

Volume 23, Number 2, November 2020

Revision

How to answer questions on the period 1846–1868

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There are a number of topic areas on which questions could be set depending upon which specification you are studying, so it is important that you are aware whether you are following the AQA, Edexcel, OCR or WJEC.

However, the key topics of this period include:

- The impact of the fall of Peel ministry in 1846
- The reasons why the Conservative Party was out of power for so long
- The reasons for the emergence and development of the Liberal Party
- The development of the political system and party realignment
- The reasons for the Second Reform Act
- The ideas of Gladstone and Disraeli
- The impact of foreign affairs on political developments

Although this seems to be quite a lengthy list of issues, you will see that the issues are closely linked and you will often need to use similar material for a range of questions.

The impact of the fall of Peel's ministry in 1846

This topic, and the reasons why the Conservative Party were out of power for so long, are closely linked. With these topics you will need to look carefully and see if there are any dates in the question. Does the question cover the whole period or is the question focused more narrowly?

Question

Assess the impact of the fall of Peel's ministry in 1846.

The fall of Peel's ministry had an impact on political developments throughout the period and the question requires you to consider a range of issues and weigh up their relative importance. You should be aware of the actions of the Peelites and the loss of talent that their departure meant for the Conservative Party. You should also be aware of their impact on the development of the Liberal Party, although that would be balanced against other factors that were important in the creation of the Liberal Party. There might also be a mention of the impact on Peel and his career and how it impacted the Conservative Party, which became a protectionist party for many years.

Why was the Conservative Party out of power for so long?

This topic is much broader than the impact of the fall of Peel's ministry. There are a number of ways in which questions could be phrased. You could get a question that simply asks:

Question

Assess the reasons why the Conservative Party was out of power between 1846 and 1866.

This question would require you to examine a range of factors that resulted in the party being out of power for so long. With this question it is up to the candidate to decide which issues they want to discuss. You would need to evaluate the importance of each issue discussed and reach a balanced conclusion, or judgement, as to the relative importance of the factors.

You might consider issues such as the loss of talent following the split in the Conservative Party in 1846, the poor leadership of the Conservative Party in the period, focusing on Derby and his lack of interest or the emergence of the Liberal Party and its appeal. Some of this might be linked back to the Peelites who left the Conservative Party after 1846, notably Gladstone, but also the policies of the Liberals. There might also be reference to social and economic developments, such as non-conformity, the growth of the popular press and mid-Victorian prosperity. Responses might also consider how the Whig-Liberal governments handled foreign policy and the support for their response to issues such as Don Pacifico.

However, you could also be given a question where a named factor is stated as the main reason the Conservatives were out of power.

Question

'The most important reason the Conservatives were out of power from 1846 until 1866 was poor leadership.' How far do you agree?

The material you would use to answer this question would be the same as that used for the previous question. However, in this instance you must consider the importance of poor leadership and weigh up its importance against other factors. It would be vital to write a good paragraph on the named factor before going on to discuss other issues. Although there is no requirement to discuss the named factor first, it might be a good idea as then you are certain you have given it the attention required. However, as with the previous question, it is important to weigh up the importance of each factor and make an overall judgement. The only difference is that in the conclusion to this question you would need to make a judgement about the importance of poor leadership in relation to the other factors discussed.

The reasons for and emergence of the Liberal Party

Once again, much of the material used to answer questions on the previous two topics is likely to be relevant here.

Questions might simply require you to assess the reasons for the emergence and development of the party or a named factor could be given, and you would have to weigh up its importance or significance in bringing about the development and growth against other factors. In this instance you could be asked:

Question

How important were the Radicals in the emergence and development of the Liberal Party in the period to 1868?

This question goes beyond 1866 and would therefore require you to consider their importance in the Liberal victory of 1868. It would be a good idea to begin with the role and importance of the Radicals, considering issues such as the Lichfield House compact and the role of important radicals, such as John Bright, before going on to consider other factors. The focus would need to be on the Liberal Party and, although there would be some reference to the Conservative split of 1846 and the role of the Peelites in the development, you would not need to spend time focusing on the weaknesses of the Conservative Party.

Instead, the focus would be on issues such as the personalities, policies and appeal of men such as Palmerston and Gladstone. Attention would also be given to broader developments, such as the press, non-conformity and mid-Victorian prosperity. The issue of Italian Unification, often seen as a key issue would also merit attention. The relative importance of these issues would then be weighed up against the named factor and a judgement reached as to the importance of the Radicals.

