

Contemporary Issues in US Politics



Capitol Building. Martin Falbisoner, 2013, WikiCommons

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Contents

<u>Contemporary Issues in US Politics: e-workbook</u>	4
<u>Thinking About US Politics: What does US Politics mean to you?</u>	7
<u>US Politics Quiz</u>	8
<u>Digging Deeper: Polling</u>	11
<u>Exercise 1: Comprehension and Analysis</u>	13
<u>Digging Deeper: Independents</u>	16
<u>Exercise 2: Analysis and Evaluation</u>	18
<u>Digging Deeper: Women in Congress</u>	21
<u>Exercise 3: Analysis and Advocacy</u>	23
<u>Digging Deeper: Lobbying in US Politics</u>	26
<u>Exercise 4: Comprehension and Analysis</u>	29
<u>Digging Deeper: Immigration</u>	32
<u>Exercise 5: Research, Role Play and Investigation</u>	34

A-Level Politics & University 'Taster'

Workbook

Contemporary Issues in US Politics

This e-workbook has been produced to assist students and teachers studying the US Politics component of the A-Level Government and Politics course as well as those considering studying politics and/or international relations at University. The workbook complements the formal A-Level curriculum and provides a 'taster' and a bridge to University study.

The Workbook has been developed by the [Department of International Politics](#) at [Aberystwyth University](#) based on our interactive schools and colleges workshops. Usually these workshops are delivered in class but we have tailored them for online outreach during the disruption to education caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.

This e-workbook supplements rather than duplicates or replaces content provided by schools and colleges. It provides additional material and ideas to enrich A level studies and encourage reading and thinking around the subject as a preparation for university-level approaches to study. Some of the material is deliberately more specialised than the A-level curriculum to help students expand their intellectual horizons and deepen their understanding of quite specific but highly topical and sometimes controversial issues. The approach taken by this workbook is similar to the way that students at University are taught, and is designed to introduce A-level students to ways of doing research and assessment that they will encounter in higher education. The intention is to develop resources that provide

engaging, research-based exercises to develop critical thinking, analysis and to widen engagement with key empirical and conceptual aspects of politics in the United States of America.

Each topic starts with a multiple-choice question, followed by some brief points on the possible answers. We then have a section on 'Digging Deeper' to engage in more detail with the topic and raise a number of wider discussion points related to the question. This is followed by a set of engaging resources about that topic, which you can read, watch or listen to. At the end of each topic section there is a more in-depth exercise to be completed.

The topics covered in this work relate to a number of aspects of the A-Level US Politics curriculum, in particular:

Workbook Topic	Corresponding A-Level specification details
<p>Topic 1: President, popularity and polling</p>	<p>AQA 3.2.1.2 - Legislative Branch & 3.2.1.5 on Electoral Process & 3.2.1.8 Civil rights Edexcel 3.3 - US Presidency & 5.1.1 President Elections WJEC 4.2.2 - US Presidency & 4.3.2 Voting behaviour</p> <p>This section also discusses polling as an important political tool.</p>
<p>Topic 2: US Political Parties</p>	<p>AQA 3.2.1.6 - Political Parties Edexcel 3.5.2- Democrat & Republican Parties WJEC 4.3.3 - Political Parties</p>
<p>Topic 3: Congress & Representation</p>	<p>AQA 3.2.1.6 - Political Parties Edexcel 3.2.2.1 - Representation & 3.2.3- Interpretations & Debates around Congress & 5.4 Interpretations & Debates around US Democracy & Participation WJEC 4.2.1 - US Congress & 4.3.2 - Voting Behaviour</p> <p>This topic focuses on representation by gender, race, class etc.</p>
<p>Topic 4: Interest groups & Lobbying</p>	<p>AQA 3.2.1.7 - Pressure Groups Edexcel 5.3 - Interest Groups & 5.4 - Interpretations & Debates around US democracy & Participation WJEC 4.3.1 - US Elections</p>
<p>Topic 5: Immigration</p>	<p>AQA 3.2.1.8 - Civil Rights Edexcel 3.4.4 – 3.4.6 - Civil Liberties, Rights, Race and Interpretations & Debates Around Civil Rights WJEC 4.1.3 - The Bill Rights</p>

Thinking About US Politics:

What does US politics mean to you?

Think which three words best portray US politics to you.

