

Government and Politics

Advanced GCE **A2 H495**

Advanced Subsidiary GCE **AS H095**

OCR Report to Centres

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This report on the examination provides information on the performance of candidates which it is hoped will be useful to teachers in their preparation of candidates for future examinations. It is intended to be constructive and informative and to promote better understanding of the specification content, of the operation of the scheme of assessment and of the application of assessment criteria.

Reports should be read in conjunction with the published question papers and mark schemes for the examination.

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CONTENTS

Advanced GCE Government and Politics (H495)

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OCR REPORT TO CENTRES

Content	Page
Overview	1
F851 Contemporary Politics of the UK	2
F852 Contemporary Government of the UK	3
F853 Contemporary US Government and Politics	5
F854 Political Ideas and Concepts	7
F855 US Government and Politics	10
F856 Political Ideas and Concepts in Practice	12

Overview

In this, the final January examination of the specification, Principal Examiners made many positive comments on candidates' performance, particularly about their growing awareness of contemporary politics and the ways in which the assessment criteria are being fully grasped. Relevance, or rather the lack of it, seems to be a constant factor when considering underachievement, and this suggests that focus on technique rather than content might pay dividends.

F851 Contemporary Politics of the UK

General Comments

Candidates seemed to generally perform well on this paper. However, candidates should be reminded that they need to answer the specific questions set. When planning and writing their responses, they need to ensure that the points they make are valid, fully and properly explained and, if possible, supported by relevant and contemporary examples. By doing this they will have a better chance of accessing the higher levels of the marks.

Comments on Individual Questions

- 1 (a) Most candidates were able to provide a comprehensive outline of what is meant by a pressure group and supported this with current examples, but fewer were able to do the same for parties. Candidates needed to focus on the question set and not bring in unnecessary knowledge, such as the differences between parties and pressure groups.
- 1 (b) Candidates achieved the highest marks when they discussed the extent to which criticisms were justified, keeping strictly to the question asked. Most were able to identify and describe a range of criticisms that have been made of pressure groups and to provide examples, and they were also able to offer a defence; but they needed to discuss the extent to which criticisms were justified to push into the highest level of marks.
- 2 The best answers considered why parties might be considered to be essential to democracy, before going on to reflect on why this might not be the case, with most candidates finding it easier to make the case for the former rather than the latter. Better candidates tried to discuss why parties might be essential to democracy, or not, rather than just describing party functions. For example, good candidates made sure that they focused on 'effective choice', rather than just choice, and could explain what they meant by this.
- 3 Candidates who attempted this question clearly knew what party list systems were and were able to describe their advantages and disadvantages. The best answers contained a number and range of points supported by detailed evidence. Candidates who wrote generically about proportional representation rather than list systems did not access the highest level of marks.
- 4 Focus, range, balance and depth were the key to candidates performing well on this question. Knowledge of recent by-elections and their significance – or otherwise – often marked out the very good responses.
- 5 Better responses discussed the extent to which party policy might affect voting behaviour, with examples, and also considered other factors which might be equally or more important. Candidates who simply listed a series of factors or described a range of models did not reach the higher levels of marks. Candidates who focused on the specific question asked in this paper about voting behaviour, instead of giving a more generic answer regarding the subject, performed better.

F852 Contemporary Government of the UK

General Comments

There were some strong candidates whose scripts showed detailed knowledge of the specification, good awareness of contemporary politics and the ability to write clearly and relevantly. The absence of a 'textbook' approach was encouraging, and the ability to use sources intelligently is also producing better results. The willingness of candidates to debate, argue and discuss also helps ensure good AO2 marks.

Three principal reasons behind possible underachievement were noted by those examining. The first was an absence of detailed knowledge on the House of Commons, its membership and its workings. Care should be taken to ensure greater knowledge of this topic. The second was a failing to think carefully about exactly what the question was about and so keep the essay sharply focused; it was necessary, for example, to think about 'executive' in Question 2, 'Source' in Question 3 and 'government' in Question 5. As always, relevance is critical to success. The third was the recurrent confusion over the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR), the European Court of Justice (ECJ) and European Union (EU). This caused considerable problems in Questions 2, 3, 4 and 5, and it is strongly recommended that centres clarify this, as quite a large number of candidates got very muddled indeed.

