Module overview

POL253 is an intermediate-level module on British government. Students with no prior knowledge of British government may wish to take POL108: Background to British Politics before attempting POL253, but it is not a prerequisite.

POL253 considers the relationship between government and governed in contemporary Britain, and in particular the key questions of what mechanisms exist to hold those in power accountable to the citizenry, and how effective those are against a backdrop of growing complexity in both the nature of government and the challenges it has to face. Students will consider electoral, party-political, judicial and professional accountability systems, as well as how appreciating the economic, technological, sociological and transnational contexts in which policymakers operate affects what they can reasonably do.

Students may wish to take POL253 alongside its Semester A companion module, POL260: Power and Legitimacy in British Politics, though this is not compulsory. POL253 provides useful background knowledge for POL373: Parliamentary Studies and POL396: British Economic and Social Policy since 1945.

Teaching, assessment and feedback

The formal contact time for POL253 comprises eleven weekly one hour lectures and eleven weekly one hour seminars during Semester B, plus a one hour revision lecture during the revision week at the start of the summer exam period. In addition, students are expected to complete approximately 8 hours of independent study each week. Independent study time should be spent writing assignments, completing background readings, and doing the assigned written seminar activity before each seminar. Students should attend all lectures and seminars, and should come to seminars prepared to discuss their work.

Students will complete one formal written assignment over the course of the module, and a two hour unseen examination during the summer exam period.

The assignment, due at the end of week 8 and comprising 40% of the module grade, is a 2,500-word essay answering a choice of questions.

The examination will range across all topics covered on the module. Students will have two hours to answer two questions from a choice of eight. A mock examination paper is attached at the end of this module guide.

Seminar tutors will provide feedback on the formal written assignment within three weeks of the submission deadline. Individual seminar tutors will make clear what precise format their feedback will follow, but in each case they will attempt to link their comments to the
SPIR undergraduate marking scheme for second year modules. Seminar tutors will also offer informal feedback in the form of comments in seminar discussions, and will be available to discuss student progress in more detail during their weekly office hours. Students are strongly advised to make an appointment to see their seminar tutor during office hours at least once over the course of the module.

Module schedule

POL253 follows a staggered structure, meaning that you will have a lecture on a topic, then a week to do the required seminar activity and further reading for that topic, and then you will attend the relevant seminar. As not all QM modules follow this approach, I have reproduced the module schedule below. Please make sure you come properly prepared for each seminar.

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Introductory readings

All students are strongly encouraged to read King, Anthony (2015) *Who Governs Britain?* (London: Penguin) at an early stage in the module. Students – especially those with little or no background in the study of British Politics – may also wish to refer to Flinders, Matthew et al. (2011) *The Oxford Handbook of British Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press) for introductions to many of the topics discussed in the module. This is available digitally via the QM Library search engine.
**Topic 1: Elections and voting**

**Lecture (week 1)**

To what extent, and in what ways, are British governments held accountable at the ballot box? In theory, the great advantage of the British electoral system (discussed in more detail in POL260) is the ease with which governments can be thrown out of power if they under-perform. How powerful is this mechanism in practice? To what extent does the way voters behave shape the effectiveness of electoral accountability?

**Seminar (week 2)**

Seminar questions:
- What factors explain how British voters vote?
- Is voting an effective means of holding governments to account?

**Required reading:**


**Further reading:**


Topic 2: Political Parties

Lecture (week 2)

In this lecture we’ll look at the role political parties play in the UK system of government. We’ll consider the nature of the party system and its evolution over time, the way internal party rules interact with electoral politics to shape who the UK’s leaders are, who party members are and what they think, and how parties are funded and regulated.

Seminar (week 3)

Seminar questions:
- How does the party system interact with voting behaviour to shape who can form a government in the UK?
- What are the key features of how Labour and Conservative Parties appoint their leaders? How similar are they? How different are they?
- How important are party members in holding governments to account?

