This guidance supports the revised National Curriculum for citizenship published by the DFE in 2013, for first teaching from September 2014. This topic, the political system and constitution, addresses the following requirements in the revised programmes of study:

- the development of the political system of democratic government in the United Kingdom, including the roles of citizens, Parliament and the monarch (KS3)
- the operation of Parliament, including voting and elections, and the role of political parties (KS3)
- parliamentary democracy and the key elements of the constitution of the United Kingdom, including the power of government, the role of citizens and Parliament in holding those in power to account, and the different roles of the executive, legislature and judiciary and a free press (KS4)
- the different electoral systems used in and beyond the United Kingdom and actions citizens can take in democratic and electoral processes to influence decisions locally, nationally and beyond (KS4)
- local, regional and international governance and the United Kingdom’s relations with the rest of Europe, the Commonwealth, the United Nations and the wider world

This topic represents a clearer commitment to teach an element of civics than has been formulated in previous programmes of study. However, rather than being seen as a huge block of dry content this should be seen as the bedrock of political literacy – students should be encouraged to develop a sense of the political system as a whole, and how the various institutions and processes connect together. Scepticism about politics and politicians is rife and, whilst some of this may be well-earned by politicians, it is important that students understand the necessity of politics in a democratic plural society. Teachers should therefore guard against scepticism about politics in general, and promote a positive appreciation of the importance (and inevitability) of politics, whilst encouraging a critical engagement with the nature of politics today. Politics is an inevitable (and inevitably flawed) process which can be improved by democratic participation. If students can gain a holistic sense of this system, critically discuss the extent to which it functions democratically and perceive their own role

Key concepts

The key to teaching this area successfully will be balancing the detail with the big picture. Case studies and individual elements should be consistently related to the holistic system. In doing so, teaching could usefully address the following key concepts:

1. Democracy – in particular, a key question to re-visit will be, how does each feature of the political system function democratically and could it be made more democratic? Are there more democratic ways to achieve the same functions? How well does politics work? What do we expect of politics and politicians?
2. Government and governance – what is the appropriate role for government and how should it go about performing that role? How are we governed, how are others governed, how should we be governed?
(I) Government

(a) Forms of government. Aristotle defined three types of government – monarchy, aristocracy and democracy (1). In the UK we have developed a national system which blends all three: there is still a role for the monarch (albeit a largely ceremonial one), a form of aristocracy in the House of Lords (although this is less a chamber for hereditary power now and more a chamber of ‘the wise’, appointed for their expertise or achievement) and a democratic element through the House of Commons. This settlement clearly reflects the evolutionary history of the UK rather than the revolutionary changes that often give rise to single systems with written constitutions.

(b) Continuity and change. Another way to look at government focuses on the relationship between the permanent element of government (the civil service and the army) and the temporary element (the politicians who actually make the decisions). Whilst in other systems such as the USA, incoming governments bring the top layer of civil servants with them, in the UK the civil service remains as a permanent (supposedly neutral) feature of government and thus carries out the day to day business of government and provides a sense of continuity. It is useful to remember the difference between these elements and the tensions arising at the heart of government. Relevant issues for exploration in case studies might involve the differences between the decision in Whitehall and the implementation, what Barber called ‘deliverology’ (2) when leading the Department for Education; and the on-going debate about extent to which these civil service functions can be moved into the private sector and the implications for the tradition of ‘public service.’ (3)

(c) Functions. A third way to think about government is to focus on the three functions: legislature, executive, and judicial. Following the Constitutional Reform Act (2005) and changes to the role of the Lord Chancellor, our political system has moved to a clearer demarcation of responsibilities and an independent judiciary (4). Prior to these reforms one person was effectively the Speaker of the House of Lords (legislature), Lord Chief Justice (judiciary) and a member of Cabinet (executive). Clearly the value of this functional perspective is to emphasise the ways in which each branch of government interacts and can act as a check on the others and so the move towards full independence of the judiciary was an important reform.

(d) Citizens and government. The national government can seem quite distant from citizens but it is important to consider the opportunities for individuals to attempt to influence those in power. Petitions have always been important ways to show collective opinion and recently government has begun to experiment with ways to use petitions to request parliamentary time be spent on an issue (to affect the legislature) (5). Lobbying of ministers has always been part of the system (to affect the executive) (6), and individuals and organisations can also bring legal challenges to the government (using the judicial system). An example of this latter form of action is provided by the legal challenge being led by disability rights campaigners against the way the government has tried to scrap the Independent Living Fund (7).

(II) The broader system

In addition to members of the government, parliament also includes those who oppose the government, and the opposition can provide another form of accountability and sometimes checks and measures. Local government also forms an integral part of the system of government nationally, and in 2013-14 local authorities are budgeted to spend just over £100 billion (compared to total central government spending of £340 billion). Devolved governments in Northern Ireland (8), Wales (9) and Scotland (10) provide further levels of complication as each has different powers (11). In our democratic system however, there are some common features such as elected assemblies, committees (12), and a free media, which all provide a measure of scrutiny and transparency and which could function as organising themes for teaching. In addition it is important to recognise the importance of the public sphere as a space in which citizens can interact as individuals and through networks and organisations. Many theorists argue that the continuation of public deliberation is an important feature of (and safeguard for) democracy (13). On this view a democratic political system is defined by much more than the direct relationships between voters and governments, and between branches of governments – democracy is sustained through a complex web of democratic citizen relations outside of government.
(III) The Constitution

The great confusing factor of studying British politics is that we are a constitutional monarchy, but do not have a clearly codified constitution, resting instead on a complex series of laws, court rulings and conventions (14). It’s not so much that we have an ‘unwritten’ constitution as one which is written down in many places, and which is constantly being re-written. Whilst this makes it difficult to study the constitution, it also means that teachers have to focus on the relationships between elements of the system and raise examples of how the system adapts and evolves, for example through reforming legislation, court decisions, European legislation and adaptations to conventions. It also means discussion about the constitution remains a live political issue, for example Republic campaigns for a ‘democratic’ constitution without a monarch (15). This perspective is important as the curriculum asks teachers to teach the ‘development’ of the political system, which is on-going.

