

Politics In The USA

2007 - Question C9

To what extent do ethnic minorities influence the outcome of elections in the USA? (15)

2008 - Question C9

Assess the effectiveness of Congress and the Supreme Court in checking the powers of the President. (15)

2009 - Question C9

To what extent do ethnic minorities achieve the American Dream? (15)

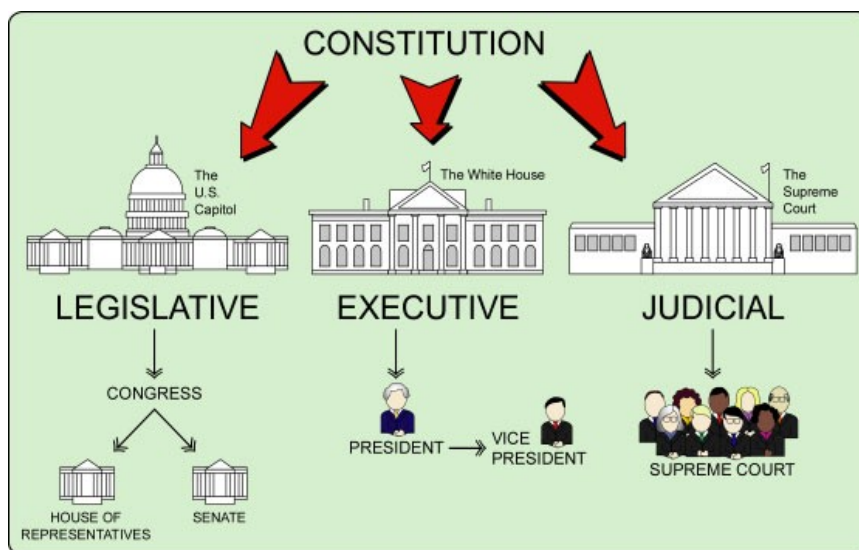
2010 - Question C9

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The President, Congress and Supreme Court

American politics and government is based on the Constitution. This describes the rights US citizens have and separates the power of the three branches of Government: the Executive, Legislative and Judiciary.

At national level the Executive is the federal government headed by the President and Vice President, who are elected for at most two four year terms. The USA President is often said to be the most powerful elected world leader. He (it has never been a she so far) is Commander in Chief of the armed forces, head of the federal government with the power to appoint the cabinet (who are not elected unlike most of the UK cabinet) judges and other important officials. He recommends laws to Congress. However the separation of the power and the checks and balances built into the system impose limits on presidential powers.



The President and cabinet cannot be part of Congress and have to get Congress' approval to pass laws, approve the budget or declare war. Even when the President's party has a majority in one or both houses, Senators and Congressmen/women are more independent than British MPs and will not always support the President's plans. When a President is getting near the end of his eighth year in office he is seen as 'lame duck' since everyone knows he will soon be out of power.

The Supreme Court is an important feature in American politics and has the power to declare governmental actions unconstitutional.

Both houses in Congress have important powers. Both are involved in the passing of laws. The Senate has 100 Senators, two from each state, elected for 6 years. The Senate tends to spend quite a bit of time on foreign affairs and national issues. The House of Representatives has 435 members, elected for two years. The House of Representatives is more concerned with domestic and local issues.

In 2008, US citizens elected Barack Obama as the 44th President of the United States. This was a historical event as it marked the first time a non-white has held the highest office in American politics. President Obama's candidacy and election victory received intense worldwide media coverage.

State and Local Government

The USA, as its name implies, has a federal system. Each of the 50 states has its own government headed by a State Governor, like a President on a smaller scale, and its own legislature split into two houses, Senate and House of Representatives as well as a State Supreme Court. American states have more power than Scottish councils or even the Scottish Government. For example they decide on state taxes and policies on law: the penalty for murder varies from state to state, some have the death penalty some do not.

At a more local level there are cities and counties which elect their own mayors and councils. Many posts in the US are elected, eg the local head of police (in the UK this would be the Chief Constable) is appointed by the local authority police board. This means that officials in the USA are very concerned about public opinion.

US Parties and Elections



The two main parties are the Republicans and the Democrats. It is important to realise that these only operate as national parties at election times. Comparisons with the two big UK parties can be misleading. The Democrats tend to be supported by poorer people, ethnic minorities and city dwellers. The Republicans draw more support from rural areas, longer established and better off families. However local issues can have a big effect.

