

# US Politics: Roosevelt to Reagan

Headings	Notes
<b>THE AMERICAN CONSTITUTION AND THE 'SEPARATION OF POWERS'</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• To understand American politics and history, you have to understand the <b>Constitution of the United States</b>.</li><li>• It was drawn up in 1787 by the '<b>Founding Fathers</b>', the men who led the American Revolution against the British rule.</li><li>• They feared that their newly founded republic might be taken over by a tyrant (dictator). To stop that happening they wrote a Constitution that limited the government's power with an elaborate system of '<b>checks and balances</b>'.</li><li>• The most important of the checks and balances is '<b>the separation of powers</b>'. This prevents any one part of the government getting so strong that it can over-rule the others.</li><li>• Power is separated in two ways:<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Between the <b>States</b> and the <b>Federal</b> government</li><li>• Within the Federal government.</li></ul></li><li>• In 1776, there were <b>13 states</b>, e.g. Virginia and New York. As the US expanded into the West, new states like Texas and California were created. Today, there are <b>50 states</b>.</li></ul>
<b>THE AMERICAN CONSTITUTION</b>	
<b>STATE GOVERNMENT</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The Founding Fathers left a great deal of power with the States that started the revolution against Britain:<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Each State can write its own Constitution.</li><li>• It can elect its own <b>Legislature</b> (parliament) to make laws and its own <b>Governor</b> to enforce those laws.</li><li>• It can raise its own taxes and control its own education, health, welfare and transport system.</li></ul></li></ul>
<b>THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• To keep the States united and to deal with general issues, the Founding Fathers set up a <b>Federal government</b>.</li><li>• It controls foreign policy, trade, the armed forces, currency, banking, travel between the States, etc. It is located in <b>Washington, DC</b> (which is not in any of the States).</li><li>• If there is a conflict between State law and Federal law, Federal law wins.</li></ul>
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<b>HOW POWERS ARE SEPARATED WITHIN THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>The Founding Fathers also divided the Federal government into three parts. Each part was given a separate task:<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>The <b>Congress</b> is the <b>Legislature</b> which makes the laws.</li><li>The <b>President</b> is the <b>Executive</b> which enforces the laws.</li><li>The <b>Supreme Court</b> is the <b>Judiciary</b>, which decides if the actions of Congress, the President and the States are in line with the Constitution and laws of the US.</li></ol></li></ul>
<b>THE CONGRESS</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>The Congress has two Houses:<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li><b>The House of Representatives</b>: Its members, called <b>Congressmen</b>, are elected for two years. Seats in the House of Representatives are given on a <b>population basis</b>, so a big state with a big population like California has more Congressmen than a state with a small population like Vermont.</li><li><b>The Senate</b>: Each state, big or small, elects <b>two Senators</b> who must seek re-election after six years.</li></ol></li><li>All Bills (proposed laws) must be accepted by both Houses and signed by the President. If he <b>vetoes</b> a Bill (i.e. refuses to sign), it will still pass if <b>two-thirds</b> of both Houses vote for it.</li><li>The President must get the approval of the Senate before s/he can appoint members of the Cabinet, Ambassadors and Judges of the Supreme Court.</li></ul>
<b>THE PRESIDENT</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>The <b>President</b> is the most important person in the United States. S/he is elected for four years. All citizens may vote in the election. Voting is on a state-by-state basis, with the candidate who wins most votes in each state getting all the votes in that state.</li><li>A <b>Vice-President</b> is elected at the same time. If the President dies in office, the Vice-President takes over.</li><li>The President is elected in November and takes office in the following January. Since 1948, Presidents may only serve for two terms (i.e. eight years). If the Vice President takes over for two years or less of the original President's term, they can be elected for two full additional terms.</li></ul>
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<b>THE PRESIDENT</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The President is <b>Commander-in-Chief</b> of the armed forces and controls foreign policy, though the Senate must approve any treaties s/he makes.</li><li>• S/he draws up the <b>annual budget</b> (taxes and what they will be spent on) and submits it to Congress, which has to approve it.</li><li>• S/he draws up <b>Bills</b>, and submits them to Congress, which has to approve them before they become law.</li><li>• S/he is responsible for collecting taxes and enforcing laws.</li><li>• S/he is advised by a <b>Cabinet</b>, with members (called <b>Secretaries</b>) in charge of particular areas of government. The <b>Secretary of State</b> is responsible for foreign affairs, the <b>Secretary of Defence</b> is responsible for the armed forces, and so on.</li><li>• Presidents also have many unelected advisers. Often they have more power than Cabinet members.</li></ul>