“Having a religious organisation in the House of Lords is as symbolically wrong as having a hereditary monarch as the head of state.”

Alex Hern

(IV) Power

Central to this area of knowledge is a consideration of power. Power can be viewed in many ways but it may be useful to think about the power to affect change (a conservative view), power over others (a liberal view), and power to control the agenda (a radical view). Sometimes power is exercised for the common good, at other times power is asserted by those with greater access to resources over the interests of others, and at other times those with power dominate the agenda so thoroughly that those out of power may not even be fully aware of the scale of their control. Power and authority are distributed throughout government in different ways and sometimes people ‘in power’ are able to influence others simply because their authority is accepted by others. At other times, those in power may need to remind others that they control the only legitimate source of violence in the state (through the police and armed forces) and therefore can use force or coercion to exercise power. Whilst the exercise of state violence is relatively rare in domestic politics, this remains one of the prerogatives of government.

Power has never been a key concept in the national curriculum but is a good theme to return to when considering this topic (16). Whilst power may most obviously reside in the offices of government which have authority, or in the offices of the rich who control economic resources, many citizens’ organisations stress that ordinary citizens can have access to a form of ‘people power’ which can effectively influence others (17). Much of the work under the banner of community organisation is based on Saul Alinsky’s models, which inspired President Obama and can still form an important feature of the Citizenship class (18).

Footnotes

1) http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aristotle-politics/
4) http://www.judiciary.gov.uk/about-the-judiciary/introduction-to-justice-system/constitutional-reform
5) http://epetitions.direct.gov.uk/
6) http://www.parliament.uk/get-involved/have-your-say/lobbying/
7) http://dpac.uk.net/
8) http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/
9) http://www.assemblywales.org/
10) http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/
12) http://www.parliament.uk/about/how/committees/select/
13) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Public_sphere
14) http://www.ucl.ac.uk/constitution/unit/whatis/uk-constitution
15) http://www.republic.org.uk/index.php
16) http://www.powercube.net/
17) http://organizingforpower.org/power-2/
20) http://www.local.gov.uk/publications/-/journal_content/56/10180/4098780/PUBLICATION
21) http://dpac.uk.net/
Assessment

A reasonable outcome for KS3

Pupils demonstrate an understanding that democracy is an ideal, which is made up of several features. They can give examples of institutions and processes which constitute the political system and government of the UK e.g. role of democratic assemblies, scrutiny and the public sphere. They are aware of some of the relationships between different branches of government. They begin to make a judgement about the extent to which institutions and processes of government operate democratically and can identify strengths and weaknesses in the aspects of the system they study. They can express an informed opinion about the roles of citizens in relation to politics and government, giving personal reasons for and against forms of involvement.

A reasonable outcome for KS4

Pupils can explain that some aspects of government are more or less democratic than others and provide reasons for their judgement. They can give examples of democratic institutions and processes and explain how these relate to one another. They can also identify suggestions for changes in the current system or formulate a rationale for retaining aspects of the system. They can identify examples of citizen action and / or alternative practices and institutions which might address these areas for improvement, e.g. commenting on the effectiveness and appropriateness of different forms of political participation. In their discussions they appreciate that democracy is not simply ‘majority rule’ and decision-making systems must also protect minorities. They explain whether citizens should participate in the political system, and in what ways, citing reasons which relate to individual beliefs and the effective operation of democracy.

Teaching ideas and resources

Case studies of topical issues are probably the best way to illustrate the connections between areas of government and people’s lives. The alternative is to work through all the institutions of government in general which will descend into dry civics – an approach we have always tried to avoid in Citizenship. For example by focusing on the campaign led by disabled people against the welfare reforms, pupils can learn about the role of a minister (Ian Duncan Smith) and government department (Work and Pensions), the reasons given for reforms (19), the decisions taken in government, the legislative dimension (Welfare Reform Act 2012), the role of local government, the impact on people (20), and citizen’s campaigns to challenge the cuts, including the use of the legal system (21). Giving the knowledge a purpose (to understand a contentious policy) makes it useful and increases the chances of engagement. Selecting the right topics will be crucial.

Simulations such as the Chance to be Chancellor competition provide useful ways for students to think critically about the difficult decisions which make politics and government inevitable: http://www.payingforit.org.uk/chance-to-be-chancellor/

Debate is at the core of democratic government and students often enjoy fairly formal debating. Look back at Teaching Citizenship (Issue 33) for ideas and links to organisations that can help – both to promote debate in school but also to analyse debate in the political system.

Resources

www.royal.gov.uk Information and short films about the role of the monarchy.

www.powercube.net Primarily this is great site for articles about power to help develop your understanding, it might also be suitable for older students.

www.parliament.uk Links to information and the education services, including a select committee experience for A level students.

www.gov.uk The starting point for information about the UK government.

www.local.gov.uk The Local Government Association website provides information about government and up to date briefings and research about topical issues.