

Government and Politics

Advanced **GCE A2 H495**

Advanced Subsidiary **GCE AS H095**

Report on the Units

June 2009

HX95/MS/R/09

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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 syllabus 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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Chief Examiner Report

Generally centres adapted well to the new specifications; a lot of lessons had been learned from the January session. The standard was higher on F851, particularly as candidates were more familiar with using sources and stimulus material successfully on topics like parties and pressure groups. The unwillingness to make use of the sources by a large number of candidates on F852 surprised us all, as did the lack of very basic knowledge on the guaranteed questions on the Executive and Legislature. There was evidence also that candidates benefitted a great deal from having just two papers with identical format, and were not faced with three very different types of papers. We have reduced the amount of content which has to be known, but care should be taken to ensure that there is sufficient knowledge there to enable candidates to answer questions in the appropriate depth. There were a significant number of candidates who clearly had no idea at all what collective or individual ministerial responsibility was all about, which led to examiners actually checking the specifications to see whether they were mentioned in them (they are!). We would also like to stress that we are anxious to emphasise the focus on contemporary politics, and candidates should be encouraged to keep as up to date as possible. The expenses scandal proved a boon to many when looking for exemplar material, but care should be taken to ensure that it should be relevant. Moat clearing has little relevance to questions on the EU.

F851 Contemporary Politics of the UK

General Comments

The first summer running of this paper proved to be an excellent discriminator. While fewer candidates did very badly, it proved relatively easy to distinguish between good and bad performances.

That said, on the evidence of this exam, the best advice that teachers can give their students is, 'answer the question'. Many candidates failed to gain the marks that their knowledge and understanding might have merited because they ignored the question and 'wrote about' the topic.

For example, question 1(b) required candidates to discuss the view that parties no longer have an important role to play in British politics, the expectation being that candidates would identify a range of roles played by parties and discuss whether they were still important. Instead, many candidates wrote about the reasons for party decline. They did not do well.

Similarly, when asked to discuss the importance of the factors that may contribute to the success of a pressure group in question 2, examiners wanted candidates to identify a range of such factors and discuss their importance, not simply describe pressure group methods.

Generally examiners are looking for balanced and well-focused answers which correctly identify a number and range of relevant and important factors and communicate these clearly in a logical, fluent and coherent style containing few, if any, errors of grammar, punctuation and spelling. They will also reward candidates who are able to support their arguments with current examples. Candidates who do this will always perform better than candidates who don't.

Finally, under the new examination format, candidates are generally expected to write at greater length than before and this raises the question of whether they should include an introduction or a conclusion in their answers. Neither is actually necessary, but if candidates wish to write them they should ensure that they add something to the essay. Using this criterion, there is no value in introductions which simply outline what is going to be said and conclusions which summarise what has already been said. On the other hand, introductions which - briefly - set the essay in context and conclusions which - briefly - either come down on one side of an argument or broaden its focus may be of value.

Comments on Individual Questions

1 (a) Using the sources and your own knowledge, outline what is meant by a one-party system, a two-party system, a multi-party system and a dominant-party system?

Most candidates were able to describe different types of party system and to provide examples, either from the source or their own knowledge. Some candidates found it more difficult to distinguish between one-party and dominant-party systems and many confused the ability to form a government with party representation in the legislature. Candidates who did not use the source did not gain full marks.

Some candidates spent more time on the question than was warranted by the marks available and consequently had less time to answer the later questions.

1 (b) Using the sources and your own knowledge, discuss the view that political parties no longer have an important role to play in British politics.

The answers to this question were generally disappointing. The main reason for this was because candidates failed to focus on the roles played by parties in British politics. Instead they often tried to explain why parties were in decline or focused on the importance of political parties generally. Candidates who did attempt to answer the question often scored very highly.

2 Discuss the importance of the factors that may contribute to the success of a pressure group.

Most candidates were able to identify some of the factors that might contribute to the success of a pressure group, but the best answers did what the question asked for and considered both a wide range of factors and their relative importance. Simply describing pressure groups' methods without discussing their contribution to any success did not score as highly. There was also some needless defining of pressure groups and outlining of typologies. Centres should note that the IRA, Al-Qaeda and individual retail businesses are not normally regarded as pressure groups.

3 Discuss the view that referendums should be used more often in the United Kingdom.

A very popular question and often done very well. The best answers focused on the precise question - 'Yes, they should be used more often ... No, they shouldn't ...' - and provided lots of evidence from recent referendums to support their arguments. Weaker answers tended to identify a limited range of arguments, did not develop them or were unable to provide examples.