You can compare your answers online with your classmates.



Donald Trump. Mandel Ngan/AFP/Getty Images

US Politics Quiz & Academic Exercises

The following quiz will test your knowledge of American politics and might surprise you. You will be asked a question and given four options. On the following page you will be given the answer and some further information and discussion points to consider, which will help you increase your understanding of the topic being addressed.

Following the annotated answers for each topic there is 'Digging Deeper' section. This engages in more detail with the subject matter, raising wider discussion points and providing a set of engaging resources for further research and interest. Finally, at the end of each topic section there is a more in-depth exercise to be completed. These elements aim to give you a sense of the kinds of resources, discussions, questions and assessments you may encounter at University.

The objective of the Quiz and Further Exercises is to allow you consider key aspects of US politics in an accessible and enjoyable way and to think about key politics concepts in a tangible and grounded way. In this way we hope to allow you to better understand the ever shifting US political landscape.

[Start quiz](#)

Question 1:

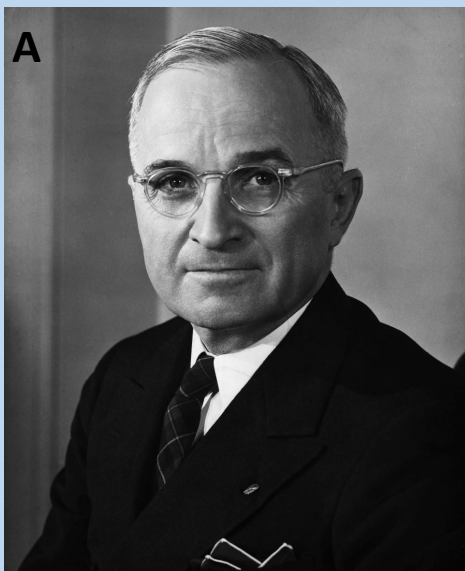
Before Trump, which post-1945 US President has suffered the lowest *average* monthly approval rate over their presidency?

