



Department  
for Education

# Politics

**GCE AS and A level subject content**

**March 2016**

# Contents

The content for AS and A level politics	3
Introduction	3
Aims and objectives	3
Subject content	3
Knowledge and understanding	3
Government in the UK	4
Political participation in the UK	4
The European Union	6
Political ideas	6
Comparative politics: government and politics of the USA	8
Global politics	10
Skills	12

# The content for AS and A level politics

## Introduction

1. AS and A level subject content sets out the knowledge, understanding and skills common to all AS and A level specifications in a given subject.
2. They provide the framework within which the awarding organisations create the detail of the specification.

## Aims and objectives

3. AS and A level specifications in politics must encourage students to:
  - develop knowledge and an informed understanding of contemporary political structures and issues in their historical context, both within the United Kingdom (UK) and globally
  - develop a critical awareness of the changing nature of politics and the relationships between political ideas, institutions and processes
  - develop knowledge and an informed understanding of the influences and interests which have an impact on decisions in government and politics
  - develop knowledge and an informed understanding of the rights and responsibilities of individuals and groups
  - develop the ability to critically analyse, interpret and evaluate political information to form arguments and make judgments
  - develop an interest in, and engagement with, contemporary politics

## Subject content

### Knowledge and understanding

4. AS and A level specifications in politics must be of sufficient depth and breadth to allow students to develop the knowledge, informed understanding and skills specified below.
5. AS and A level politics specifications build on the knowledge, skills and understanding established at key stage 4 and a range of GCSE qualifications.
6. Students will be expected to understand the interrelationships between the different areas of study and develop an awareness of their significance.

7. Students will be expected to develop a broad understanding of the historical development of government and politics in the UK in order to know and understand in detail contemporary politics in the UK.

8. A level specifications must require students to study one of the following areas in depth as specified in paragraphs 14 to 19.

- the government and politics of the United States of America (USA), or
- global politics

## **Government in the UK**

9. AS and A level specifications must develop knowledge and understanding of government in the UK, its institutions, their roles, powers and interrelationships including:

- the nature and main sources of the British constitution<sup>1</sup>, how it has changed since 1997 and debates concerning further reform
- the structure, role and powers of Parliament; the legislative process; the work of committees; the roles and influence of backbench MPs and peers; the role of the Opposition; the sovereignty of Parliament and how it interacts with other branches of government; and parliamentary privilege
- the accountability of the government to Parliament, including the effectiveness of parliamentary scrutiny of the executive and the extent to which Parliament is able to influence the decisions of the government
- the concepts of collective and individual Ministerial responsibility, and the power of the Prime Minister and Cabinet to dictate events and determine policy making, using an example from 1945 to 1997 and an example from 1997 to the present day
- the Supreme Court and its interactions with and influence over the legislative and policy making processes, including the importance of ultra vires and judicial review, and its impact on the work of government and Parliament
- the impact of devolution on the UK, including the different roles and powers of the Scottish Parliament and Government, the Welsh Assembly and Government, and the Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive, as well as devolution in England

## **Political participation in the UK**

10. AS and A level specifications must develop knowledge and understanding of levels and types of political participation in the UK including:

---

<sup>1</sup> For example: Magna Carta (1215), Bill of Rights (1689), Act of Settlement (1701), Acts of Union (1707), Parliaments Acts (1911 and 1949) and the European Communities Act (1972)

## Democracy and participation

- the current systems of representative democracy and direct democracy in the UK
- debates over suffrage, and how it has changed over time from the Great Reform Act (1832) to the present day, particularly in relation to gender and class and/or ethnicity through the study of the suffragists and suffragettes, and at least one other movement seeking to increase suffrage
- how different pressure groups exert influence including how their methods and influence vary, looking at two examples in detail
- other influences on government and Parliament including think tanks, lobbyists, corporations and media
- the main sources of rights in the UK today<sup>2</sup> (including relevant contemporary legislation); debates about the extent of rights in the UK, their limits; and consideration of how individual and collective rights may conflict

