

EDEXCEL A-LEVEL POLITICS

COMPONENT 2 UK GOVERNMENT REVISION GUIDE



Student Name:

ABOUT THIS REVISION GUIDE

This revision guide is designed for all students sitting exams in Edexcel A-Level Politics. It provides an overview of all content in the UK Government topic in Component 2, including the key debates. There is also a range of exam-style essay questions and expert exam tips in each section.

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TREATIES

Treaties can also form part of the UK Constitution, especially the treaties that have established and developed the European Union.

Treaties such as the Treaty of Rome, 1957 and the Lisbon Treaty, 2009, established that EU law applied to the UK (prior to the UK exiting the European Union). The fact that EU law took precedence over statute law was one of the main reasons why Eurosceptics suggested that the EU undermined parliamentary sovereignty, although Europhiles counter that Parliament chose to pool its sovereignty with other countries through the European Communities Act (and some subsequent statutes).

Governments are able to sign treaties without a vote in parliament, using the royal prerogatives, which are themselves derived from common law.

Should the UK have a codified constitution?

A key debate about the UK constitution is whether we should adopt a codified constitution.

Yes	No
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Entrenching the principles of the constitution protects them from government interference.• There are frequent criticisms in the UK that executive power is too dominant, and a codified constitution would clearly set out the limits of executive power and restrict its excesses.• Citizens' rights would be entrenched into the constitution, making them harder to violate and easier for people to seek redress.• It would allow the constitution to be more consistent and rational – because of the evolutionary nature of the constitution, there are many features that make little sense today and require further modernisation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Uncodified constitutions are more flexible and therefore more responsive to social and political change (e.g. arguments about gun control in the US).• Gives too much political power to judges who are unelected and unrepresentative of British society. Constitutional matters being left in the hands of a small number of rich, white men is sometimes described as a “tyranny of the judiciary”.• Constitutions do not really guarantee rights: slavery, segregation and lynching all took place under the US Bill of Rights; the 1936 Soviet Constitution included all manner of guaranteed rights, none of which existed in practice in Stalin's regime.

Synoptic links

Because the constitution relates to all aspects of politics it is quite straightforward to make synoptic links to aspects of Component 1 in this topic. These could include links to:

- Referendums
- Elections
- Voting systems
- Core political ideas (especially liberalism and conservatism)

Exam style questions

Evaluate the view that the UK should adopt a codified constitution. (30 marks)



Exam Hint To answer this question, you should take a view and see it through. While there are arguments on both sides, the essay should develop an argument and come down on one side of the argument. When considering both sides of the debate, try “pairing up” arguments that relate to each other, in order to demonstrate an analytical approach, rather than a descriptive or list-like one. Your conclusion should flow logically from the argument and should never come as a surprise!

Exam style questions continues on next page

and 2019, because it held a majority among English MPs. However, the sorts of issues that the process was developed to tackle – such as tuition fees and foundation hospitals both being passed through parliament thanks to the votes of Scottish MPs whose constituents would not be impacted by the measure – have not arisen. This is largely because at that time most Scottish MPs were Labour and therefore followed the government whip, whereas since 2015 most Scottish MPs have opposed government legislation anyway.

Since 2015 there has been significant further English devolution, particularly in relation to directly-elected metro mayors and their powers. In 2017 there were elections for mayors of Greater Manchester, Merseyside, Tees Valley, the West of England and the West Midlands. This was later followed by the Sheffield city region. Some of these areas already had elected mayors within them, such as Bristol (in the West of England), Middlesbrough (in Tees Valley) and Liverpool in Merseyside, while others had rejected such officials in referendums, such as Manchester. Metro mayors hit the headlines in 2020, because of debates between them and central government about Covid restrictions and support for local businesses.

The most significant constitutional change since 2015 is **Brexit**. There have been a number of constitutional changes as part of the process of exiting the European Union, most notably, repealing the European Communities Act of 1972. However, as well as the relatively straightforward process of ending the supremacy of EU law, there have also been complex arrangements, particularly around Northern Ireland and the province's relationship with the Republic of Ireland (and therefore the EU) and the rest of the UK. Trying to ensure that the UK's new relationship with the EU does not undermine the provisions of the Good Friday Agreement from 1998 is a constitutional headache.

Synoptic links

Again there are lots of opportunities to make synoptic links to Component 1 in this section. Issues surrounding the recall of MPs are particularly applicable to ideas around representative democracy and direct democracy and the nature of representative democracy in the UK today. As well as this, you can make links to:

- Political parties
- Pressure groups/lobbyists (supporting or opposing particular reforms)
- Referendums
- Liberalism
- Turnout / voting behaviour
- Conservatism

Exam style questions

Evaluate the view that constitutional reform since 1997 has been ineffective at decentralising power. (30 marks)



Exam Hint You've got a lot of potential constitutional reform to talk about here. Try and consider a few reforms from across the time period, not just devolution from 1998 for instance. As usual, take a view and see it through. Make sure that view can be justified with the weight of evidence presented in your balanced response. There are a few approaches you could take to answering this question. One might be to use a paragraph to consider the effectiveness (and otherwise) of a particular reform.

