effective the Judiciary is as a check on the Executive.		
<b>Analyse</b> and <b>evaluate</b> different views of the role of Pressure and Interest Groups.		