## Elections and voting

- three key general elections: the 1997 election, one from before 1997 and one from after 1997, and the different perspectives they provide on:
  - national voting behaviour patterns for these elections, as revealed by relevant national data sources, and explanations for how and why they varied, including assessments of the influence of media
  - the factors that explain the outcome, including the reasons for and impact of the parties' policies and manifestos, techniques used in their election campaigns, and the wider political context of the election
  - the impact of the result for the parties and the country
- debates about why different electoral systems are used and their advantages and disadvantages, including at least one example comparing the UK's electoral system to that of a devolved parliament/assembly
- how referendums have been used in the UK and their impact

## Political parties

- the origins and historical development of the Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat parties, and how this has shaped their current policies
- how political parties are funded and debates relating to party funding
- explanations for why political parties have succeeded or failed, including debates about the influence of the media

---

<sup>2</sup>For example: Magna Carta (1215), Bill of Rights (1689), and Human Rights Act (1998)

- the development of a multi-party system in the UK and its implications for government, including the policies of emerging and minority parties

## The European Union

11. AS and A level specifications must develop knowledge and understanding of:

- the aims of the EU and the extent to which they have been achieved; the role of the EU in policy making and the impact of it on UK political systems and policy making

## Political ideas

12. A level specifications must require students to know and understand:

### Liberalism

- the core ideas and principles of liberalism, particularly as they affect liberal views on human nature, the state, society and the economy
- differing views and tensions within liberalism, notably between classical liberalism and modern liberalism
- the ideas of the following thinkers on liberalism: John Locke, Mary Wollstonecraft, John Stuart Mill, John Rawls and Betty Friedan

### Conservatism

- the core ideas and principles of conservatism, particularly as they affect conservative views on human nature, the state, society and the economy
- differing views and tensions within conservatism, particularly related to divisions between traditional conservatism and the New Right
- the ideas of the following thinkers on conservatism: Thomas Hobbes, Edmund Burke, Ayn Rand, Michael Oakeshott and Robert Nozick

### Socialism

- the core ideas and principles of socialism, particularly as they affect socialist views on human nature, the state, society and the economy
- differing views and tensions within socialism, in particular differences between revolutionary socialism and social democracy
- the ideas of the following thinkers on socialism: Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, Beatrice Webb, Rosa Luxemburg, Anthony Crosland and Anthony Giddens

13. A level specifications must also require students to study one of the following topics, and know and understand<sup>3</sup>:

### **Nationalism**

- the core ideas and principles of nationalism, particularly as they affect nationalist views on human nature, the state, society and the economy
- the different types of nationalism and the extent to which these vary, as well as more recent developments
- the ideas of the following thinkers on nationalism: JJ Rousseau, Johann Gottfried von Herder, Giuseppe Mazzini, Marcus Garvey and Charles Maurras

### **Feminism**

- the core ideas and principles of feminism, particularly as they affect feminist views on human nature, the state, society and the economy
- the different types of feminism, in particular the features of liberal feminism, and radical feminism, as well as more recent developments
- the ideas of the following thinkers on feminism: Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Simone de Beauvoir, Kate Millett, Sheila Rowbotham and bell hooks

### **Multiculturalism**

- the core ideas and principles of multiculturalism, particularly as they affect multicultural views on human nature, the state, society and the economy
- the different types of multiculturalism, in particular the features of integration and segregation
- the ideas of the following thinkers on multiculturalism: Isaiah Berlin, Will Kymlicka, Charles Taylor, Tariq Modood and Bikhru Parekh

### **Anarchism**

- the core ideas and principles of anarchism, particularly as they affect anarchist views on human nature, the state, society and the economy
- the different types of anarchism, in particular the features of individualist and collectivist anarchist traditions
- the ideas of the following thinkers on anarchism: Max Stirner, Mikhail Bakunin, Emma Goldman, Peter Kropotkin and Pierre-Joseph Proudhon

### **Ecologism**

- the core ideas and principles of ecologism, particularly as they affect ecologist views on human nature, the state, society and the economy