Evaluate the view that recent reforms have been effective at modernising the UK constitution. (30 marks)



Exam Hint One problem with this sort of question is determining when “recent” starts! While there is no definitive answer to that, it would be good to set out your own answer in the introduction and certainly to focus on changes this century and preferably in the last 5-10 years. An answer that focused on early New Labour reforms would struggle. The other issue is how to judge how effective reform has been. You need an idea of what effective reform would look like and then determine whether recent reforms have achieved this. As usual, avoid being equivocal: you don't want an “it depends” answer. That does not mean abandon all nuance – it clearly does depend on how you define effective, but your answer can't stop there. Define effective and keep going!

The Salisbury Convention

When Attlee became PM with a Labour landslide in 1945, there were only 16 Labour-supporting Lords in the House, out of 761 peers. Labour had a clear mandate to implement the 1945 manifesto and the Lords had no mandate to block it. Lord Salisbury, who was the Conservative leader in the Lords at the time, set out a principle that the Lords would not obstruct measures set out in a government's manifesto. This has become part of the UK's constitution (an example of a constitutional convention).

Interestingly, it was deemed that the convention should not apply 2010-2015 as the 'Coalition Agreement' was not a manifesto upon which either governing party was elected. As there was no manifesto that secured a majority it was felt that the convention was not relevant. There have been similar (but less conclusive) debates about minority governments, such as Theresa May's programme in 2017. As well as the debates about whether the convention should apply to coalition or minority governments, there have been suggestions that, since 1999, and the House of Lords reform, perhaps it should no longer apply at all.

In practice, the Lords are able to propose **reasoned amendments** to government bills at second reading, but not **wrecking amendments** that are designed to frustrate, reverse or destroy the bill. As such the Lords maintains its role as a revising chamber and a source of further scrutiny and debate.

The effectiveness of the House of Lords

Legislation

Effective	Not effective
Government legislation is defeated in the Lords much more often than in the Commons, because of the lack of a clear majority. E.g. the government suffered 14 defeats in the Lords during the passing of the EU Withdrawal Bill in 2018. Lords are more likely to rebel against the whip than MPs, and the presence of crossbenchers means that the outcome of votes is less predictable.	Has no legislative veto, it can only delay legislation, and this can be over-ridden (because of the Parliament Acts). Significant areas of legislation cannot be obstructed by the Lords because of the Salisbury Convention (Lords must not obstruct measures that were promised in the governing party's manifesto). The Lords also does not vote on "money bills" (bills that only concern taxation or borrowing).

Debating

Effective	Not effective
The Lords has a less crowded timetable than the Commons, and therefore can spend more time on debates. Many peers have been appointed because they are experts in a particular field, while others have previously held high office, and therefore the quality of debate is often very high.	Sometimes accused of being a "talking shop" – where there are long debates but to no useful or practical end. Despite there being a lot of Lords, the chamber is often poorly-attended – even more so than the Commons – with members only attending debates in which they have a particular interest.

Scrutiny/accountability

Effective	Not effective
High levels of expertise can lead to forensic and effective questioning.	The most senior ministers are in the Commons, so only junior ministers are held to account in the Lords.

May initially had a small majority (inherited from David Cameron). She attempted to appoint a balanced cabinet with people who campaigned on both sides in the 2016 EU referendum (although that proved difficult to manage and she suffered a number of resignations and very visible cabinet divisions. It was almost impossible to maintain collective cabinet responsibility, as ministers were well known for their differing views on preferred Brexit outcomes.

Despite the Fixed Term Parliament Act, May was able to call a snap election, but this was not so much because of personal authority, but that opposition parties supported having an election. Clearly this backfired on May, losing her majority, and – as a result, her authority. She became dependent on the DUP as well as various Conservative backbench groups, such as the European Research Group (ERG) to pass legislation. The more she did to keep them on board, the more she pushed others away, including some Europhile Conservatives who broke away from the party and joined the Independent Group for Change with some ex-Labour independent MPs.

By 2019 May had lost control of the Brexit process and parliament began holding indicative votes on possible ways forward. It became increasingly clear that May would have to resign, especially after a disastrous set of European Parliament elections where the Conservatives came fifth behind even the Green Party. In June she announced her resignation and the process began which would eventually see the election of Boris Johnson as party leader and prime minister.

Synoptic links

These prime ministerial case studies link very clearly with both political parties content and general elections content from Component 1. As you read back through this section, you will spot lots of these synoptic links that flow naturally when writing about them.

THE SUPREME COURT

The Supreme Court was set up under the Constitutional Reform Act 2005. It was formally established in 2009 and was designed to facilitate a greater separation of powers in the UK (with less of a fusion of the judiciary, executive and legislature as had previously existed with the Law Lords role in the House of Lords and the significant role of the Lord Chancellor).

The Supreme Court is:

- The final court of appeal in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.
- Focused on appeals relating to issues of public or constitutional importance. In civil cases, these can be from anywhere in the United Kingdom but, for criminal cases, this does not include cases from Scotland, which has its own criminal legal system.

There are 12 Supreme Court judges (called justices). One of them is designated as the president (in 2020 this role went to Lord Reed, who took over from Lady Hale).

Before 2009, the final court of appeal judges sat in the House of Lords as the Law Lords, but today justices have no legislative role while they serve (although they can take a seat in the House of Lords as a life peer on retirement). If there is a vacancy, the judicial appointments committee chooses a new judge (which is formally confirmed by royal prerogative, but is actually completely separate from the executive).