5.2 Comparative Theories: Structural, Rational and Cultural Approaches

EDEXCEL 9PL0 · about 80 minutes · Write-in edition

Total Marks

Name: _____ Date: ____ / ____ / _____

Answer ALL questions. For levels-marked questions, write a well-structured, developed response using accurate political knowledge, named examples and precise terminology. This pack forms part of Edexcel Paper 3A (9PL0/3A): Comparative Politics - USA.

1 This question is about the constitutional structures of the UK and the USA.

(a) Using a structural approach, explain one similarity between the UK and US constitutions. **(4)**

(b) Using a structural approach, explain one difference between the UK and US constitutions. **(4)**

(Total for Question 1 is 8 marks)

2 This question is about formal and informal checks in each system.

(a) State two examples of checks and balances built into the US constitutional structure. **(2)**

(b) Explain one way the UK constitution provides a check on executive power, despite the absence of a codified constitution. **(3)**

(Total for Question 2 is 5 marks)

3 Evaluate the extent to which the differences between the UK and US political systems are better explained by structural theory than by cultural theory.

(Total for Question 3 is 30 marks)

4 Analyse the extent to which a rational approach best explains why the UK and the USA have both tended to be dominated by two major political parties.

(Total for Question 4 is 9 marks)

5 Analyse the extent to which cultural factors, rather than structural factors, explain differences in voter turnout between the UK and the USA.

(Total for Question 5 is 12 marks)

6 This question applies rational theory to specific behaviour of elected representatives.

(a) Using rational theory, explain why members of the US Congress often prioritise the interests of their own state or district over their national party's position. **(4)**

(b) Using rational theory, explain why UK Members of Parliament are, in general, more likely to vote according to their party whip than members of the US Congress. **(4)**

(Total for Question 6 is 8 marks)

7 Explain, using one example from the UK and one example from the USA, how a structural feature of a political system can produce unintended cultural effects.

(Total for Question 7 is 6 marks)

Mark scheme · 5.2 Comparative Theories: Structural, Rational and Cultural Approaches

Question 1

(a) identifies a valid similarity, e.g. both constitutions establish and limit the powers of government / both provide for a bicameral legislature / both incorporate some protection for individual rights **B1**

(a) names or describes the relevant provision accurately, e.g. the UK's Human Rights Act 1998 (giving further effect to the European Convention on Human Rights) or the US Bill of Rights (1791) **B1**

(a) explains the structural consequence of the similarity, e.g. both systems allow individuals to seek a legal remedy where a public authority has acted incompatibly with protected rights **B1**

(a) links explicitly back to the structural approach, e.g. because the comparison rests on formal legal/institutional provisions rather than on values or actor behaviour **B1**

(a) Answer: Example: both constitutions provide some legal protection for individual rights - the US Bill of Rights (1791) and, in the UK, the Human Rights Act 1998 (which gives further effect to the European Convention on Human Rights) - allowing individuals in both systems to challenge public bodies that breach protected rights, even though the UK's protection can, unlike the US Bill of Rights, be amended or repealed by a simple Act of Parliament.

(b) identifies a valid structural difference, e.g. codified vs uncodified, or entrenched vs unentrenched **B1**

(b) describes the US constitution accurately, e.g. a single codified document (1787) that is the supreme law and can only be amended by the special process in Article V **B1**

(b) describes the UK constitution accurately, e.g. uncodified, drawn from statute, common law, convention and authoritative works, and can be changed by a simple Act of Parliament **B1**

(b) explains the structural consequence, e.g. this makes the US constitution far harder to amend and gives it a status superior to ordinary law, whereas the UK constitution is flexible and no Act of Parliament has higher legal status than any other **B1**

(b) Answer: The US constitution is a single codified document (1787), entrenched by the special amendment process in Article V, and is superior to ordinary law; the UK constitution is uncodified, drawn from multiple sources (statute, common law, convention), and can be changed by a simple Act of Parliament, reflecting the principle of parliamentary sovereignty.