---

<sup>3</sup> All specifications must offer all eight political ideas

- the different types of ecologism, in particular the features of light/shallow greens and the dark/deep greens
- the ideas of the following thinkers on ecologism: Aldo Leopold, Rachel Carson, EF Schumacher, Carolyn Merchant and Murray Bookchin

## **Comparative politics: government and politics of the USA**

14. A level specifications offering this option must require students to study the government and politics of the USA in order to respond to in-depth questions about the USA. Students will also be required to know and understand key similarities and differences with the UK, and their impact, based on knowledge from paragraphs nine to eleven above.

15. Students must know and understand the following three theoretical approaches to the study of comparative politics: structural, rational and cultural, including the different ways they explain similarities and differences between the government and politics of different countries, and the extent to which they explain these similarities and differences in the UK and USA.

16. A level specifications offering this option must require students to know and understand:

### **The Constitution**

- the nature and principles of the US (United States) Constitution, and the constitutional framework within which US institutions operate
- the main characteristics of the federal system of government, and its relationship with the states
- key similarities and differences between the UK and US constitutions, and their impact on UK and US politics and Government, including:
  - their nature (codified/uncodified), their sources and provisions, separation of powers, and checks and balances in both systems; and how far the UK model of devolution parallels the US federal system

### **Congress**

- the structure and functions of Congress, the distribution of power within Congress and debates about the adequacy of its representative role
- the factors influencing the relationship between Congress and the presidency; the policy significance and institutional effectiveness of Congress
- key similarities and differences between the UK and US congressional and Parliamentary systems, and their impact on UK and US politics and government, including:



- the relative strengths and weaknesses of the US House of Representatives and Senate, and the UK House of Commons and House of Lords, and the extent to which their powers are equal

## President

- the formal and informal sources of presidential power and their use, using relevant examples to show how they have been used by different Presidents, and the limitations on presidential power
- the relationships between the presidency and other institutions and why this varies
- key similarities and differences between the UK and US Prime Minister and President, and their impact on UK and US politics and government, including:
  - the role and powers of the US President and how they differ from that of the UK Prime Minister, and the extent of their accountability to legislatures

## Supreme Court

- the role of the US Supreme Court
- the current composition of the Supreme Court and the process for appointing Supreme Court judges
- debates about the political significance of the Supreme Court and its impact on public policy in the USA
- key similarities and differences between the UK and US Supreme Courts, and their impact on UK and US politics and government, including:
  - the basis for and relative extent of the powers of the US Supreme Court and the UK Supreme Court, and a comparison of the relative independence of the judiciary in the USA and UK

## Democracy and participation

- electoral systems used in the USA including: presidential, congressional, primaries, caucuses and national party conventions; and their significance
- the ideas, and principles of the Democratic and Republican parties, conflicts and tendencies within each party, and their coalitions of supporters
- the US party system, including the distribution of power within parties and the changing significance of parties
- the debates about the role of campaign finance and incumbency in US elections
- the significance of organised groups and interests, their resources and tactics, and debates about their impact upon democracy
- key similarities and differences between the UK and US party systems, and their impact on UK and US politics and government, including:

- why the USA has a two party system but the UK has a multi-party system, degrees of internal unity within parties in the USA and UK, and different policy profiles of the parties in the USA and the UK
- key similarities and differences between the influences over government in the UK and US including their impact on UK and US politics and government, including:
  - debates around the issues of campaign finance and party funding, and the relative power, methods and influence of pressure groups in the USA and UK

## Civil Rights

- the protection of civil liberties and rights in the USA today under the Constitution, Bill of Rights, subsequent amendments and rulings of the Supreme Court
- the impact of at least one contemporary political issue concerning civil rights and liberties on current domestic US politics, for example in relation to race, immigration, religion, freedom of speech, gender, sexual orientation, privacy, disability, the right to bear arms etc.
- key similarities and differences between the protections of civil rights in the USA and UK including:
  - debates around perceptions of these civil rights issues, and the relative methods, influence and effectiveness of civil rights campaigns in the USA and UK

## Global politics

17. A level specifications offering this option must require students to know and understand key concepts, structures of and influences on global politics. Students must also know and understand the ways and extent to which contemporary global issues, such as conflict, poverty, human rights and the environment, are affected by the content in each of the sections in paragraph 19.

