

## Volume 35, issue 1, September 2025

### US politics

# Congress and the president

**Question: Evaluate the view that Congress can limit the powers of the president.**

This sample Edexcel-style essay should be read alongside 'The 119th Congress: President Trump's poodle?' (pp. 12–15).

## Planning

### What is your line of argument?

**Either:**

- Congress will be more effective in limiting the powers of the president following the midterm elections.
- A 'governing trifecta' is typically temporary, and partisanship in Congress is exaggerated.
- Congresspeople from the same party as the president do sometimes vote against a president's legislative agenda.
- The Senate must ratify nominations by the president for the executive and judiciary. It has the power to impeach the president, and the House has twice brought impeachment charges against Trump in his previous term.
- With the House's 'power of the purse', a president must seek Congressional approval for a budget to pass, and presidents have struggled to get approval, leading to government shutdown.

**Or:**

- When a president has a 'governing trifecta', they seek to achieve their legislative agenda quickly.
- It is rare for Congress to succeed in blocking executive appointments, and presidents have succeeded in bypassing oversight through executive actions.
- A 'governing trifecta' means that Congress chooses to be less diligent in its oversight of the executive, particularly in an era of hyper-partisanship.
- If this includes a clear majority in the House, a president is usually able to pass a budget with relative ease.

## Supporting arguments and evidence from the article and recent developments

Evidence that suggests that Congress can limit the powers of the president:

- A 'governing trifecta' is only temporary. The president cannot rely on party loyalty.
- Congress is effective in its oversight of the executive.
- Congress has the 'power of the purse'.

Evidence that suggests that Congress struggles to limit the powers of the president:

- A 'governing trifecta' means that a president can fulfil their legislative agenda with ease.
- Congress is ineffective in its oversight of the executive.
- Congress's 'Power of the Purse' is weakened when there is a 'governing trifecta'.

## Writing the essay

It is essential to have a clear line of argument (AO3) running through your essay. There also needs to be a debate (point/counterpoint) within each paragraph. Aim for an introduction, three paragraphs and conclusion.

### Sample introduction

The US Constitution grants the House the 'power of the purse' and the Senate the power to ratify appointments and treaties. With the separation of powers, presidents cannot rely on members of Congress to fulfil their legislative agenda, particularly if a president's party loses control of a House of Congress. Congress does, however, struggle to limit the power of a president when their party has a 'governing trifecta'. It has become increasingly common for a president to act quickly to fulfil their legislative agenda, and the use of executive orders means that Congress is frequently bypassed. An era of hyper-partisanship means that the 'power of the purse' is rarely an obstacle to a president when they have a 'trifecta'. Congress is therefore not effective in limiting the president's powers.

### Sample paragraph 1

**[Argument]** While control of Congress brings the opportunity to pass legislation favourable to a president's agenda, this is typically temporary. Following the midterms, presidents commonly lose control of a house, meaning their powers are more easily limited. Due to the separation of powers, Congresspeople are less bound by party loyalty than in the UK, as the executive does not possess similar powers of patronage. Hyper-partisanship in Congress can be exaggerated as Congresspeople from the president's party do vote against their legislative agenda. Even when the president has a 'trifecta', it still takes time to debate and pass legislation. **[Supporting evidence]** Donald Trump is not exceptional in wanting to force through the main bulk of his policies during a trifecta. Biden, Trump and Obama all lost a house of Congress in the midterms, and subsequently struggled legislatively. A president's party has not gained a house in the midterms since George W. Bush in 2002, in the aftermath of 9/11. Congress is likely to reassert itself after the midterms and limit the executive. Even in 2025, the vice president had to cast the tie-breaking vote to pass Trump's signature piece of legislation, dubbed the 'One Big Beautiful Bill', with three Republican Senators voting against it. Similarly, Trump failed to repeal Obamacare and Clinton failed to reform healthcare, despite having a 'trifecta'. **[Counter-argument]** Congress struggles to limit the powers of the president if they have a 'trifecta', so most presidents seek to enact their main policy pledges during the first 2 years. This is exacerbated by an era of hyper-partisanship. Trump has been exceptional in his expectations of

Congress, and Congressional Democrats have been powerless to stop Trump fulfilling his legislative agenda. **[Supporting evidence]** Several presidents have forced through controversial policies in their first 2 years while benefiting from a 'governing trifecta'. Trump's 2017 Tax Cuts and Jobs Act, 'Obamacare', and Biden's Infrastructure Spending and Chips and Science Acts, were significant pieces of legislation that passed through Congress. Trump signed his 'One Big Beautiful Bill' into law in time for his symbolic 4 July 2025 deadline, despite opposition from Republicans in Congress. Democrat Cory Booker may have broken the record for the longest ever speech in the Senate, but it was merely a symbolic protest, and not even technically a filibuster. **[AO3 judgement]** Congress struggles to limit the power of the president fulfilling their legislative agenda, but this is typically dependent on the president's party controlling both houses of Congress, as well as the presidency.

### Plan for paragraph 2

**[Argument]** Congress possesses the implied power of oversight of the executive, and a more hostile Congress is likely after the midterms. The House can bring impeachment charges against a president, who is then tried in the Senate, with a vote as to whether to remove the president. All cabinet-level posts and federal judges have to be confirmed by a Senate vote.

**[Counter-argument]** Congress rarely succeeds in blocking executive appointments, with Congresspeople from opposing parties often voting to confirm nominees. Presidents bypass oversight through executive actions, and a 'trifecta' means Congress is less diligent in its oversight in an era of hyper-partisanship.

### Plan for paragraph 3

**[Argument]** Congress possesses the 'power of the purse' and presidents must seek Congressional approval for a budget to pass. Congress has refused to pass a budget on several occasions, particularly when the president's party loses control of the House. This can lead to a government shutdown.

**[Counter-argument]** When there is a 'governing trifecta' and a clear majority in the House, Congress is far more willing to pass a budget which will help fulfil a president's agenda, with few objections. In April 2025 only two House Republicans opposed the budget in the end, despite concerns about adding to the budget deficit.

### Student task

Complete this essay:

- Add supporting evidence to paragraphs 2 and 3.
- Add an AO3 judgement to paragraphs 2 and 3.
- Write a conclusion, bringing the three judgements together.

***Ben Scott is an experienced politics teacher.***

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