exam success

Studying politics

A beginner's guide

This is probably one of the most exciting, important and significant times to be studying politics in the last 50 years. From the snap 2017 election, Brexit and the Scottish independence movement to Donald Trump and the rise of nationalism, you will have a much better understanding of the origins, meaning and impact of all of these and more after studying politics. Whatever you go on to do after your A-levels, the analytical and evaluative skills and knowledge you will develop through this course will be useful.

What prior knowledge is required?

It may be that you have very little knowledge of British, US and global politics or of political ideas. If this is the case it is sensible to focus on improving your basic knowledge of politics. You need to do this in your own time. Do not expect your teacher to do this for you — it is not in either your own or your classmates' interest to do this.

Begin by making yourself a set of introductory notes on the following areas:

- the difference between right-wing, left-wing and centrist political ideas
- how the British political system works — the executive, legislative and judicial branches and the relationship between these branches and the devolved assemblies
- how the different forms of election in the UK work and what purpose they serve
- the names of all the major figures in UK politics, e.g. shadow chancellor

Learn some key terms (Box 1).

What will I be studying?

If you are studying the 2-year A-level course, for most of the first year you will study British politics. You will cover UK politics and UK government:

- Democracy and participation
- Political parties
- Electoral systems
- Voting behaviour and the media
- The constitution
- Parliament
- PM and executive
- The relationship between the different branches of the government, including the EU

Towards the end of the first year (unless your teacher decides to do this differently) you will also start to study the core political ideas: conservatism, socialism and liberalism. As part of this you will also cover another political idea. Your teacher will pick one from: anarchism, feminism, nationalism, ecologism and multiculturalism. However, you will probably not cover this until the second year of your course.

If you are just taking the AS course you will only study UK politics and UK government, and will not cover the political ideas sections. You will sit two examinations at the end of the year.

In the second year of your course, if you are doing the Edexcel specification, you will study either the USA or global politics. Your teacher will decide which option to choose. However, if you and your classmates have any strong feelings about this, it may be worth discussing it with your teacher, as they may be open to persuasion. It is definitely worth finding out if your teacher has made a decision yet, as this should guide your wider reading and current affairs study across your first year.

Box 1 Key terms to learn

Write an explanation and give a relevant political example of each of the following terms.

- parliament
- government
- executive
- legislature
- judiciary
- constitution
- separation of powers
- power
- authority
- election
- political party
- pressure group
- political ideology
- politics
- prime minister
- president

A beginner's guide to following current affairs

In order to make the course a living subject, rather than just something in a textbook, you need to follow current affairs on a daily basis. This will not only make the course much more interesting for you, but will also gain you marks as you need to give up-to-date examples in your exam answers. *Pocket* is a useful app that allows you to download and collect useful resources that you can then read, even when you are out of a Wi-Fi area.

How will you do this?

- Broadsheet newspapers/newspaper websites — the *Guardian* and *Independent* are still free online, others now have a paywall. They are all available as apps. Remember that all newspapers have a political stance — they are not neutral.
- Political magazines such as the *Spectator*, *The Week* and the *New Statesman* — sign up for weekly podcasts.
- Respected politics news websites — the BBC is most useful and, by law, must be neutral. Get the BBC news app on your phone and read the politics section daily. It also includes useful explanations of the news such as 'Brexit — all you need to know'. Sign up for the 'Week in Westminster' podcast: .
- Vice and Buzzfeed can also be really useful as long as you ignore the celebrity news.
- On television, watch *BBC News at Ten*, *Channel 4 News*, *Newsnight* and *Question Time*. You could also try listening to Radio 4 and your local radio station.
- Use twitter to follow your local MP and political commentators such as Nick Robinson.

Table 1 Some recent political events

Recent political events	Significance and links to specification
2017 general election UK	Shows the workings and possible failings of the 2011 Fixed-Term Parliaments Act — it aimed to reduce the prime minister's power by fixing the dates of elections, but Theresa May got the two-thirds majority in Parliament necessary to overrule the Act.
Brexit referendum 2016	
US presidential election 2016	
2015 general election UK	
Scottish independence referendum 2014	
2010 general election and formation of coalition government	

Table 2 Example of note-taking system

Title: The origins and development of the Conservative Party	
Key points and terms	**Explanation**
Traditional conservatism and one-nation conservatism	• A pessimistic view of human nature • The significance of tradition and institutions • Organic society — interdependence and the role of each individual in the wider community
New Right conservatism, neoliberal and New Right views	• Pragmatism — rejection of radical change and fixed ideas
Conclusions Conservatism is a pragmatic ideology that focuses on 'what works' rather than being connected to a fixed set of ideas. It rejects change, unless it is 'in order to preserve'. However, the Conservative Party is linked to a set of ideas, including neoliberal economics, strict law and order policy and limited welfare spending.	

Be aware that not all of the news you will see on the internet is true — fake news is everywhere. Stick to respected websites and avoid the tabloids. Wikipedia rejects the use of *Daily Mail* articles as a source, for example.

For your first year of study you should focus on reading about the activities of the British government, Parliament and judiciary, all elections (including by-elections, council elections, devolved assembly elections), pressure groups and the Brexit process.

If your teacher does not provide you with one, get a copy of your specification and download the sample papers. Familiarise yourself with the content and then look out for useful newspaper articles, television programmes and so on that you can collect, including for the second year content. The specification includes a detailed and useful glossary, which you can use to supplement your own glossary (using the correct political terminology is essential).

Create and regularly update a table of recent political events such as those in Table 1. The first entry is completed for you.

Starter skills

Do not worry about exam and timing skills yet. The most important skill you need to start the course is the ability to take detailed and useful notes. You must learn how to pick out the most helpful points, to summarise and add examples. Obviously this is quite a personal thing — many students like spider diagrams and colour, others use revision cards.

If you are not sure, try the Cornell note-taking system. This involves creating a wide margin in which you write the key headings, with more detail on the left and a summary box at the bottom of every page. Google it for more details. Table 2 is an example of an incomplete set of notes made using the Cornell system.

Troubleshooting

Do you fit into either of the following categories? If so, help is at hand.

(1) 'I am already finding this course really hard — help!'

Have you followed the advice above — are you building up a basic knowledge of the UK political system outside of lessons? You should also develop a political glossary, making a note of every new word you come across. Keeping up to date with current affairs — reading the BBC Politics webpage daily for example, will also help your course to start making sense.

(2) 'It seems pretty straightforward so far, I'd like to develop a wider understanding…'

Have you developed your own political viewpoint? Read ahead and find out about socialism, conservatism and liberalism. Which appeals to you? Is there a pressure group or a party that you would like to join? Can you get work experience with your local MP or councillor? What about reading some classic politics-related books — *1984* or *Animal Farm* by George Orwell for example, or a political biography?

It is also really important to develop your knowledge of political history — the key turning points in the development of British democracy. Make a timelines of events. Does your school offer the Extended Project Qualification? Maybe that would give you the opportunity to develop your knowledge of politics further. Finally, find out who your MP is and attend an event that they are speaking at ( ).

This is part one of a two-part article. Coming up in the next issue: how to answer exam questions, the significance of historical examples and using textbooks.

Jessica Hardy is a deputy editor of Politics Review, teaches at St Francis Xavier College, London, and is an experienced examiner.

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