A - Harry S. Truman

B - Barak Obama

C - Richard M. Nixon

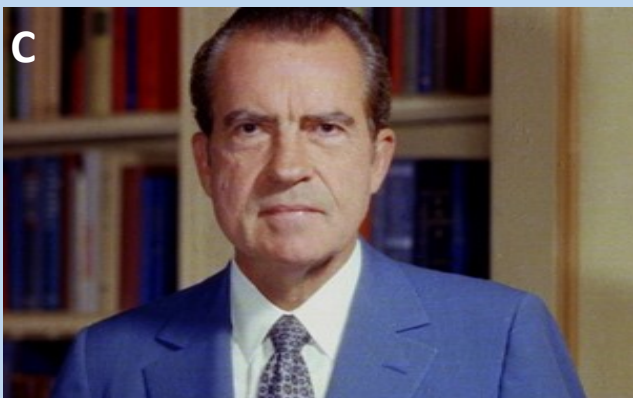
D - George W. Bush



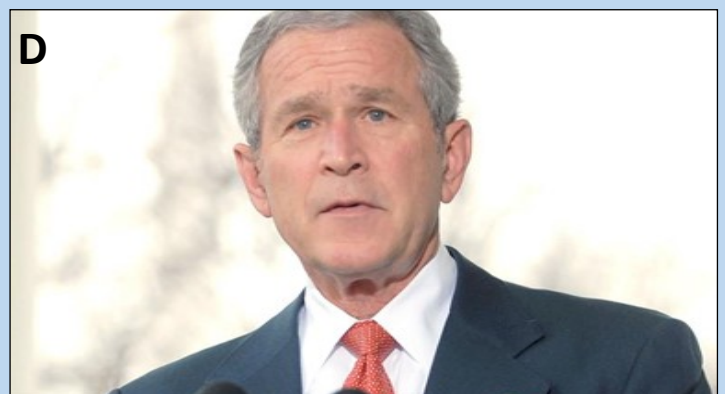
Harry S. Truman. Bettmann Archive



Barak Obama. Pete Souza, 2012



Richard Nixon. www.biography.com



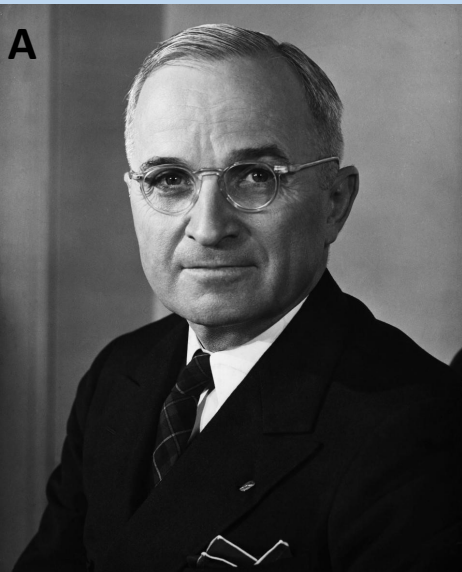
George W. Bush. www.history.com

[Contents](#)

Question 1:

Before Trump, which post-1945 US president has suffered the lowest *average* monthly approval rate over their presidency?

Answer: A - Harry S. Truman, with 45.4% average approval



It might be surprising but the answer is Harry S. Truman. Truman famously polled so low that the Chicago Tribune predicted that he would lose the 1948 election to his Republican challenger Thomas E. Dewey and printed the headline before the results came in confirming Truman's victory.

In comparison:

- Carter 45.5%
- Obama 47.9
- Nixon 49.1%
- G.W. Bush 49.4

Top 5 in order: Kennedy 70.1%; Eisenhower 65%; HW Bush 60.9%; Clinton 55.1%; LBJ 55.1%.

Source: Gallup. Available from: <http://www.gallup.com/poll/116677/presidential-approval-ratings-gallup-historical-statistics-trends.aspx>

Digging Deeper: Polling

Questions for discussion

The presidential job approval ratings were introduced by George Gallup in the late 1930s to gauge public support for the President of the United States during their term. An approval rating is a percentage determined by a polling which indicates the percentage of respondents to an opinion poll who approve of a particular person or program. Typically, an approval rating is given to a politician based on responses to a poll in which a sample of people are asked whether they approve or disapprove of that particular political figure.

In the 2016 US Presidential election the majority of Polls consistently projected Hillary Clinton as defeating Donald Trump. Relying largely on opinion polls, election forecasters put Clinton's chance of winning at anywhere from 70% to as high as 99%, and pegged her as the heavy favourite to win a number of states such as Pennsylvania and Wisconsin that in the end were taken by Trump. This highlighted the importance of polling methodology. The traditional telephone polls are now joined by increasing numbers of high profile, online probability and nonprobability sample surveys, as well as prediction markets, all of which showed similar errors.

Given the myriad of methodological approaches to polling it is important not to just rely on one poll but to examine several polls. What follows are links to different polls and websites which analyse these polls.

Gallup Poll: <https://news.gallup.com/poll/267905/gallup-election2020-center.aspx>

Gallup is recognized as the premier flagship of polling data and metrics. However, after 2012 Gallup polling methodology collapsed after predicting Mitt Romney would win the election. As a result, Gallup ceased polling presidential elections but continues to run its job approval polls it began in the 1930s.

Nate Silver and FiveThirtyEight: <https://fivethirtyeight.com/>

This award winning website began as Nate Silver's personal blog but evolved into one of the most powerful polling analyst sites in the business. Since the 2008 election, the site has published articles on a wide variety of topics in current politics and political news. The site and its founder are best known for election forecasts, including the 2012 presidential election in which FiveThirtyEight correctly predicted the vote winner of all 50 states. However like many other pollsters, during the 2016 election, the site's forecast gave Hillary Clinton a 71% chance of winning and Donald Trump a 29% chance.

Rasmussen Reports: <https://www.rasmussenreports.com/>

An American polling company, founded in 2003 by Scott Rasmussen, the company engages in political commentary and the collection, publication, and distribution of public opinion polling information. Rasmussen Reports conducts nightly tracking, at national and state levels, of elections, politics, current events, consumer confidence, business topics, and the United States President's job approval ratings.

Exercise 1:

Comprehension and Analysis

Write three distinct paragraphs explaining and analysing opinion polling in US Politics.