<b>AMENDING THE CONSTITUTION</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The Constitution can be <b>amended</b> (changed) when two-thirds of the Congress and two-thirds of the states agree.</li><li>• Since 1789 the Constitution has been amended 27 times. The first ten Amendments were passed in 1791. They are called the <b>Bill of Rights</b> and guarantee freedom of speech, freedom of religion and the right to own guns, among other rights.</li><li>• Later Amendments abolished slavery (14th) and gave women the right to vote (19<sup>th</sup>).</li></ul>
<b>THE IMPORTANCE OF THE SUPREME COURT</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The Constitution was written over 200 years ago when America was a small rural country.</li><li>• It has not changed greatly since, yet it continues to work in a century when America is an urban, industrialised superpower.</li><li>• The reason for this is the Supreme Court. As the United States changed, the Supreme Court interpreted the wording of the Constitution in ways which allowed it to deal with modern problems.</li><li>• Federal and State courts are supposed to enforce the decisions of the Supreme Court.</li><li>• People who want something in the law changed take cases to the Supreme Court, hoping it will support their point of view.</li></ul>
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<b>PARTIES</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Most Americans support one of the two major Parties, the <b>Republicans</b> and the <b>Democrats</b>:<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Republicans usually represent business and favour low taxes and less power for the Federal government.</li><li>• Democrats usually represent poorer people and ethnic minorities, and want the Federal government to be involved in welfare and civil rights.</li></ul></li><li>• American parties are much less disciplined than Irish parties and Congressmen and Senators often vote independently of the party-line.</li></ul>
<b>THE PRESIDENCY FROM ROOSEVELT TO REAGAN 1945–1989</b> <b>THE GROWTH OF PRESIDENTIAL POWER: 1945–1990</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Since 1941, the United States has been involved in almost continuous warfare.</li><li>• Because the President is Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces, war has greatly increased Presidential power at the expense of Congress. Historians sometimes call this the '<b>Imperial Presidency</b>'.</li></ul>
<b>1933–1945: FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT (DEMOCRAT)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Roosevelt led America during the Depression of the 1930s and most of the Second World War. In dealing with these crises, he greatly expanded the powers of the President.</li><li>• He was the only President in American history to be elected four times. After his death the Constitution was amended to make this impossible.</li></ul>
<b>HARRY S. TRUMAN, DEMOCRAT (1945–1953)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Truman was Roosevelt's Vice-President and became President when Roosevelt died on 12<sup>th</sup> April 1945, shortly before Germany surrendered.</li><li>• Fearing many American soldiers would die if the Allies had to invade Japan, he dropped the <b>atom bomb</b> on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August. This forced a quick Japanese surrender.</li><li>• Once Hitler was beaten, relations between the US and Soviet Union declined. Truman thought that Stalin planned to expand communism and conquer Europe. To stop him, Truman:<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Approved the investment of millions of dollars in Europe to help it recover from the effects of the war (<b>Marshall Aid</b>)</li><li>• Adopted the policy of '<b>containment</b>' to stop communist expansion</li><li>• Issued the <b>Truman Doctrine</b>, which promised American aid to any government opposing a communist takeover.</li></ul></li></ul>
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<p><b>HARRY S. TRUMAN, DEMOCRAT (1945–1953)</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• When Stalin blockaded Berlin in 1948, Truman ordered that supplies be airlifted into the city.</li> <li>• In 1949, he organised democratic European countries into the <b>North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO)</b> to resist communist expansion.</li> <li>• When the communists under <b>Mao Zedong</b> took power in China 1949 Republicans accused Truman of '<i>losing China</i>'.</li> <li>• Truman sent US troops to defend <b>South Korea</b> in 1950 when it was invaded by the communist North. But he sacked <b>General McArthur</b> when he suggested using the atom bomb against China.</li> <li>• At home, the <b>GI Bill of Rights</b> gave special help to soldiers returning from the Second World War. But the Republican-controlled Congress turned down Truman's proposal for a <b>Fair Deal</b> to provide more equal treatment for racial minorities and greater social security and housing for the poor.</li> <li>• His last years as President were dominated by the panic over communist infiltration (the '<b>red scare</b>') associated with <b>Senator Joseph McCarthy</b>.</li> </ul>