The development of the political system and party realignment

It is possible that questions set on this topic will extend beyond the period 1846–1868 and you would need to be aware of how your specification treats this theme. Party political developments are probably best understood across the period 1832–1868 so that they take into account the two Reform Acts of 1832 and 1867. However, with some specifications, these acts are part of different topics and therefore questions could not be set on the whole period, but either on 1832 or 1867, so again it is crucial that you have a clear understanding of the structure of your specification.

A question that covers the period from 1832 to 1867 could be as follows:

Question

'The most important political change in the years 1832-68 was the development of party political structures.' Assess the validity of this view.

This question requires you to analyse the importance of the development of party political structures and compare that with other political developments, such as parliamentary reform or the emergence of the Liberal Party. Once again, the question requires knowledge that comes from a range of the topics outlined at the start.

Questions could also consider the motives behind the two reform acts, such as the role of popular pressure or the importance of government policy. Consider the two questions below:

Questions

How important was popular pressure in bringing about political change in the period 1830–68?

How important was government policy in the passing of parliamentary reform in the period 1830-67?

The same knowledge would largely be needed for both questions, but the focus of the response would be slightly different. With the first question the importance of popular pressure would be weighed against other factors that brought about political change, although there would also be the opportunity

to argue that at times popular pressure failed to bring about political change, using the Chartists as an example.

With the second question the focus would be on government policy and a comparison between Grey and Russell in the 1830s and Derby and Disraeli in the 1860s would provide a useful starting point. However, as with the first essay the importance of the named factor would need to be weighed up against others.

The reasons for the Second Reform Act

In the previous section we considered questions that cover the whole of the period, and even before 1846, but in some specifications the focus is on just the Second Reform Act, so you do need to read the question carefully.

Questions could focus on the reasons for the passing of the act and it might be left to you to decide what factors to cover. This will be the case if the question asks:

Question

Assess the reasons for the passing of the Second reform Act in 1867.

As with all assess questions, you will need to weigh up or evaluate the importance of a range of factors, such as popular pressure, or the attempt of the Conservatives to 'dish the Whigs' and reach a balanced judgement as to the relative importance of the issues you have discussed. On the other hand, the question may put forward a named factor:

Question

How important was popular pressure in bringing about the Second Reform Act?

The same knowledge that was used to answer the previous question applies here, but you do need to deal with the named factor. A good paragraph analysing the importance of popular pressure, even if you intend to argue that it was not important, is essential. You would conclude by comparing the importance of popular pressure with other factors.

Some questions may go beyond 1867 and ask about the impact of the act on parties and political developments, so again it is vital that you are aware of how your specification treats the topic. Does the topic end in 1867 or does it continue and look at the governments post-1867?

The ideas of Gladstone and Disraeli

As with the last section of the last topic, questions on Gladstone and Disraeli, who dominated mid and late nineteenth century politics, may well extend beyond our time frame of 1868 and consider their ministries. However, an understanding of their ideas and political philosophies may also underpin other questions that finish in either 1866 or 1868. You should be aware of their views on issues such as free trade and protectionism, the role of the state, government, social policy and foreign policy. This is important as it will help you to understand the growing popularity of the Liberal Party and the key ideas of liberalism, many of which were associated with Gladstone. Similarly, an understanding of Disraelian Conservatism will help you to understand why they were out of office for so long and the motives behind the passing of the 1867 Reform Act.

The impact of foreign affairs on political developments

It is very unlikely that questions would be set just on the foreign policies of the various administrations of the period 1846–68. However, foreign policy played a particularly important role in the development of the growth of the Liberal Party. It was the foreign policy of Palmerston in upholding British interests that helped to win him support, particularly over Don Pacifico, and would play a crucial role in maintaining the Whig-Liberal governments in office in the 1850s. Similarly, an understanding of the importance of the Italian wars of unification played a crucial role in the development of the Liberal Party. Its support for nationalist movements was an important factor and understanding of it will help in explaining the Liberal dominance.

There are many areas on which questions can be set for the period 1846–68, but as you can see, your knowledge of the period can be used to address many of the questions, which often cover more than one of the bullets listed at the start of this guidance. It also shows that to fully understand the period you do need to see the topic as a whole and not simply focus on one or two issues. Only by seeing the topic as a whole will you have a full understanding of this crucial period in the development of modern political parties.

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