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UK politics

How to use contemporary evidence: a 'Partygate' case study

A-level politics students regularly complain that they need to know too many examples to support their arguments and analysis. This article aims to show you how learning one case study in depth and with accuracy, rather than a large number superficially, can help you with answers across a wide range of essay questions and topics. You can then use this model to do the same with other contemporary case studies, building up an evidence bank that should be regularly updated. You will also develop invaluable synoptic skills, as good case studies show you how all topics are interlinked in the study of politics. This approach will also help you stay really up to date in a way that your textbooks cannot.

'Partygate': the facts

'Partygate' was a major political scandal. During the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020–21, meeting people outside your household was heavily restricted. Despite this, several 'gatherings' were held in the Downing Street building and garden as well as in other Conservative Party offices. Boris Johnson (prime minister at the time) initially dismissed these as 'work events'. The gatherings were investigated by the police in January 2022 and 126 fixed-penalty notices were issued, including to Boris Johnson and Rishi Sunak. Senior civil servant Sue Gray was appointed by Johnson to carry out an investigation, which decided that there had been 'serious failures'. More recently, the Privileges Committee examined whether Johnson lied to Parliament about the nature of the events. The committee, which includes several Conservative MPs, concluded that he had. The 'Partygate' scandal was a contributory factor to both the resignation of Johnson as prime minister and, more recently, as an MP.

Using this case study to answer exam questions

The impact of the media on UK politics

The first reporting of 'Partygate' was in the *Daily Mirror*. This Labour-supporting tabloid broke the story in 2021 and has covered it intensively since, regularly on its front page. The coverage clearly had an impact. For example, it led Keir Starmer to ask questions at PMQs in December 2021. In contrast, other tabloids such as *The Sun* (usually Conservative Party-supporting), were much less interested. This shows that newspapers can still have an influence on UK politics, despite their declining readership. Arguably, the *Mirror* made a significant contribution to the downfall of a prime minister. An alternative view could be that as readers of the *Mirror* tend to vote Labour anyway, the newspaper was just reflecting existing attitudes.

Governing competency and voting behaviour

'Partygate' contributed to the Conservative loss of the 2021 North Shropshire by-election (along with the resignation of Owen Paterson MP) and the Conservative Party's poor showing in the 2022 and 2023 local elections. Many voters felt that the government was behaving in an arrogant fashion,

believing that the law did not apply to them during a time of huge sacrifice and hardship. This shows the importance of the concept of governing competency as an influence on voting behaviour – making a judgement on the present government in order to decide how to vote. ‘Partygate’ has definitely had, and continues to have, an impact on those crucial ‘floating voters’ who often decide electoral outcomes.

The role and significance of select committees

‘Partygate’ shows the strength and independence of select committees as a tool to hold the government to account. The Privileges Committee investigated whether Johnson had misled Parliament over the allegations. The committee was able to call for ‘persons, papers and records’ and it also had the power to compel attendance from MPs – Johnson appeared before it in March 2023. The Privileges Committee is cross-party, with a majority of Conservative MPs and chaired by Labour MP Harriet Harman. Despite this majority, it showed its independence from party politics. The report, published in June 2023, stated that if Johnson had not already resigned as an MP, he would have been suspended for 90 days.

The crisis in UK democracy

There is arguably a participation crisis in UK politics, with declining numbers joining political parties and often low turnout at election time. Public opinion is negative towards many politicians: they are often seen as incompetent liars who cannot be trusted. ‘Partygate’ suggests that this view is accurate, which is damaging for democracy. If we do not have faith in our leaders, this can lead some to reject democracy altogether, or to stop voting. It may also discourage talented individuals from seeing politics as a career path.

The importance of party leaders to the success or failure of political parties

‘Partygate’ shows that party leaders can go from being electoral assets to being a liability. Leaders are central to the success or failure of a political party. Like Margaret Thatcher, Boris Johnson was initially seen as someone who could appeal to voters who would not have usually voted Tory. His ‘get Brexit done’ approach helped the Conservatives to a majority in 2019. However, after ‘Partygate’ he became a liability, damaging the party image.

The powers of the prime minister

‘Partygate’ proves how the prime minister’s powers can fluctuate. External events such as the Covid pandemic can have a huge impact on their role. It also suggests that the cabinet cannot be seen as weak: if they lose faith in the prime minister, they can and will remove them. There were more than 50 resignations in 48 hours, including from cabinet members such as Rishi Sunak, before Johnson left office in July 2022.

Student task

Choose one from the following:

- Keir Starmer’s Lords reform plans
- The Public Order Act 2023
- The Elections Act 2022

Look through your specification and see how your case study can be used across as many topics as possible. Add this information to a table like the one below, which you can then update on a regular basis.

Evidence	Topic 1	Topic 2	Topic 3	Topic 4	Topic 5
Add the example in here..	This shows that...				

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