Comments on Individual Questions

- 1 (a) (i) High marks went to those who not only made good use of the sources, but also discussed features such as ethnicity, age, socio/economic background and occupational background. The sources themselves could be better utilised, with the data there on gender balance and education, for example. There was a tendency in some cases to go on at length about electoral systems and the demerits of the first past the post system, a discussion which was not really relevant. There are only AO1 marks available here and so discussion is not rewarded. The best answers made good use of the sources and then clearly developed the 'own knowledge' aspect of the question, giving the sort of information mentioned above.
- 1 (a) (ii) On the whole this was better done than Question 1(a)(i) as not only were the sources more carefully used and developed, but candidates frequently brought in details on other 'features' such as the hereditary element, bishops and the appointment of 'experts' (such as Lords Jones and Sugar). At times there were long irrelevant digressions on the failings of the Lords Reform act, and the point about only AO1 marks being available needs to be stressed again. The technique that was most successful was the 'two paragraph' approach: the first developing the data available in the sources and the second focusing on 'own knowledge', but avoiding in-depth discussion.
- 1 (b) The best argued in some cases that there had been enough reform recently (and demonstrated awareness of what it constituted) and added that, if the powers that were present were properly used, then the House of Commons could fulfil its roles more than adequately. Some good answers looked at possible flaws (in addition to those in the sources) and argued a strong case for further reforms. The expenses scandal clearly was still in the minds of many but often got much more coverage than the question warranted. The shortage of detailed knowledge on the House of Commons surprised the examining team. Successful candidates approached the question from a variety of different angles. Some started by looking at the roles of the Commons and considering improvements there. Others looked at the issue from an 'executive' viewpoint, and yet others from the viewpoint of the backbench MP trying to represent his or her constituents better.

- 2 Better answers started with a definition of what the executive consisted of - Prime Minister, Cabinet and Civil Servants, etc. – and this clear view of what constituted the ‘executive’ was vital for success. However, a significant number simply opened their answers with: ‘The Prime Minister has got too much power as ...’ or: ‘The powers of the Prime Minister are...’. It really is vital for candidates to think carefully about the title before they write, as many excellent ‘powers of the Prime Minister’ essays only contained a certain amount of relevant information and points. There were some excellent discussions on whether Prime Ministerial power was weakened by either the cabinet or the coalition generally, but which seemed to be unaware that they are both parts of the executive. The best considered what sort of power the executive should have in a democracy in order to get the balance right between efficient government and democracy, and then argued a case each way. The majority considered that there were ample checks – ranging from Parliament, the election process to the ECHR – it was just a matter of using them.
- 3 Knowledge of the main sources of the constitution was usually good and there were often valid examples which helped to demonstrate the level of understanding and so picked up more AO1 marks. However it was interesting to note how many candidates gave the fox hunting ban as their example of statute law, with perhaps a better example being the Constitutional Reform Act. The best spent some time discussing which is the most important source and why, and did not simply list the various sources. Some got confused between principles and sources and, as always, the ‘for and against a written constitution’ essay made its appearance. Some confusion often emerged over the role of the EU, and clarification of that would be of great help to many candidates.
- 4 The better responses looked at the role of the judiciary in defending rights and liberties, comparing it with other ‘defenders’ and putting them into some order of priority, with clear reasoning to support their argument. Other ‘defenders’ ranged from Parliament through to pressure groups and there were some good examples given of both. Unfortunately rather a lot of essays just gave detailed descriptions of the structure of the judiciary, which was not what the question asked. There was often confusion over the role of the ECHR and comments like: ‘the EU imposed the Human Rights Act on us’ were frequent. As always there were lots of references to Abu Qatada and what he costs the UK taxpayer – few spelt correctly and most lacking in any relevance. As with question 2, those who reflected carefully on what the question required before they started to write did well.
- 5 The question asked about the impact of EU membership on government in the UK. The better ones kept the focus on ‘government’, looking at the variety of different ways in which membership affects the decision making process at all levels, from Prime Minister down to civil service. Government can be interpreted quite broadly here, and examiners rewarded points about the effect on the legislative process. A substantial number simply wrote at length about the iniquities of the Human Rights Act which we had to obey (more references to Abu Qatada) as it had been imposed on us by the EU. There was the usual tendency to see the EU as a group of foreign bureaucrats out to destroy what was best about the UK. There were also some ‘merits and demerits of EU membership’ essays with a strong economic slant which tended to have only limited relevance.