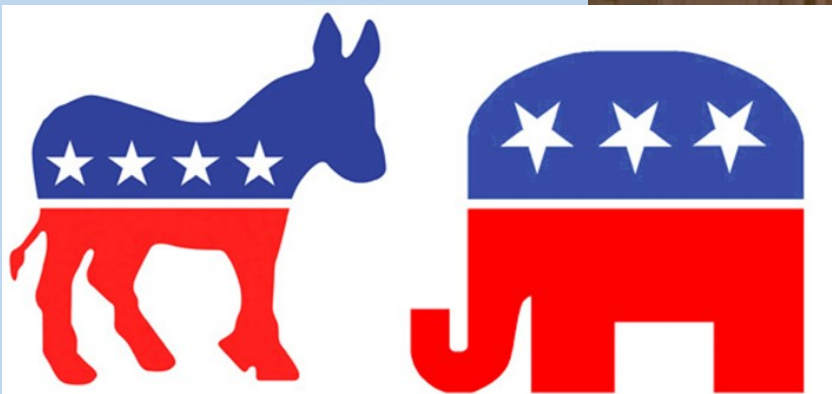
Question 2:

In 2017, what percentage of Americans identified as 'Independents' rather than 'Republican' or 'Democrat'?

- A - 7%
- B - 17%
- C - 42%
- D - 48%



Capitol Building. www.havecamerawilltravel.com



Republican and Democrat logo. www.smithsonianmag.com

Question 2:

In 2017, what percentage of Americans identified as 'Independents' rather than 'Republican' or 'Democrat'?

Answer: C - 42%

Although the number of self-identified independents has fallen slightly in the 1990s and 2000s, the vast majority of self-defined Independents are not neutral but partisan. This means that the proportion of the electorate that is actually neutral has not changed since the Eisenhower Administration.

In comparison:

- Republicans: 27%
- Democrats: 29%

Source: Gallup, 8 January 2018. Available from: <https://news.gallup.com/poll/225056/americans-identification-independents-back-2017.aspx?version=print>

Digging Deeper: Independents

Questions for Discussion

Given the strength and dominance of the two main US political parties, the Republicans and the Democrats, it is surprising that such a high proportion of Americans do not identify themselves with either party but instead describe themselves as “independents”.

Why might so many Americans want to avoid being associated with political parties? Here are some factors you could consider:

- A general disillusion and lack of connection with politics and politicians.
- Something specific about a two party system – in comparison with many other democratic countries around the world, which have a larger number of viable parties representing a wide range of more specific political positions and interests.
- Something about the way that the two parties have developed – see links to sources on the following page about recent trends in party positions and composition.

How ‘independent’ are these Americans really? Research has demonstrated that most self-identified independents actually lean towards one of the two main parties in terms of their views on policy. How meaningful is this category?

Links to further information on this topic:

The American Values Atlas <http://ava.prri.org> is an

interactive map that allows you to see the extent that Americans in different states share certain political values, such as political party affiliation. This resource is produced by the Public Religion Research Institute, a non-partisan research organisation that carries out opinion polls about American values.

John Laloggia, “Six facts about US political independents” (Pew Research Centre website, 2019) <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/05/15/facts-about-us-political-independents/>

Christopher Devine, “Don’t be fooled – most independents are partisans too” (The Conversation, 2020) <https://theconversation.com/dont-be-fooled-most-independents-are-partisans-too-128670>

Podcast: “The changing face of American conservatism” (London School of Economics US Centre, 2017) <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/usappblog/2017/07/04/the-ballpark-podcast-episode-2-4-the-changing-face-of-american-conservatism/>

Podcast: “The future of American progressivism” (London School of Economics US Centre, 2017) <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/usappblog/2017/08/07/the-ballpark-podcast-episode-2-5-the-future-of-american-progressivism/>

Exercise 2:

Analysis and Evaluation

From your research and the material provided identify a maximum of five benefits and five drawbacks of being an Independent in the US political system.

Pros	Cons

Question 3:

How many of the 535 seats in the US Congress are currently (March 2019) occupied by women?

A - 59

B - 127

C - 188

D - 236



(Clockwise from top): Speaker Nancy Pelosi; Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez; White House press secretary Stephanie Grisham; activist and politician Stacey Abrams; Education Secretary Betsy DeVos. Photo illustration by Nazario Graziano; Original photos Pelosi: Sarah Silbiger—Bloomberg/Getty Images; Ocasio-Cortez: Erin Scott—Reuters; Grisham: Mark Wilson—Getty Images; Abrams: Danny Matson—Getty Images; Devos: Leah Mills—Reuters.