Question 2

(a) one accurate example, e.g. presidential veto of legislation, which Congress can override by a two-thirds vote in both chambers **B1**

(a) a second accurate example, e.g. Senate 'advice and consent' over major presidential appointments and treaties, or Supreme Court judicial review of Acts of Congress **B1**

(a) Answer: Any two of: the presidential veto (overridable by a two-thirds vote of both chambers of Congress); Senate confirmation ('advice and consent') of major presidential appointments and treaties; Supreme Court judicial review of the constitutionality of federal laws and executive actions.

(b) identifies a genuine UK check, e.g. judicial review of the lawful use of prerogative or statutory powers by the executive **B1**

(b) accurate supporting example, e.g. the Supreme Court's ruling in R (Miller) v The Prime Minister; Cherry v Advocate General for Scotland [2019] UKSC 41 that the 2019 prorogation of Parliament was unlawful **B1**

(b) explains the consequence, e.g. this shows UK courts can constrain how the executive exercises its powers even without a codified constitution, by applying constitutional principles developed through case law and convention **B1**

(b) Answer: UK courts can check the executive through judicial review of the lawfulness of its use of power, even though the UK constitution is uncodified. For example, in R (Miller) v The Prime Minister; Cherry v Advocate General for Scotland [2019] UKSC 41, the Supreme Court ruled that the 2019 prorogation of Parliament was unlawful, void and of no effect, showing that constitutional principles developed through case law can constrain the executive.

Question 3

Level 0 No relevant content. **0**

Level 1 Basic, limited knowledge of structural and/or cultural theory, with little or no developed analysis or evaluation. Examples, if present, are generalised or inaccurate. **1-7**

Level 2 Clear, mostly accurate knowledge of structural and cultural approaches with some developed analysis; evaluation is present but may be one-sided, assertive rather than substantiated, or only loosely tied to named examples. **8-15**

Level 3 Detailed, accurate knowledge deployed in a sustained analysis that engages with both structural and cultural theory using well-selected, accurate examples; evaluation weighs the two approaches against each other and reaches a reasoned judgement, though development of counter-arguments may be uneven. **16-23**

Level 4 Sophisticated, wide-ranging and accurate knowledge used to construct a sustained, tightly argued evaluation that directly compares structural and cultural explanations (and may bring in the rational approach as a further point of comparison), using precise, well-chosen examples throughout; reaches a clearly substantiated, balanced judgement on the extent of the claim. **24-30**

Indicative content:

- Structural case for the claim: the US separation of powers (a separately elected President, distinct from Congress, per Article I, Section 6) contrasts with the UK's fusion of executive and legislature (the PM and Cabinet sit in and are drawn from Parliament); this formal, codified difference can be identified and compared precisely.
- Structural case for the claim: US federalism entrenches state powers under the Tenth Amendment (1791), whereas UK devolution grants powers that remain legally revocable by a sovereign Westminster Parliament (Scotland Act 1998, Wales Act 2017, Northern Ireland Act 1998); a structural theorist argues this formal difference in the entrenchment of sub-national power is the primary driver of observed differences in how devolved/state government behaves.
- Structural case for the claim: the codified US Constitution and the Supreme Court's power of judicial review (Marbury v Madison, 1803) versus the UK's uncodified constitution and doctrine of parliamentary sovereignty (limited only by mechanisms such as section 4 declarations of incompatibility under the Human Rights Act 1998) is a further precise, testable structural contrast.
- Cultural case against the claim (for cultural theory instead): American political culture, shaped by the historical experience of breaking from British colonial rule, has long emphasised individualism and suspicion of concentrated central power; this cultural disposition can be argued to have driven the original choice of a fragmented, checked-and-balanced structure, rather than the structure existing independently of culture.
- Cultural case against the claim: UK political culture reflects an evolutionary, non-revolutionary constitutional history and a deep-rooted deference to the convention of parliamentary sovereignty, which helps explain why the UK has been comparatively willing to concentrate power in a sovereign Parliament and a fused executive, something a purely structural account (which treats the rules as a fixed starting point) does not itself explain.
- Balanced/synthesis point: structural and cultural theories are not necessarily rivals - political culture may explain why a set of structures was originally adopted, after which those structures become self-reinforcing (path dependency) and shape behaviour largely independently of the culture that produced them; a sophisticated answer can therefore argue the two approaches are complementary layers of explanation rather than competitors.
- A substantiated conclusion might reasonably favour structural theory on the grounds that formal rules are more precisely comparable and testable across cases, or might reasonably favour cultural theory on the grounds that identical structures (e.g. two federal-style systems) can produce very different outcomes depending on political culture; either conclusion should be credited provided it is supported by accurate, well-explained evidence and does not present one theoretical school as objectively 'correct'.