Yet another case where careful reflection on exactly what is being asked. Thinking here about what ‘government’ might involve, is what earns the marks.

F853 Contemporary US Government and Politics

General Comments

The paper attracted attempts on all of the questions in fairly equal measure. There were no major problems with regard to the allocation of time to the questions, which needs to be allocated on a pro rata basis to the marks available.

The highest marks were awarded to those candidates who provided in-depth analysis and evaluation related to the actual question set. They maintained a sharp focus on the question by making frequent references to it. Other good answers provided a range of balanced arguments supported by a range of contemporary examples.

Comments on Individual Questions

- 1 (a) This question focused on the congressional checks on the presidency. Candidates who knew the main checks – impeachment, appointments, treaties, legislation and budget – were able to gain full marks; and many did. Candidates who reached the highest mark band knew details such as it is the Senate and not the Congress that approves treaties and appointments and that two thirds of the Senate are needed to approve a treaty.
- 1 (b) Presidential power was the focus of this question. This required a discussion of the relationship between the president and the Congress, as well as the impact of the separation of powers and the nature of the legislation. Discussion of the “power of persuasion” was the key to scoring well on this question. This necessarily discriminated against those who were able only to provide examples of crises, increased powers for federal government and details of events such as the killing of Osama Bin Laden, but failed to focus on the key issue of presidential power.
- 2 This question was on elections, and the best answers provided a range of arguments, supported by evidence from the recent primaries and caucuses in 2012. Many of the essays presented a range of arguments and identified some of the principal criticisms, such as the critical roles played by Iowa and New Hampshire and their unrepresentative nature. It was pleasing to see references to the 2012 nomination contests.
- 3 This question was based on pressure groups. Previous reports, have stressed the need to focus on the question asked, and in this instance candidates needed to consider “importance”. Most legitimately discussed the impact of pressure groups upon democracy and considered some of the elitist and pluralist debates. But the best answers went beyond the traditional examples of the NRA and NAACP, and some considered the role of Super PACs following the Citizens United ruling.
- 4 This question was on constitutional amendments and enabled those who had revised thoroughly to provide a comprehensive range of arguments relating to the lack of constitutional amendments. The importance of the Supreme Court and comparisons with the UK also aided analysis and evaluation.
- 5 Rather like the previous question, candidates who had properly covered the specification were able to provide a good answer to this question on Congress. Candidates scored well if they were able to establish three lines of argument relating to the Senate’s superiority, their co-equal status, and the House’s exclusive powers, supporting their arguments with contemporary examples, such as reference to the fiscal cliff issue.

- 6** This question focused on the Supreme Court. Candidates who did well were generally aware of the process and the various stages of the appointment process, and were then able to offer analysis and evaluation. Consideration of EGG criteria, politicisation and impact of voting blocs upon the Court provided a framework for such analysis. Similarly, comparisons with the UK and references to the “independence of the judiciary” were also rewarded.
- 7** This question was on rights, and most candidates were able to provide examples of cases which had defended individual rights. Examples of rights being threatened allowed candidates to reach a higher mark level. Good marks would be available for discussion of the different nature of rights and how some rights might be better protected than others, as well as referring to the importance of the composition of the Court. Reference to the role played by the executive and the legislature also provided a basis for effective evaluation.
- 8** This was a question on political parties, and those candidates who were able to provide a range of arguments relating to both decline and revival did well. The latter was not as well done as the former, though it was pleasing to see contemporary references to issues such as gun control and immigration reform.