Question 3:

How many of the 535 seats in the US Congress are currently (March 2019) occupied by women?

Answer: B - 127 (23.7%) including 25 from 100 Senators and 102 from 435 Members of the House of Representatives.

Of the 127:

- 47 are 'women of colour'
- 22 Afro-American,
- 13 Latina,
- 8 American/Pacific Islanders, 2 Native American/Alaskan,
- 1 multiracial,
- 1 Middle Eastern/North African
- 46 are Democrat; 1 is Republican

Women of colour constitute 8.8% of the total 535 members of Congress.

Although the number of women in government in the US has grown, they still hold less than 25% of government positions nationwide. It has been noted that in Congress, both in the Senate and the House of Representatives, women have been historically and are currently under represented. No political gender quotas exist, mandatory or voluntary.



The women elected to the 2019 congress. [Nancy Pelosi/Flickr](#) [CC BY](#)

Digging Deeper: Women in Congress

Questions for Discussion

The mid-term elections in November 2018 generated historic results in terms of the numbers of women elected to Congress: this was the first time that the US House of Representatives had ever elected more than 100 women.

But despite this landmark result, women still comprise less than one quarter of the elected representatives in Congress. Why is it so difficult for women to make gains in this area?

Does it make a difference that the proportion of women in Congress is much lower than the proportion of women in the population of the United States? Should elected representatives **be** representative of society?

It was notable that the Democrats had much greater success in electing women than the Republicans did. In fact, the number of Republican women in the US House of Representatives declined as a result of the November 2018 elections. What factors might explain this difference between the two main political parties?

Links to further information on this topic:

Jennifer Mathers, “Women candidates break records in the 2018 US mid term elections” (The Conversation, 2018)

<https://theconversation.com/women-candidates-break-records-in-the-2018-us-midterm-elections-105829>

Kelly Dittmar, “Why scaling up women’s political representation matters” (GenderWatch website, 2018)

<http://www.genderwatch2018.org/scaling-womens-political-representation-matters/>

Melissa Deckman, “There was no wave for Republican women this year” (GenderWatch website, 2018)

<http://www.genderwatch2018.org/no-republican-women-wave/>

The documentary “Knock Down the House” focuses on four women Democrat candidates for Congress during the 2018 mid term elections and is available to watch on Netflix

<https://knockdownthehouse.com>

The podcast “Women belong in the House” hosted by Jenny Kaplan, examines gender representation in US Congress

<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/women-belong-in-the-house/id1435089907>

Exercise 3:

