

Politics Homework

1. a) Why have there been so few constitutional amendments?

The American constitution has been amended so few times and has lasted for over 200 years due to several factors. First, Liberalism, which was the dominant ideology at the time of the constitution, is still the dominant ideology today. The enduring principles of limited government are still central to today's politics as it was at the time of the beginning of the constitution.

Second, a very important reason why the constitution is hardly amended is to do with the huge, complicated political process, which is involved in amending the constitution. The two main ways of amending the constitution are as follows. Either an amendment must pass both houses of congress by a 2/3 majority and then ratified by ¾ of the states or by special convention whereby 2/3 of the states call upon congress to re-write the constitution, this is then ratified by ¾ of the states. However, the main way of keeping the constitution in touch with modern day times is through the Supreme Court, which updates the constitution by its interpretations e.g., on abortion (Right to privacy).

Furthermore, because of the complicated political process which an amendment must get through many attempted amendments fall short of ratification e.g. 'Equal Rights' passed congress in 1972, but fell 2 states short of ratification. In addition, due to the 'Prohibition crisis' where the amendment was later on repealed due to much controversy, issue-specific amendments are avoided (problems can be seen arising from the issue specific Amendment 2 'right to keep and bear arms').

Another important reason why the constitution is amended so seldom is because many suggested amendments are unserious and although are known to have no real chance of ratification, they are still voiced as a means of public display. For example, attempted amendments on abortion and flag burning, are voiced by certain representatives to show that they are 'one of the people', in order to gain support for themselves.

b) Outline one recent failed amendment.

The 'Balanced budget' attempted amendment if passed would mean that the US budget had to be constantly kept in surplus, so that no debt would ever occur. Reagan put this forward in the late 1970's, it managed to pass both houses of congress but it never managed ¾ of the states ratification. This example also shows that Reagan (who suggested the amendment) was not committed to this idea as when he did eventually get into office he ran up the biggest budget deficit of American history. However, this is now less of an issue since the mid - 90's because the budget has been in surplus.

2. a) How do the powers of the House and Senate differ?

Although the House and Senate share many common powers e.g. budgets and impeachments, a few powers remain either belonging to the Senate or House of Representatives. These are set out in the constitution in order to ensure the separation of powers and also to make sure that the 'checks and balances' system works.

The house has a specific power, which the senate does not have and this is the ability to initiate taxation. A special department called the 'Ways and Means' standing committee has been set up based on this power. However, although senate does not get a say in how and when taxation should be initiated it must agree if the initiation is to take place.

Senate also has reserved powers that mainly consist of ratifying presidential appointments & treaties. For example, the senate approves / ratifies presidential, judicial appointments. Linda Chavez (Bush's nominee for labour secretary) was not approved of because of evidence that she had employed an illegal immigrant. Senate also did not ratify a presidential treaty (the comprehensive test ban treaty CTBT) signed by Bill Clinton, as it did not reach a 2/3 majority in senate. As the senate is based on an anti-majoritarian system, another power named the 'filibuster' enables certain senators to talk out a bill. However, a 'cloture motion' passed by ¾ of senate can now end this.

b) Why is the senate more prestigious than the house?