F854 Political Ideas and Concepts

General Comments

Candidates are becoming increasingly familiar with the requirements of this paper and are demonstrating a better and more focused understanding of political theory. They are developing the ability to illustrate their theory-based arguments with the views of specific theorists. Better candidates explain the views of the specific theorists, instead of simply making generic references to thinkers, for example by stating that Liberals such as Locke believe in individual liberty. Candidates are also taking more care over how to answer specific types of questions. The very best presented balanced comparisons in their responses rather than being simply descriptive in nature. A pleasing number of answers established criteria for their comparisons.

Candidates should consider the following advice regarding how to achieve AO1 and AO2 marks. This guidance is relevant to this series but is also an indicator for other series.

For AO1 marks:

- Answers which only display a general understanding of the topic area without any reference to specific theory are marks within Level 1.
- Answers which describe specific aspects of the relevant concept(s) but do not refer to the ideas of specific thinkers are likely to score marks towards the bottom of Level 2.
- Answers which display understanding of the specific concept(s) and are able to relate the ideas of a few specific theorists are likely to score marks towards the top of Level 2 (this may involve one or two examples of the views of thinkers, or generic reference to a wider range of thinkers without any exemplification of their specific ideas).
- Answers which display a good understanding of the relevant concept(s) and which illustrate their arguments with examples from a range of specific thinkers are likely to score marks around Level 3 (this might involve between 3–7 examples, dependent upon quality of exemplification).
- Answers which display a thorough understanding of the relevant concept(s) and illustrate their arguments with a wide range of examples drawn from specific thinkers are likely to score marks around Level 4 (this might involve eight or more examples, but may be less if they provide very good exemplification of specific views).

For AO2 marks

- Answers which describe only general issues relating to the question are likely to score marks no higher than the bottom of Level 2, but a very generalised description will best fit Level 1.
- Answers which discuss one or two relevant factors (eg for and against, similarities and differences, or issues of importance and related other factors) or which simply list an underdeveloped range of factors are likely to score marks towards the top of Level 2.
- Answers which adopt a one-sided approach to their answer (either for or against, similarities or differences, or related issues of importance without considering other factors) are likely to score marks no higher than the bottom of Level 3.
- Answers which analyse and develop a range of some three or four relevant factors or which develop a very imbalanced approach (eg four to one against) are likely to score marks around Level 3.
- Answers which analyse and develop a balanced argument covering a wide range of some five or more relevant factors are likely to score marks around Level 4.
- Answers which show sophistication in their analysis and evaluation may be awarded marks around the top of Level 4.