<p><b>1953–1961: DWIGHT D. EISENHOWER (REPUBLICAN)</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Eisenhower led the Allied armies to victory in the Second World War and became a hero. In 1952, the Republicans chose him as their candidate and he won the Presidential election.</li> <li>• He arranged a truce which ended the Korean War in 1953, but continued Truman's policy of communists. This led him to begin America's involvement in Vietnam.</li> <li>• Stalin's death in 1953 eased tensions with the Soviet Union. Eisenhower held '<b>summit meetings</b>' with the new Soviet leader <b>Nikita Khrushchev</b>.</li> <li>• At home, he encouraged economic stability and saw the US enjoy eight years of economic growth.</li> <li>• He saw the start of the civil rights movement in the American South and reluctantly sent troops to enforce the law in Little Rock, Arkansas in 1957.</li> </ul>
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<b>1961–1963: JOHN F. KENNEDY (JFK) (DEMOCRAT)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• In 1960, Senator <b>John F. Kennedy</b> narrowly defeated Vice-President <b>Richard Nixon</b>. He was the first Roman Catholic President.</li><li>• He accused the Republicans of letting the US fall behind the Russians in technology and promised to put a man on the moon.</li><li>• In the Cold War he faced crises over<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The building of the <b>Berlin Wall</b></li><li>• Soviet missiles in <b>Cuba</b></li></ul></li><li>• He increased American involvement in Vietnam.</li><li>• He reluctantly supported the civil rights movement.</li><li>• He was assassinated in Dallas in November 1963.</li></ul>
<b>1963–1969: LYNDON B. JOHNSON (LBJ) (DEMOCRAT)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• As Vice-President, Johnson took over after Kennedy's death.</li><li>• He supported the civil rights movement (see p.300) and greatly increased help for poorer Americans (the <b>Great Society</b>).</li><li>• He hugely increased American involvement in Vietnam (see p.270). This diverted resources away from his social programmes and damaged the American economy.</li><li>• In 1968, he decided not to contest the election for President.</li></ul>
<b>1969–1974: RICHARD M. NIXON (REPUBLICAN)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Nixon saw men land on the moon and slowly ended US involvement in Vietnam.</li><li>• He encouraged a <b>détente</b> with the Soviets by visiting Moscow.</li><li>• He also recognised the communist government in China and visited Beijing.</li><li>• He tried to improve the economy by freezing wages and devaluing the dollar.</li><li>• His support for Israel led the Arab States to impose an <b>oil embargo</b> which damaged the economy.</li><li>• He won re-election in 1974, but during the campaign there was a break-in at the Democratic headquarters in the <b>Watergate</b> building in Washington. When he was linked to it, he was forced to resign.</li></ul>
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<b>1974–1977: GERALD FORD (REPUBLICAN)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Vice-President Gerald Ford took over.</li><li>• He officially ended the Vietnam War.</li><li>• He continued the détente with the Soviet Union.</li><li>• He faced economic problems with inflation and high unemployment, but failed to solve them.</li><li>• His reputation was also damaged when the communists took over in South Vietnam.</li></ul>
<b>1977–1981: JIMMY CARTER (DEMOCRAT)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• He improved the economy but his policies were damaged by a second oil crisis in 1979–1980.</li><li>• He negotiated peace between Israel and Egypt at Camp David and negotiated a disarmament treaty with the Soviet Union.</li><li>• In <b>Iran</b>, after the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Americans were held hostage for over a year. Carter's failure to get them out probably cost him the election.</li></ul>
<b>1981–1989: RONALD REAGAN (REPUBLICAN)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Once a film star, then Governor of California, Reagan became President at the age of 69.</li><li>• His economic policies involved large tax cuts for the rich and increased military spending.</li><li>• Inflation fell from the mid-1980s and employment increased.</li><li>• He ended the détente with the Soviet Union, calling it an 'evil empire' and proposed building a 'star wars' missile system to protect the US from attack.</li><li>• When a reformer, <b>Mikhail Gorbachev</b>, came to power in the Soviet Union, Reagan negotiated with him, thus contributing to the ending of communist rule in Europe in 1989.</li><li>• In spite of many scandals he remained personally popular with the American people and was succeeded by his Vice-President, <b>George Bush</b>.</li></ul>
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<b>EXAM QUESTIONS</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Which President had the more effective foreign policy, Truman or Johnson? Argue your case referring to both. (HL 2022 DP)</li><li>• How effectively did President Harry Truman tackle the problems he faced at home and abroad? (HL 2018)</li><li>• From Roosevelt to Reagan, would you agree that American presidents always acted for the good of America? Argue your case referring to more than one president. (HL 2017)</li><li>• Who was the greater president, Truman or Johnson? Argue your case, referring to both in your answer. (HL 2016)</li><li>• Which president was more successful in his handling of US foreign policy, Harry Truman or Lyndon Johnson? Argue your case, referring to both. (HL 2013)</li><li>• How well did President Harry Truman or President Lyndon Johnson handle the challenges they faced? (HL 2012)</li><li>• How did the US presidency develop from Roosevelt to Reagan? (HL 2011)</li><li>• What were the successes and failures in the presidency of Lyndon Johnson? (HL 2010)</li><li>• What were the successes and failures in the political career of Ronald Reagan? (HL 2006)</li></ul>