Question 4

Level 0 No relevant content. **0**

Level 1 Basic, limited knowledge of the theoretical approaches or the two-party pattern, with little or no developed analysis of the rational approach specifically. **1-3**

Level 2 Clear knowledge of the rational approach and relevant examples, with some developed analysis, though the link to the UK/US comparison may be incomplete or one-sided. **4-6**

Level 3 Detailed, accurate knowledge used to construct a sustained, well-evidenced analysis of the rational approach, which explicitly considers the extent to which it is the best explanation (including at least one alternative approach) before reaching a supported conclusion. **7-9**

Indicative content:

- Rational-choice case: single-member-district, plurality-style electoral systems (UK Commons FPTP; the state-based, largely winner-take-all US Electoral College) create a strong incentive for voters not to 'waste' a vote on a party unlikely to win, and for politicians to join one of the two largest viable parties to maximise their own chance of gaining office (a pattern generalised in political science as Duverger's Law).
- Rational-choice case: candidates and parties in both systems rationally converge toward the median/centre voter to maximise their vote share, reinforcing a stable two-party equilibrium rather than fragmentation into many small parties.
- Counter-argument (structural): the electoral system itself is a structural feature, not simply a product of individual rational calculation; a structural theorist would argue the rules mechanically squeeze out third parties regardless of any single actor's reasoning, so structure - not rational calculation - is doing the real explanatory work.
- Counter-argument (cultural): long-established two-party political identities and loyalties (e.g. voters' inherited attachment to Labour/Conservative or Democratic/Republican traditions, reinforced across generations) can sustain a two-party pattern even where rational calculation might favour a third option, suggesting cultural attachment supplements or even outweighs rational calculation.
- A strong answer notes that rational, structural and cultural explanations are not mutually exclusive: rational actors respond to structural incentives that were themselves shaped by, and now reinforce, an underlying political culture, so a fully rounded analysis weighs all three before judging which offers the most powerful single explanation.
- A balanced conclusion might argue the rational approach is persuasive because it explains why the pattern is self-reinforcing election after election, but that it works best in combination with, rather than as a full substitute for, the structural explanation (the electoral system) that creates the incentive in the first place.

Question 5

Level 0 No relevant content. **0**

Level 1 Basic, limited knowledge with little developed analysis; cultural and structural factors may be listed rather than explained or compared. **1-4**

Level 2 Clear, accurate knowledge of relevant cultural and/or structural factors with some developed analysis, though the direct comparison between the two approaches may be incomplete. **5-8**

Level 3 Detailed, accurate knowledge used to construct a sustained analysis that directly weighs cultural against structural explanations for turnout differences, reaching a supported judgement on the extent to which culture is the stronger explanation. **9-12**

Indicative content:

