2.6 The Relationship Between the Executive and Parliament

Total Marks

EDEXCEL 9PL0 · about 60 minutes · Write-in edition

Name: _____ Date: ____ / ____ / _____

Answer ALL questions. For extended, levels-marked questions write full sentences and construct a developed response. Spend approximately 70 minutes in total: allow 10 minutes for short recall items and applied questions, 20 minutes for the 12-mark source question, and 40 minutes for the final 30-mark essay.

1 State one consequence of a large Commons majority for the balance of power between executive and legislature, using the 1997 and 2001 Labour majorities as context.

(Total for Question 1 is 1 mark)

2 Explain briefly how a small Commons majority or no overall majority can empower backbench rebellions, citing the 2017 to 2019 hung Parliament as context.

(Total for Question 2 is 2 marks)

3 Analyse the extent to which backbench rebellions constrained the Conservative government between 2017 and 2019, with reference to specific Commons votes and outcomes.

(Total for Question 3 is 9 marks)

4 Evaluate the extent to which Parliament is able to control the executive in the contemporary UK, using examples such as the 2010 coalition, the 2017 Conservative-DUP arrangement, and the 2017-2019 Commons votes. Your answer should make a reasoned judgement.

(Total for Question 4 is 30 marks)

5 Explain the concept of the payroll vote and assess briefly how it affects the independence of MPs from the executive, with one dated example.

(Total for Question 5 is 6 marks)

6 Using both short extracts below, analyse how the size of a government's Commons majority can change the practical power of the executive. Extract A is an academic commentary; Extract B is a contemporary newspaper summary. Extract A: 'A decisive parliamentary majority allows the executive to set an agenda with minimal compromise, reducing the effective veto power of backbenchers and opposition parties, especially on routine legislation.' Extract B: 'After the 2017 election the Conservative Party lost its absolute majority and was forced to rely on confidence and supply with the DUP, making the government vulnerable to small rebellions and requiring negotiation over several domestic votes in 2017-2019.' Using these extracts and your own knowledge of UK politics, analyse how majority size affects executive power in the Commons.

(Total for Question 6 is 12 marks)

Mark scheme · 2.6 The Relationship Between the Executive and Parliament

Question 1

one accurate consequence, e.g. the executive can usually pass legislation with little effective opposition, illustrated by the large Labour majorities 1997 and 2001 cao **B1**

Answer: A large Commons majority lets the executive usually pass legislation with little effective opposition, as seen with the large Labour majorities after 1997 and 2001.

Question 2

identifies that a small or no majority makes each vote more critical, so individual MPs or small groups can change outcomes **B1**

links to 2017-2019 context, e.g. the government needed support from other parties and dissenting Conservatives could block motions or force concessions **B1**

Answer: When a government has a small or no overall majority, each Commons vote becomes critical and individual MPs or small groups can change outcomes; during the 2017 to 2019 hung Parliament the Conservative government relied on other parties and a small number of Conservative rebels could block or reshape government business.

Question 3

Level 0 No relevant content. **0**

Level 1 Limited knowledge of the 2017-2019 period and backbench rebellions, with little developed analysis. **1-3**

Level 2 Clear knowledge of some relevant votes and a basic analysis of how rebellions constrained the government, though the explanation may be partial. **4-6**

Level 3 Detailed and well-evidenced analysis using specific Commons votes (e.g. meaningful votes on Brexit, indicative votes, defeats, and the Cooper-Letwin amendment), explaining how rebellions and external partners restricted executive options and led to negotiated outcomes. **7-9**

Indicative content:

- Context: the June 2017 general election produced a hung Parliament; the Conservative Party formed a working arrangement with the DUP and had a small working majority.
- Key examples: the government suffered multiple parliamentary defeats on Brexit-related motions and amendments in 2017-2019, including defeats over the government timetable, the Cooper-Letwin amendment enabling indicative votes, and the crushing defeats of Theresa May's Withdrawal Agreement in January and March 2019, where Conservative Remain-leaning and opposition MPs combined to reject the government position.
- Mechanisms: Conservative backbench rebels, including the European Research Group and moderate Conservatives, used their numbers and occasional alliances with opposition MPs to block or amend government business, forcing concessions such as promises of indicative votes and additional Commons scrutiny.
- Constraints: the government had to negotiate with the DUP and accept procedural changes; defeats undermined the Prime Minister's authority and limited the executive's ability to unilaterally set the Brexit exit terms.
- Limitations and counter-evidence: the government could still use tactics like pairing, whipping and offering concessions to survive many votes; some defeats were reversed or limited in long-term effect, and ultimate resolution required executive negotiation with the EU as well as Parliament.
- Conclusion: rebellions significantly constrained the government between 2017 and 2019, producing real policy consequences and procedural concessions, though the executive retained tools to manage or survive many challenges and was not wholly controlled by backbenchers.