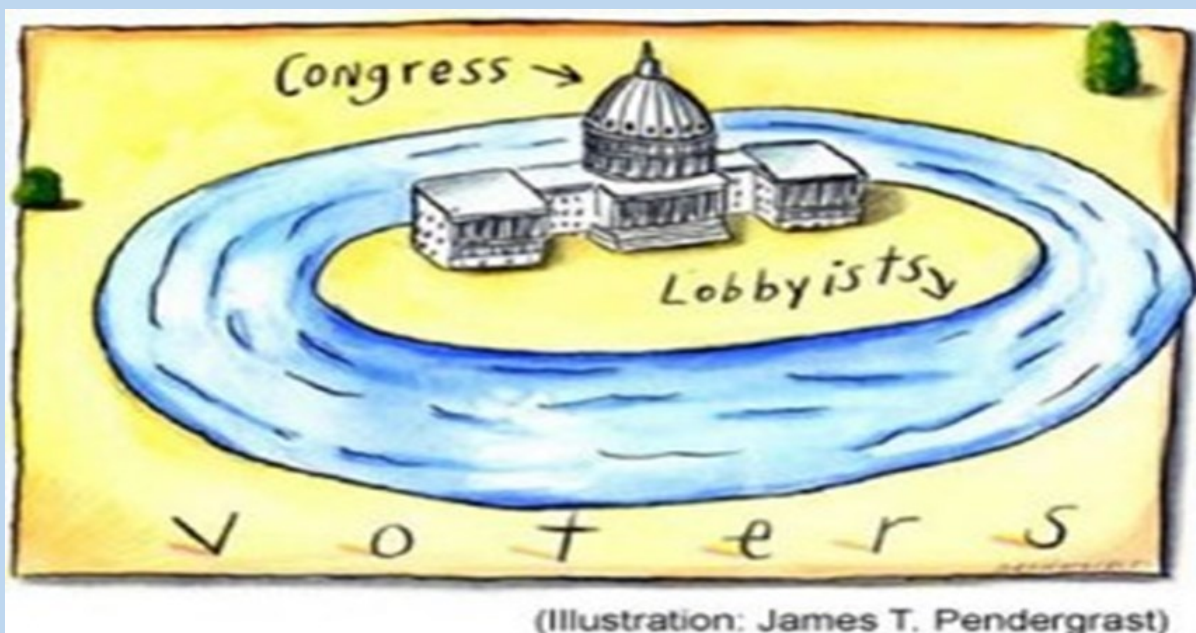
Analysis and Advocacy

From the information provided and your own research, write a 300-500 word 'Blog-Post' arguing either for or against gender quotas in US Congressional elections.

Question 4:

Of the top-20 highest spending industries, which industry spent the most on lobbyists in the US in 2017?

- A - Defence Aerospace
- B - Automotive Industry
- C - Oil & Gas
- D - Pharmaceuticals/Health Products



James T. Pendergrast. Grand Rapids Institute for Information Democracy.

Question 4:

Of the top-20 highest spending industries, which industry spent the most on lobbyists in the US in 2017?

Answer: D - Pharmaceuticals & Health, \$279.57 million

Lobbying in the United States describes paid activity in which special interests hire well-connected professional advocates, often lawyers, to argue for specific legislation in decision-making bodies such as the United States Congress. It is a highly controversial phenomenon, often seen in a negative light by journalists and the American public, with some critics describing it as a legal form of bribery or extortion.

In comparison:

- Oil & Gas (4th): \$126.09 million
- Defence Aerospace (18th): \$69.13 million
- Automotive (17th): \$69.98 million
- Insurance (2nd): \$160.7 million
- Internet companies (19th): \$67.99 million



Congress Brokers, 2017.

Source: Statista, 2018. Available from: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/257364/top-lobbying-industries-in-the-us/>

Digging Deeper: Lobbying in US Politics

Debates for Consideration

Lobbying in the United States describes paid activity in which special interests hire well-connected professional advocates, often lawyers, to argue for specific legislation in decision-making bodies such as the United States Congress. It is a highly controversial phenomenon, often seen in a negative light by journalists and the American public, with some critics describing it as a legal form of bribery or extortion.

Lobbying has been the subject of academic inquiry in various fields, including law, public policy, economics and even marketing strategy. In any case, often complex and difficult rules and legal regulations are employed to keep lobbying in check but these can be easily circumvented.

Despite these criticisms, there are counterarguments that the system is working as it should, despite being rather messy. According to the Madisonian view of politics—in which factions are supposed to compete with other factions—the system is working exactly as it should. Competing factions, or in this case, competing interest groups, square off. According to political scientist Donald deKieffer, lobbying serves a helpful purpose as helping guard against extremism as it adds "built-in delays" and permits and encourages opposing lobbies to battle. In turn, these battles delay potentially damaging decrees and incorrect decisions.

Podcast: The Lobbying Show with Jim O'Brien

<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/the-lobbying-show/id1401504350>

A podcast about the world of lobbying: how it works, who's lobbying, and how to be effective. Each week, we interview government affairs professionals and lobbyists to get their perspective on the industry.

Christine Mahoney, 'Why lobbying in America is different' Politico, 4/12/14

<https://www.politico.eu/article/why-lobbying-in-america-is-different/>

Christine Mahoney explore the difference in Lobbying in Europe and the United States. One of the biggest arguments against stricter lobbying regulations in the EU has been that strict rules do not work in Washington. Why, then, would they work in Brussels? This is faulty logic. The reason why we see more undue influence of special interests in the US is not the failure of the lobbying disclosure and ethics regime, but rather our failure in the US to bring about real campaign-finance reform.

David Harsanyi, 'In Defense of Lobbying', Real Clear Politics 6/7/2019

https://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2019/06/07/in_defense_of_lobbying_140515.html

David Harsanyi defends the tradition of Lobbying using the First Amendment to the US Constitution which guarantees free speech.

