

The British constitution

Introductory questions

What is a constitution?

- The laws, rules and customs that set out the ways in which a country should be governed and the rights and duties of the state and its citizens
- The history of Britain has been one of gradual change rather than great upheaval and so the British constitution has evolved over many years and unlike the USA is not set down in one document.

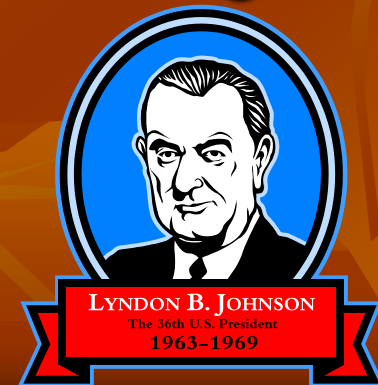
Functions

- To distribute power within the political system.....
- To empower states.....
- To protect the freedoms of citizens.....
- To define the limits of government.....
- To provide governmental stability.....
- To act as a symbol of the nation....



Functions

- Legitimacy- power- each branch of govt.....
- Freedom – safeguard to civil rights.....
- Stability – especially in relation to new democracies.....
- Limited govt – checks & balances; clear functions & powers of each branch of govt.....



Classifying constitutions - UK

- UK-partly written & uncodified – no single specific document, scattered across a number of different sources
- Flexible-no special procedures for amendment-Act of Parliament
- Unitary-sovereignty exercised by central govt-devolved power subject to supervision by the sovereign body & can be revoked by it



Classifying constitutions - US

- Federal structure - sovereignty shared – central/federal govt and subnational govt
- Written/codified – one document which contains information in which the US system of govt operates
- Rigid – special process for change – two thirds of Senate & House of Representatives plus three quarters of state legislatures



Constitutional reforms – New Labour

- House of Lords Reform
- Freedom of Information
- Devolution
- PR
- Human Rights Act
- Future reforms?