Candidates, especially for President, have to secure the nomination of the party through a complicated system of primaries, caucuses and then conventions. In practice to succeed in American politics you need money. Presidential candidates spend million of dollars on their campaigns. Presentation and personality are often more important than policies. Looking good and competent on TV is seen as essential.

The 2008 Presidential campaign was also notable for being the first election fought completely in the digital age. The Obama campaign was very successful at increasing the role of the internet – including Facebook, YouTube, Blogs, for online campaigning. They were designed to encourage support and for President Obama to reach all the voters across the country via the web. President Obama gained nearly 170,000 MySpace friends and more than 11million views on YouTube compared to only 40,000 MySpace friends and 450,000 YouTube views for his opponent Senator McCain. Newspaper websites were reporting huge demand for information in the run up to the election.

To vote in the USA you must be registered. This has been an issue for minorities who are less likely to register than the white majority.

Voter turnout in many elections is not particularly high, usually below 60%. This improved in the 2008 election when around 62% of eligible voters turned out to vote. It was predicted that due the historical significance of the 2008 election there would be a huge voter turnout, but this did not happen.

Immigration

Each year from 2005 to 2008, over one million legal immigrants were allowed into the USA. Millions of illegal immigrants have made their way into the USA over the years, particularly Hispanics who have managed to make their way across the Mexican border, despite the efforts of the US authorities to prevent this.

Pros and cons of immigration for the USA

Immigration is good for America

Throughout its history the USA has been the destination for a steady flow of immigrants from all over the world - making the USA the diverse country it is today.

Some states (like California and Texas) rely on the cheap labour that immigrant workers provide - especially in tourism and agriculture.

Immigrants suffered war, poverty or religious/political persecution in their own countries and only want a better life for themselves and their families.

Most economists consider the benefits of immigration to the USA outweigh the costs.

Immigration drains America's resources

Immigrants have brought with them a host of problems - cultural differences and language barriers etc that are not easily resolved and sometimes lead to hostilities.

There are not enough jobs for Americans and more immigration means that there is more competition for what jobs there are available.

America should 'close the immigration gates' to protect the levels of prosperity that most American citizens enjoy. Some immigrants do not have the skills needed to find jobs and rely on welfare at the expense of American taxpayers.

Illegal immigration costs American taxpayers millions on border patrol - this money could be better spent elsewhere.

Key Issue 1:

To what extent do Congress and the Supreme Court limit the power of the President?

In the USA's federal system of government, power is divided between the central (Federal) Government and the fifty states. The power of the Federal govt. is balanced against the rights of the state govts. All powers not given to the Federal govt by the US Constitution are reserved to the states.

The Constitution defines the powers and duties of the Executive (President), Legislature (Congress) and Judiciary (Supreme Court). This is referred to as the Separation of Powers.

A new law must be passed by both the Senate and the House of Representatives and finally signed by the President. The President can use his **veto** to prevent this, as George Bush did in 2006 to stop a bill to fund stem cell research. He opposed this on moral and religious grounds, **as did many of his supporters**.

There are also checks and balances by both Congress and the Supreme Court on the powers of the President. Congress can overturn a Presidential veto if it has a two-thirds majority in both Houses. Also, the President draws up the budget each year but Congress has to vote through the money. The President can make foreign treaties but again two-thirds of the Senate must agree.

Meanwhile, the nine members of the Supreme Court can declare a law or the actions of a President to be unconstitutional. They can also change the way existing laws are applied by redefining what they mean. Supreme Court Judges are appointed for life by the President. Bush appointed two Supreme Court judges during his period of office (one had died and the other retired). This is a significant power because the President can choose a judge who reflects his own outlook, and that judge cannot later be sacked by another President. However, the choice of judges must be ratified (i.e. confirmed) by the Senate.