- Cultural case: differences in political culture, such as the extent to which voting is seen as a strong civic duty or social norm, can vary between the UK and the USA and may help explain why average turnout at UK general elections has tended to be higher than at US federal elections over recent decades.
- Cultural case: a more historically rooted distrust of a strong central government in parts of American political culture (traceable to the founding generation's break from British rule) may reduce some citizens' sense that voting in distant federal elections matters, compared with the UK's tradition of a single, clearly accountable Parliament.
- Structural case: most US states require citizens to actively register to vote as a distinct administrative step (voter registration), whereas the UK's household and individual electoral registration process, while still requiring registration, is often experienced as more straightforward; extra registration hurdles are a structural, not cultural, barrier to turnout.
- Structural case: the sheer frequency and number of elections in the US system (federal, state and local elections held on staggered cycles, plus primaries) can produce 'voter fatigue' as a structural feature of the system, distinct from any underlying cultural attitude toward voting.
- A strong answer notes that structural and cultural explanations interact: a structural barrier such as registration requirements may itself be a product of, and reinforce, a wider political culture that treats voting as an individual choice to opt in rather than a default civic entitlement, making a clean separation of the two approaches difficult.
- A balanced conclusion might argue that structural factors offer a more directly testable, comparable explanation (registration rules, election frequency), while cultural factors provide a deeper account of why those structures took the form they did, so the strongest answers weigh both rather than dismissing either.

Question 6

(a) identifies that members of Congress are rational, re-election-seeking actors **B1**

(a) explains that they are elected directly by, and accountable to, their own state (Senate) or district (House) rather than to a national party electorate **B1**

(a) explains that party discipline in Congress is comparatively weak, so there is limited institutional cost to breaking from the national party line **B1**

(a) links to a concrete behaviour, e.g. directing federal spending/projects toward their own district ('pork barrel' politics) to boost their re-election chances **B1**

(a) Answer: Because members of Congress are rational actors seeking re-election, and are elected directly by their own state or district rather than by a national party electorate, they have a strong incentive to prioritise local interests (for example, by securing federal spending for their district) even where this conflicts with the national party's position, especially since congressional party discipline is comparatively weak.

(b) identifies that UK MPs are also rational, career-seeking actors, but face different institutional incentives **B1**

(b) explains that re-selection as a candidate, and progression to ministerial office, depend substantially on the support of the party leadership/whips, giving a strong incentive to vote loyally **B1**

(b) explains that the UK's fused system means the government's ability to remain in office (and pass its programme) depends on maintaining a disciplined Commons majority, raising the stakes of rebellion **B1**

(b) contrasts this with the US, where separation of powers means Congress is not required to sustain the President's government in office, lowering the cost of an individual member voting independently **B1**

(b) Answer: UK MPs are also rational actors, but the institutional incentives differ: their re-selection and career progression (including ministerial office) depend heavily on the support of the party leadership, and the government's survival in a fused system depends on a disciplined Commons majority, both of which make loyalty rational. Members of Congress, by contrast, sit in a separated system where Congress does not need to sustain the President's government in office, so there is less institutional cost to voting independently.

Question 7

Level 0 No relevant content.	**0**
Level 1 Identifies a relevant structural feature and/or cultural effect but with limited or undeveloped explanation of the causal link between them.	**1-3**
Level 2 Clear, accurate explanation of how a structural feature can produce a cultural effect, using at least one developed UK or US example (top of the band requires both).	**4-6**

Indicative content:

- UK example: the First Past the Post electoral system structurally reduces the number of parties able to win seats, which over time can reinforce a cultural norm of adversarial, two-sided politics and strong voter identification with a single party 'side' rather than a culture of coalition-building.
- US example: the state-by-state, largely winner-take-all structure of the Electoral College concentrates campaign attention on a small number of competitive 'swing states', which can shape a cultural pattern of very high political engagement in some states and comparatively low perceived relevance of presidential campaigns in many 'safe' states.
- A strong answer explains the causal mechanism explicitly (structure shapes incentives and behaviour, which over repeated cycles becomes embedded as a cultural norm or expectation), rather than simply describing a structure and a cultural pattern side by side.
- A strong answer keeps the explanation purely mechanical/institutional and does not stray into asserting which resulting culture is better or worse, since the question asks only for an explanation of the causal link.