Comments on Individual Questions

- 1 (a)** Good answers outlined a full meaning of rights, highlighting key values. Use was made of the source material, although better answers extended their range of focus and included ideas drawn from relevant rights-based thinkers (especially liberals). Answers that paraphrased details within the source could access only the lower mark bands. This question should take approximately 10 to 12 minutes to answer, so there is no need to be overly lengthy, especially in comparison to Question 1(b).
- 1 (b)** Most answers displayed a good working knowledge of legal and moral rights. Good answers were able to find at least three or four points of comparison, with the best answers also providing balanced comparisons and also assessing the extent of similarity/difference between the two forms of rights. Some answers focused too heavily upon differences and failed to evaluate any similarities. Since twelve out of the fifteen marks available are for AO2, there is no value in providing lengthy examples of the models in practice, illustration using the views of specific thinkers nor for descriptions of the models themselves.
- 2** Good answers showed a clear understanding of both democracy and dictatorship, often differentiating between different types of both. An impressive range of theorists was often quoted to illustrate issues relating to democracy, although less so for dictatorship. Better answers also covered a range of comparisons, often identifying three or more points of comparison and showing a degree of balance. The number of answers that referred only to differences between the two systems limited themselves to maximum bottom Level 3 for AO2 marks.
- 3** Good answers showed a clear understanding of the meaning of the nation state and were able to analyse the validity of the argument that the nation state is in decline. Level 4 answers were often able to present three or four clear arguments and go on to include either rebuttals of these or counter arguments which discussed the robustness of the nation state. Poorer answers tended to lack balance, or focused too heavily on arguments relating to the EU undermining UK sovereignty.
- 4** Good answers displayed a clear understanding of the meaning of power, and were able to describe, with an effective range of illustration, Lukes' three faces of power. Very good answers evaluated the degree of importance of all three by looking at why each can be considered important and why also less important (thus providing six different arguments). Very good answers also tended to consider importance in relation to ideological perspectives (eg decision-making is considered the most important form of power by pluralists but less so by elitists) with explanations for these different views. A considerable number of answers performed very well in terms of AO1 showing very good understanding and use of specific theory, but did not then go on to evaluate importance, or often made unsubstantiated statements about relative importance.
- 5** The vast majority of answers on this question had been well prepared. Good answers showed a clear understanding of both social contract and natural duty based theories of obligation, although a number often showed better understanding of the former than the latter. Very good answers tended to deploy criteria for assessment, and discussed the extent of similarity over origins of obligation, the extent to which obligation extends and the basis by which obligation is maintained.
- 6** Good answers understood nationalism as an ideology, as well as the role of culture and other subsequent values such as self-determination and organicism. A number of answers correctly looked at the relative importance of the values to different strands of nationalism, illustrating their ideas with the views of nationalist thinkers. Answers which struggled to get beyond a limited description of the meaning of culture without any reference to nationalism tended to limit themselves to at maximum marks at the bottom of Level 2.

- 7** Good answers showed an effective understanding of classical and new liberalism, with many deploying a very wide range of political thinkers to illustrate their comparison. A few answers limited their options by narrowly defining new liberalism as neo-liberalism, thus tending to highlight only similarities with classical liberalism relating to economic issues and the role of the individual. However, the vast majority of answers defined new liberalism in a broader sense and were able to compare a range of modern liberal ideas, ranging from welfare liberalism to social liberalism. Very good answers achieved high AO2 marks by providing a wide range of balanced points of comparison.
- 8** Good answers showed an effective understanding of environmentalism, often including ideas advocated by ecologists, whether shallow or deep. Although knowledge of a range of environmentalist thinkers tended to be narrower than perhaps for other ideologies, the very best answers did refer to a wide range of thinkers or often were able to illustrate with different aspects of an individual thinkers ideas. Good answers were able to analyse the relative importance of anti-industrialism, often in the context of shallow and deep form of ecologism, as well as consider the relative importance of other factors such as anthropocentrism and holism.

F855 US Government and Politics

General Comments

The quality of the scripts for this module was of a good to high standard. Centres seemed to have prepared their students well, and most candidates were able to provide effective answers to the questions set. Many essays displayed a considerable range of relevant argument presented in a balanced manner. The best answers also included references which went beyond the UK and the USA. For instance, comment was made on the French presidential election of 2012 and the role of legislatures and judiciaries in the EU.

Comments on Individual Questions

- 1 This was a question on voting behaviour, where the best answers commented on the significant factors influencing the US presidential election of 2012 and related this, and other elections such as the French election in 2012, to the various models of voting behaviour. They discussed the factors which influence voting behaviour in more than just a general sense and also avoided the temptation to stray into the realms of primaries and caucuses.
- 2 This question focused on party systems, with the best answers adopting an analytical approach to consider the determinants and nature of party systems. They drew on examples from the UK and the USA to consider contrasts and differences, not only nationally, but also at voting and governmental levels.
- 3 This question about pressure groups had its own specific focus, and so pre-packaged answers which did not attempt to consider elitist and pluralist critiques were insufficiently relevant to gain good marks. References to pressure groups, especially in the USA, were essential to access the higher mark levels for AO1. Care should be taken with regard to the examples used: Bernie Ecclestone, ENRON and John Ashcroft are not pressure groups. Similarly, the factors which contribute to pressure group effectiveness are not what make them important.
- 4 This question was on the protection of rights, with good answers providing apposite examples of cases to support their arguments. These illustrated the role of judiciaries in protecting rights and acts from threats posed by legislatures and executives – mainly on the grounds of national security. The best answers offered a balanced assessment of ways in which judiciaries had failed, and executives and legislatures had succeeded, in protecting individual rights.
- 5 This was a question regarding constitutions, and one which elicited some good answers which drew on their knowledge of the arguments for and against unwritten/uncodified constitutions and also recent developments such as the incomplete nature of constitutional reforms in the UK.
- 6 This question was focused on legislatures. Good answers discussed the functions of legislatures and made effective comparisons between Britain and the USA. It was surprising to note that candidates seemed unable to draw on their AS level knowledge of the UK Parliament and so made scant references to departmental select committees, public bill committees, PMQs and written and oral questions, among other things.