Required reading:


Norris, Pippa, and Joni Lovenduski. "‘If only more candidates came forward’: Supply-side explanations of candidate selection in Britain." British Journal of Political Science 23.3 (1993): 373-408.


Further reading


**Topic 3: Parliamentary oversight**

**Lecture (week 3)**

In this lecture, we’ll consider how effective parliament is at holding the government to account. We’ll consider the everyday mechanisms parliamentarians use to elicit information from and offer challenges to government ministers. We’ll also discuss parliament’s fundamental power to impeach individual ministers and to force a government from office.

**Seminar (week 4)**

Seminar questions:

- What mechanisms does the House of Commons use to hold government to account?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of those mechanisms?
- How effective, on balance, is the House of Commons at holding the government to account?

**Required reading:**


**Further reading:**


**Topic 4: Judicial oversight**

**Lecture (week 4)**

In this lecture, we'll talk about the legal routes through which British governments are held accountable. In part that means talking about the (limited) power the courts have to review executive action, both in terms of its fairness and transparency, and its impact on human rights. We'll also look at the changing role of the courts in light of two key pieces of legislation – the Human Rights Act of 1998 and the Constitutional Reform Act of 2005. Finally, we'll consider how effective the judiciary is as an accountability mechanism, as well as the critical question of how accountable the courts themselves are.

**Seminar (week 5)**

Seminar questions:
- What changes have taken place in the role of the UK judiciary in recent years? What have been the drivers of these changes?
- How have these changes affected the way British governments are held accountable?
- How effective are the courts at holding British governments to account?

**Required reading:**


**Further reading:**


Topic 5: Technocracy, Civil Service and outsourcing

Lecture (week 5)

This week we’ll look at the civil service, the supposedly apolitical army of bureaucrats and technocrats employed to get the work of British government done. We’ll consider how governments use bureaucracies to develop, assess and implement policies, but also how bureaucratic processes become covers for political activities. We’ll consider, also, the trend in recent generations towards reducing the size of the British state by ‘outsourcing’ government services, and what the implications of this are for how accountable the exercise of British government can possibly be.

Seminar (week 6)

Seminar questions:

- How is the UK civil service held accountable?
- How have changes in the nature of public service delivery interacted with these traditional accountability mechanisms?
- On balance, how accountable are UK public services (broadly defined)?

Required reading:


Further reading:

Topic 6: Writing your analytical essay

Lecture (week 6)

This lecture sets out what you need to do to complete the written assignment for POL253, a 2,500 word essay responding to a question on one of the topics we have covered so far on the module. It will cover different analytical responses to a question, how to structure and present your essay to ensure your argument comes across effectively, and where and in what ways to introduce different types of evidence to support your argument.

Seminar (week 8)

Please prepare an essay plan covering how you plan to write your analytical essay. Your essay plan should do the following:

1. Answer your chosen question in one sentence. What do you think?
2. Identify four supporting arguments that explain your answer. Why do you think what you think?
3. Identify at least five articles or books from the reading list that you plan to discuss in the process of justifying your supporting arguments. What are the main arguments in the literature? What are their strengths? What are their weaknesses?
4. Suggest some appropriate empirical examples to illustrate your reasoning.

We will spend the seminar talking through your essay plans, identifying any areas in need of further clarification and discussing how to maximize your performance.

Analytical essay questions:

1. What factors best explain voter behaviour at British general elections?
2. Do British political parties still matter?
3. How effective is parliament at holding governments accountable?
4. Why is judicialization controversial in Britain?
5. Is the British state ‘hollowing out’?
Topic 7: Economics: Capital flows and money markets

Lecture (week 8)

This lecture considers how much influence British governments have over economic matters. In particular, it looks at the political economy of contemporary British politics, the relationship of the UK to the international economy, and the role played by business, finance interests and investors in questions of British government. In particular, it will discuss two different but related views of the UK’s position with regard to international economic forces; that there is ‘no alternative’ but to follow market imperatives, and that market imperatives can impose useful discipline over British politics.