Question 4

Level 0 No relevant content. **0**

Level 1 Basic, limited knowledge of Parliament and executive relations, with little or no sustained analysis or evaluation. Examples, if present, are generalised or inaccurate. **1-6**

Level 2 Clear, mostly accurate knowledge of relevant examples and mechanisms. Some analysis of how Parliament can control the executive is present, but evaluation is partial or one-sided and the judgement may be unsupported. **7-12**

Level 3 Detailed, accurate knowledge deployed in a sustained analysis that weighs evidence for and against Parliament's capacity to control the executive, using well-selected examples such as the 2010 coalition, the 2017 Conservative-DUP arrangement and the 2017-2019 Commons votes. A reasoned judgement is reached though it may lack full sophistication.	**13-18**
Level 4 Sophisticated, wide-ranging knowledge and analysis that directly engages with strengths and limits of parliamentary control, discussing institutional mechanisms, party factors and key case studies, and reaches a balanced, well-supported judgement.	**19-24**
Level 5 Excellent, comprehensive knowledge and evaluation using a wide range of precise examples and theory. The answer synthesises evidence about party unity, majorities, formal agreements and constitutional conventions to produce a nuanced, clearly justified and well-evidenced judgement on the extent of parliamentary control.	**25-30**

Indicative content:

- Arguments that Parliament can control the executive: parliamentary arithmetic matters, as seen in 2017-2019 where small majorities and cross-party voting defeated government motions and forced concessions; formal agreements such as the 2017 Conservative-DUP confidence-and-supply deal constrained policy freedom and required negotiation.
- 2010 coalition example: a coalition government required continual compromise with the Liberal Democrats, shared cabinet posts and constrained unilateral executive policy making, showing Parliament and party agreements can limit executive dominance.
- Mechanisms of constraint: defeats in the Commons, meaningful votes, amendments, the threat of no confidence, the role of backbench committees in shaping debate, and the power of whips and the payroll vote as countervailing influences that can either strengthen or weaken Parliament's control depending on context.
- Arguments that Parliament cannot reliably control the executive: strong party unity and disciplined whipping often allow the executive to pass its agenda even with narrow margins; the executive controls the legislative timetable and patronage, which it can use to limit dissent and manage MPs.
- Nuance: even when Parliament constrains the executive, outcomes can be limited or temporary. For example, the Miller prorogation judgment constrained executive action but was fact-specific; the executive retains significant prerogative powers and resources for negotiation with external actors like the EU.
- Political factors: the effectiveness of parliamentary control depends on party cohesion, electoral incentives, the size of majority, public opinion and the role of external partners; in some contexts Parliament is an effective check, while in others it is a forum for executive dominance.
- Conclusion: a reasoned judgement might argue that Parliament is capable of meaningful control over the executive under certain conditions, notably small or no majorities and strong backbench organisation, but that routine control is limited when the executive commands a large, united parliamentary majority and extensive patronage, so Parliament's ability to control the executive is conditional and variable.

Question 5

defines payroll vote accurately, ministers and PPSs expected to support the government in votes	**B1**
explains why this reduces independence, e.g. loss of freedom to vote differently without risk to career	**B1**
gives a dated example where payroll vote affected outcomes, e.g. ministerial support for coalition bills in 2010-2015	**B1**
develops with analysis of constraints, e.g. ministers cannot publicly oppose policy without resigning	**B1**
gives a limited counterpoint suggesting some ministers do resign or resist in exceptional cases	**B1**
links to balance of power, e.g. payroll vote strengthens executive control over Commons business	**B1**

Answer: The payroll vote means ministers and parliamentary private secretaries are expected to support the government in Commons votes. This reduces their independence because publicly opposing government policy risks dismissal or career damage. For example, during the 2010 to 2015 coalition, ministerial and junior minister support helped secure coalition legislation. Ministers cannot ordinarily dissent without resigning, which constrains debate and strengthens the executive's control of Commons business, although on rare occasions ministers have resigned in protest, showing the constraint is strong but not absolute.

Question 6

Level 0 No relevant content.	**0**
Level 1 Simple restatement of the extracts with limited or no own knowledge and little analysis of the link between majority size and executive power.	**1-3**
Level 2 Clear use of the extracts plus some own knowledge. Explains basic mechanisms by which majority size affects government power, but analysis may be descriptive rather than developed.	**4-6**
Level 3 Good analysis that integrates the extracts with detailed own knowledge and examples, explaining mechanisms such as whipping, confidence-and-supply, and the impact of narrow margins on specific votes.	**7-9**
Level 4 Excellent source-driven analysis that uses both extracts as the starting point, adds well-selected, specific examples (e.g. the 2017 Conservative-DUP arrangement and key 2017-2019 votes), explains causal mechanisms and reaches a developed conclusion about how majority size changes executive power.	**10-12**

Indicative content:

- Extract A highlights the general principle that a decisive majority lets the executive set the legislative agenda and reduces the veto power of backbenchers and opposition, which can be supported by examples of large majorities passing manifesto measures with limited amendment.
- Extract B gives a concrete case: after 2017 the Conservatives lost an absolute majority and relied on the DUP, which increased vulnerability to small rebellions and made negotiation necessary on several bills and motions between 2017 and 2019.
- Mechanisms: with a large majority the whip is effective and defeats are rare; with a small majority or no majority each MP's vote matters, increasing the bargaining power of rebels and minor partners and making confidence votes more dangerous.
- Examples: large Labour majorities 1997 and 2001 allowed the Blair government to pass major reforms relatively unimpeded; by contrast the 2017-2019 period saw the government repeatedly dependent on short-term agreements and forced to negotiate amendments, and narrow defeats or near-defeats on Commons votes occurred.
- Role of formal arrangements: confidence-and-supply with the DUP is an example where the executive secures survival but sacrifices policy autonomy, needing to accept concessions to the partner; coalitions like 2010-2015 also imposed negotiated compromises.
- Limitations and nuance: a large majority does not make the executive omnipotent, since rebellions, public opinion and Lords amendments can still matter; similarly, small majorities can sometimes be managed with strict whipping or by trading patronage, so majority size is a strong factor but not the only one shaping executive power.
- A balanced conclusion links the extracts, arguing majority size is a central structural determinant of executive power in the Commons: large majorities increase executive freedom, while small or no majority forces negotiation and raises the influence of backbenchers and minor partners, though other factors mediate this effect.