- 7** It has been mentioned in previous reports that the nature of PM power is an area which candidates seem reluctant to discuss. Given the synoptic nature of this paper, questions on the power of executives always have been asked, and will continue to be. References to the impact of the coalition and the consequences of divided government in the USA were rewarded. The best answers considered factors both within and outside the cabinet. It was unfortunate that candidates seemed to miss the opportunity to consider the nature of PM power, with hardly any discussion of the power of patronage, for example.
- 8** This question was on judiciaries, and many candidates were able to discuss the constraints upon the judiciary. As is always the case though, the best answers focused on all aspects of the question and placed their discussion within the context of the implications for democracy. Those who were able to develop arguments relating to increased judicial activism were rewarded.

F856 Political Ideas and Concepts in Practice

General Comments

There was a very limited entry to this unit in this session, thus there are no question specific comments. However candidates are reminded of the need to adopt a synoptic approach to their answers. Marks for AO1 and AO2 are awarded based upon the extent to which candidates apply political ideas and concepts to modern politics. Thus it is worth considering the following comments, based on this series but which is also an indicator for other series.

For AO1 marks

- In order to access the higher mark bands answers must include specific examples drawn from political theory **and** modern politics.
- Marks are awarded at Level 1 where answers show only basic understanding (this might, for example, include very short answers).
- Marks are awarded at around Level 2 where there is understanding of relevant ideas and concepts, but where few specific references are made to relevant illustrative evidence both in theory and practice (this might be one or two examples for each). Also answers at this level often make more references to modern politics but no relevant references to the ideas of political thinkers.
- Marks are awarded around Level 3 for answers which include a range of relevant illustrative specific examples from modern politics and explicit use of a range of relevant examples from theorists. This might range from approximately three examples for each at the bottom of the level to approximately six or seven for each at the top, or there may also be an imbalanced combination of examples across both (where detailed case study evidence is used, it is possible to access the top of the level with a smaller range of examples). Marks are awarded at this level where answers show a wide range of relevant examples from theorists (eight or more) but mostly consist of examples drawn from modern politics.
- Marks are awarded around Level 4 where answers contain a sophisticated variety of relevant factual and theory evidence (this would normally be eight or more for each, but could be less if more detailed case-study evidence is used).

For AO2 marks

- To access the higher mark bands, answers must go beyond mere description of relevant political ideas and concepts.
- Marks are awarded at Level 1 for basic description only.
- Marks are awarded towards the bottom of Level 2 where there is more specific description of relevant ideas and concepts.
- Marks are awarded around Level 2 where one or two relevant factors are discussed.
- Marks are awarded towards the bottom of Level 3 for a one-sided approach (either for or against, or similarities without differences, or relative importance without considering other factors).
- Marks are awarded towards the top of Level 3 where there is an attempt at a balanced analysis of a range of factors (approximately three or four) and an attempt to make appropriate synoptic links (i.e. consideration of the theory-based argument and evaluation of its relevance/accuracy in practice in modern politics).
- Marks are awarded around Level 4 where there is clear and balanced evaluation of a wide range of factors and appropriate synoptic links are made.
- Marks are awarded towards the top of Level 4 where there is clear sophistication in the evaluation.

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