18. Students must know and understand the divisions between realism and liberalism, the ideas of an anarchic international system and a society of states, and an evaluation of the extent to which they explain recent developments in global politics.

19. A level specifications offering this option must require students to know and understand:

## Global governance

- the origins and development of international law in creating the concept of global politics
- the origins, development and role of major global institutions, including the United Nations (UN) Charter (1945)

- the role and significance of institutions of global political governance: the UN and other key bodies; the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO)
- the role and significance of institutions of global economic governance: the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank, World Trade Organization (WTO) and the Group of Eight
- the role and significance of institutions of global environmental governance: including the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)
- global civil society and the significance of the role played by non-state actors, including non-governmental organisations (NGOs)
- the ways and extent to which these institutions address and resolve contemporary global issues, such as those involving conflict, poverty, human rights and the environment

### **Developments in global politics**

- different systems of government – including democratic, semi-democratic, non-democratic and autocratic states
- the changing nature of world order since 2000; and the implications of conditions including bipolarity, unipolarity and multipolarity
- the differing significance of states in global affairs, and why some states are classified as great powers or superpowers (USA) and emerging powers, including BRICs (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa)
- the use and effectiveness of different types of power including military action, diplomacy and cultural activity
- the development and spread of liberal economies, the rule of law, and democracy (for example South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore)
- the ways and extent to which the changing relationships and actions of states in relation to global politics address and resolve contemporary global issues, such as those involving conflict, poverty, human rights and the environment

### **Globalisation**

- the processes of globalisation and its impact on the states system
- the factors driving globalisation (economic, cultural, political, social and technological)
- debates about the impact of globalisation, its advantages and disadvantages, and particularly its implications for the nation state and national sovereignty
- the ways and extent to which globalisation addresses and resolves contemporary global issues, such as those involving conflict, poverty, human rights and the environment

### **Regionalism**

- debates about the reasons for, and significance of, regionalisation

- the factors that have fostered European integration, and the major developments through which this has occurred (economic and monetary union), the process of enlargement, and the significance of the EU as an international body
- the development of other regional organisations including: the North American Free Trade Association (NAFTA), the African Union (AU), the Arab League and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)
- the ways and extent to which regionalism addresses and resolves contemporary global issues involving conflict, poverty, human rights and the environment

## Skills

20. AS and A level specifications must require students to comprehend and interpret political information.

21. AS and A level specifications must require students to critically analyse and evaluate the areas of politics studied in order to construct arguments and explanations leading to reasoned conclusions.

22. AS and A level specifications must require students to identify parallels, connections, similarities and differences between aspects of the areas of politics studied.

23. AS and A level specifications must require students to construct and communicate arguments and explanations with relevance, clarity and coherence, using appropriate political vocabulary.

24. A level specifications must require students to make necessary connections between the areas of politics studied.



Department  
for Education

© Crown copyright 2016

This publication (not including logos) is licensed under the terms of the Open Government Licence v3.0 except where otherwise stated. Where we have identified any third party copyright information you will need to obtain permission from the copyright holders concerned.

To view this licence:

visit [www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/version/3](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/version/3)

email [psi@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:psi@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk)

write to Information Policy Team, The National Archives, Kew, London, TW9 4DU

About this publication:

enquiries [www.education.gov.uk/contactus](http://www.education.gov.uk/contactus)

download [www.gov.uk/government/publications](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications)

Reference: DFE-00055-2016



Follow us on Twitter:  
[@educationgovuk](https://twitter.com/educationgovuk)



Like us on Facebook:  
[facebook.com/educationgovuk](https://facebook.com/educationgovuk)