Seminar (week 9)

Seminar questions:
- How much influence do British governments have over the British economy?
- What external factors limit that influence?
- How accountable are the other actors involved in shaping the British economy?

Required reading:


Further reading:


Topic 8: Technology: Social media, big data and fake news

Lecture (week 9)

This lecture poses a number of questions linked to recent technological developments. How far do new technologies threaten or improve the stability of British governments? Does the rise of social media as a rival to traditional news sources make public debate more accessible or more irresponsible? How can governments best make use of big data to govern more effectively and accountably, and what are the downsides if they do?

Seminar (week 10)

Seminar questions:
• What general challenges do technological developments pose to British governments?
• How has the rise of social media affected what governments do?
• Is ‘fake news’ a threat to British democracy?

Required reading:

Further reading:
Topic 9: Transnational challenges: Terrorism and climate change

Lecture (week 10)

This lecture explores the challenges governments face from beyond the state. In particular, it focuses on two key transnational challenges; international terrorism, and climate change. Though in many ways very different, these challenges pose major difficulties for all governments, everywhere. Both raise significant collective action problems, involve deeply complex conjunctions of forces, and emerge at least in part from territories beyond the British government's power to influence.

Seminar (week 11)

Seminar questions:

- How effective is the British government at countering terrorism?
- How effective is the British government at addressing climate change?
- What makes confronting transnational challenges difficult for British governments?

Required reading:

Awan, Imran. "‘I am a Muslim not an extremist’: How the Prevent Strategy has constructed a ‘suspect’ community." Politics & Policy 40, no. 6 (2012): 1158-1185.


Further reading: Counter-terrorism


Further reading: Climate change


Topic 10: Fragmentation: British national identity after Brexit

Lecture (week 11)

As we approach the date of the UK’s withdrawal from the European Union, we'll spend this lecture reflecting on social fragmentation and its impact on the ability of governments to govern. We'll consider why the question of Brexit proved so divisive, how the British public became divided in the first place, and why reaching a consensus over what to do next has been such a challenge.

Seminar (week 12)

Seminar questions:
- What factors drove the UK’s vote to leave the EU?
- Why has Brexit proven an unusually emotive and divisive political issue?
- What other social divisions underpin the Brexit vote? How able are governments to respond to these?

Required reading:


Further reading:


Topic 11: Conclusion

Lecture (week 12)

This lecture summarizes the material covered in the module. We’ll also talk about how to prepare for the exam, covering question choice, answer structure, and the use of evidence. This should prepare you to start revision during the vacation.
Previous exam questions

POL253 is a new module this year. Last year it formed part of the 30-credit module POL243. The below questions are extracted from different versions of the POL243 exam paper. They are provided to give you a sense of the sort of questions that can come up, and to enable you to practice writing exam essays. Remember that the actual exam paper will only have 8 questions. You will be required to answer two.

1. Why do British people vote the way they do?
2. What factors determine why and how British voters participate in elections?
3. Are political parties fit for purpose?
4. Do British political parties perform useful roles?
5. Does the use of executive agencies and private companies to conduct government business make government itself less accountable?
6. Is the British state ‘hollowing out’?
7. How accountable is the British civil service?
8. Which provides greater political accountability: parliament or the judiciary?
9. Should British ministers be more concerned about MPs or about judges?
10. Is parliament powerful?
11. Are financial markets more influential than British government ministers?
12. Can British governments really shape the contemporary economy? Answer with reference either to technological developments or financial markets.
13. Do technological advances represent more of an opportunity or more of a threat to British governments?
14. Do transnational threats lie beyond the British government's power?
15. Can British governments solve transnational problems?
16. How great a threat does political fragmentation pose to effective British government?
17. What are the limits to British governmental power?