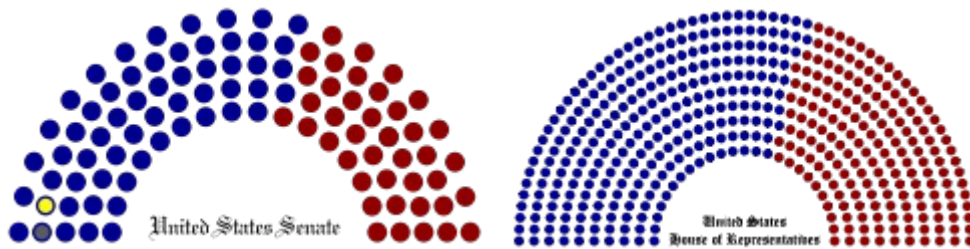
The election system also checks the power of the President as he or she can only be elected for two terms (2 x 4 years). The election system also means the make up of Congress can change which in turn affects how much support the President can count on. The House of Representatives is elected every two years and although Senators are each elected for six years, one-third of the Senate is elected every two years. This means the President can be elected along with a friendly Congress dominated by his own party, but two years later at the 'mid-term elections' may end up facing a Congress which is dominated by the opposing party, which in turn makes the President's job a lot more difficult.

Bill Clinton, a Democrat, was described as the 'defensive President' who faced a hostile Republican-dominated Congress. In contrast, George Bush, was called the 'Imperial President' because his own Republican party dominated both the House (of Reps) and the Senate – at least up until the 2006 mid-term when the Republicans lost control of both Houses. This greatly weakened Bush who became a 'lame-duck' President.

The powers of the President increased after the 9/11 attacks when George Bush pushed through legislation including the USA PATRIOT Act which gave the Executive the power to detain anyone whom s/he has reasonable grounds to suspect is a terrorist. There was also the introduction of Guantanamo Bay to detain suspected foreign terrorists. Since then, there has been ongoing debate as to the extent to which these moves go against the US Constitution. In 2006 the Supreme Court introduced limits on these powers and restated its right to preserve civil liberties (freedoms) even in wartime.

Congress and Barack Obama

The broad support for Democrat President Barack Obama was also reflected in the make-up of Congress after the 2008 elections. The diagrams below show the House of Reps and The Senate with Democrats in blue. There are 535 in total, being 100 Senators and 435 Members of the House of Reps. After the 2008 elections there were 57 Democrats and 41 Republicans (and two independents) while in the House of Reps there were 253 Democrats and 178 Republicans. These figures are likely to change at the 2010 mid-term elections and perhaps Obama will see more Republicans in Congress as a result.



Although President Obama has had a Democrat majority in both houses since he took up office after the 2008 elections, it would be wrong to think Congress has given him an easy time. This is because the USA has so many huge problems to face at the moment. In foreign policy the war in Afghanistan (& Iraq) is unpopular with many Americans. Possibly even more difficult are the problems the US economy is facing due to the world recession which has cost millions of jobs in the States, as it has in other countries. Finally, Barack Obama was elected on a platform (manifesto) to overhaul health care in the USA. All 3 issues are huge and difficult for the President to secure the agreement of Congress for his policies.

In Afghanistan and Iraq, the President has continued the policy of sending a huge and expensive US military presence to continue the 'war on terror' in a part of the world where many of the Islamic fundamentalists are based or controlled from. It has proved difficult to persuade Congress to agree the huge costs both in money and US lives this has involved ... but agreement has been forthcoming.

Early in his Presidency, Obama steered through an \$800 billion 'economic stimulus package' to keep the US economy going amid the turmoil across the world, and try to prevent unemployment in the USA rising vastly. This was followed by further massive spending commitments by the US govt. Such levels of govt. spending can only be supported by higher taxes and govt. borrowing Something which is very unpopular in the USA where generally citizens want 'smaller' less intrusive govt than people are prepared to accept in Europe. Congress held long and heated debates over supporting Obama's economic plans but eventually both houses voted in support amidst many Republican claims the policy is a disaster.

Another major issue has been Obama's call for Congress to pass legislation reforming health care in the United States, a key campaign. He wants to expand health insurance to cover the uninsured, to restrict premium increases, and to allow people to retain their coverage when they leave or change jobs. His proposal was to spend \$900 billion over 10 years and include a government insurance plan, also known as the public option, to compete with the private insurance sector as a main component to lowering costs and improving quality of health care. It would also make it illegal for insurers to drop sick people or deny them coverage for pre-existing conditions, and require every American carry

health coverage. This led to often bitter debate in Congress and the proposals were watered down to some extent but in March 2010 the health care was passed and signed into law by President Obama.