Charlotte Hill, 'America's Lobbying System is Broken' HuffPost, 6/7/2017

https://www.huffpost.com/entry/americas-lobbying-system-is-broken_b

Charlotte Hill argues that argues that lobbyists have gained enormous influence by making themselves useful. They provide resources that lawmakers desperately want, the most important of which is expertise. Until we invest in government's capacity to do its own legislative work,

special-interest lobbyists will have disproportionate influence in our policymaking process.

Exercise 4:

Comprehension and Analysis

Write three distinct paragraphs explaining and analysing lobbying in US Politics and outlining how could it be reformed.

Question 5:

How many 'unauthorized' ('illegal') immigrants were estimated to be living in the US by 2016?

- A - 3.4 million
- B - 10.7 million
- C - 38.4 million
- D - 51.8 million



Protest against Illegal Immigration reform by U.S. Congress, Los Angeles, CA, May 1, 2006. Visions Of America LLC.

Question 5:

How many 'unauthorized' ('illegal') immigrants were estimated to be living in the US by 2016?

Answer: B - 10.7 million (3.3% of total US population)

- This is down from 12.2 million in 2007.
- Moreover, there were an estimated 34.4 million 'legal' immigrants in 2016.
- U.S. foreign-born population reached a record 43.7 million in 2016 (13.5 %), was 4.7% in 1970 but 14.8% in 1890.
- Since 2000 there have never been more than 12.2 million (2007) 'unauthorized' estimated to be living within the US.
- The US is the world's leading destination for migrants.



www.uscis.gov

The declining overall number of unauthorized immigrants is due mainly to a very large drop in the number of new unauthorized immigrants, especially Mexicans, coming into the country. Consequently, today's unauthorized immigrant population includes a smaller share of recent arrivals, especially from Mexico, than a decade earlier.

Source: Pew Research Centre, 30 Noveembr 2018. Available from: <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/11/30/key-findings-about-u-s-immigrants>

Digging Deeper: Immigration

Questions for Discussion

Immigration has long been a contentious issue in the United States and has become even more controversial since Donald Trump made it a central focus of his campaign for election in 2016. There are many aspects to this topic, including border security, economic impacts of immigration, ethics and morality, as well as national identity itself.

Perhaps the question of immigration is so contested precisely because the United States is a country that is composed largely of immigrants and their descendants. On what basis might someone claim to be American, for example:

- How long they or their ancestors have been living in the US
- The reasons for their or their ancestors' immigration to the US
- Their ability and willingness to assimilate, for example by learning and using English
- Sharing and demonstrating American values (such as cherishing freedom, a willingness to work hard and improve their position, patriotism and willingness to sacrifice for the country)
- Ability to contribute to the economy (for example, through special skills or expertise)

One of the most controversial aspects about immigration is what should happen to those millions of unauthorised immigrants, with suggestions ranging from immediate deportation to temporary measures such as DACA (the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals programme started by Obama and ended by Trump), to

offering pathways to citizenship. What are the practical and ethical implications of each of these courses of action?

“Build the wall” was a Trump campaign slogan that has continued to resonate with his supporters. But what is the most effective way of regulating borders and who passes through them, and whose responsibility is it to do this work? What happens when ordinary citizens (for example through militia groups) get involved?

Links to further information on this topic:

“Four myths about how immigrants affect the US economy” (PBS website, 2018) <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/economy/making-sense/4-myths-about-how-immigrants-affect-the-u-s-economy>

Dara Lind, “Nine facts that explain DACA” (Vox website, 2017) <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2017/8/31/16226934/daca-trump-dreamers-immigration>

Laura Smith, “Trump’s immigration ban is another page in the long history of xenophobia in America” (London School of Economics US Centre website, 2020) <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/usappblog/2020/04/24/trumps-immigration-ban-is-another-page-in-the-long-story-of-xenophobia-in-america/>

“American militias have a long history on the US-Mexican border” (Los Angeles Times, 2019) <https://www.latimes.com/nation/nationnow/la-na-border-militias-20190514-story.html>

Exercise 5:

Research, Role Play and Investigation

Drawing on the resources provided and your own further research, imagine you are an investigative journalist writing a story on unauthorised immigration in the US. Develop key five questions you would ask **either** of an unauthorised immigrant **or** of a member of a militia that patrols the US-Mexico border. Think about how you will phrase your questions – how will you encourage the person you are interviewing to reveal their perspectives on this issue and discuss their experiences?

Question 1.

Question 2.

Question 3.

Question 4.

Question 5.

Thank You!