4 How democratic are elections for the House of Commons?

The best candidates used their knowledge and understanding of the advantages and disadvantages of first-past-the-post as a basis for discussing how democratic Westminster elections might be, though the question was actually slightly broader than this. Weaker answers simply provided a list of virtues and drawbacks of FPTP without any attempt to answer the question and often included the case for and against alternative systems.

5 Discuss the view that the decline in turnout at elections is the most important trend in voting behaviour.

Very popular but often badly done because candidates did not answer the question. To do well, candidates needed to identify a number of trends in voting behaviour and then assess their relative importance compared with the decline in turnout. To do this, candidates needed to know what a 'trend' was and what trends there have been in the recent history of British voting behaviour. However, in practice, many candidates simply avoided the question and provided a summary of factors associated with voting behaviour instead, sometimes ignoring turnout altogether. Candidates should be reminded that a model is not a trend as such.

F852 Contemporary Government of the UK

General Comments

Several things surprised us about the scripts. The first was the maturity of many of them; candidates were good at both discussing and dealing clearly with quite complex issues under pressure of time. There were some very high level scripts that showed awareness of contemporary issues, good background knowledge, good communication skills and an ability to grasp abstract issues. On the down side there was a marked reluctance to utilise the information in the sources and a serious lack of knowledge shown when answering some of the compulsory questions. We were very surprised at candidates who knew nothing at all about parliamentary committees or ministerial responsibility. They are in the specifications! Centres should note that this paper is called "Contemporary Government of the UK" and candidates who demonstrate awareness of contemporary issues, for example the current debate on aspects of the constitution (Question 3) will be rewarded. Greater awareness of how marks are allocated (which are laid out in the published markschemes) would also be a great asset to many candidates. There are only AO1 marks for 1 (a) and the balance between AO1 and AO2 in Questions 3-5 is 12-12. Candidates should also be firmly reminded that 16% of the marks are for AO3, the communication skills, and there are full details published in the markscheme on how they are allocated. It might also be an idea to remind candidates that it helps to get AO3 marks if they manage to spell correctly words which are in the question paper, such as "Committee", "Judiciary" and "amendment".

Comments on Individual Questions

1 (a) Using the sources and your own knowledge, describe the role of Public Bill (Standing) and Departmental Select Committees of the House of Commons.

The unwillingness to use the sources was surprising. There were several very obvious points made in the sources, such as "the Public Bill Committee on the Transport Bill" and "vote for required amendment as promised" in Source A and the even more obvious "Select Committees, set up to monitor government departments" in Source C. These were often ignored. Candidates who had little own knowledge but made intelligent use of the sources could often get into Level 3. In some cases there was simply no awareness at all of what committees in the Commons did. Others had excellent knowledge and were well aware of their role and their relationships with whips and the executive. A few got carried away and got involved in detailed discussion, perhaps pre-empting what should have gone into 1 (b). There are only AO1 (factual) marks allocated to 1 (a), so discussion of any sort should be avoided. Concentrate on doing exactly as asked in 'describing' the role. 'Describe' is the sort of command word which makes it clear that only AO1 marks are allocated. The best tended to adopt a two paragraph approach. The first paragraph dealing with Public Bill Committees which would mention a couple of source based points, such as "whips are on ... amendments to the bill are possible" etc and then demonstrate some 'own knowledge' on membership, relationship between the committee and ministers etc. The second paragraph would deal with Select Committees, again starting with points from the source such as "monitoring government departments" (that was a pretty obvious one) and then bringing in own knowledge such as who chairs them and what powers they have. It was good to see several highly topical examples about bankers being interrogated, while others still remembered the David Kelly episode. Those that kept the focus firmly on the role did well. There were a few candidates who got carried away in terms of length and wasted time. It would help a lot if candidates learned to copy the correct spelling of words such as 'committee' and 'amendment' from the question paper.

1 (b) Using the sources and your own knowledge, discuss how well the House of Commons performs its functions.

On the whole this was better done than 1 (a) as it offered more scope and did not rely on knowledge of just one specific area of Parliament such as committees. Again many made no use of the sources at all. There were lots of useful pointers there, ranging from “deal with constituency ...” and “local school buses ... adjournment debate ...” to name but two. The best looked at a broad range of functions, acknowledging any source based origin. The systematic did well; looking at each of a range of functions and commenting as they went along on the ‘how well/how badly’ lines. Most clearly knew what ‘discuss’ was expecting, but at times answers could be both sweeping and very subjective. Others could be very good indeed on the weakness of both the scrutiny and representation functions with excellent use of topical examples. There was perhaps just too much focus on PM questions and too little awareness of some of the relevant aspects of the issue particularly when it came to the work of backbench MPs.

2 Discuss the view that the conventions of collective and individual ministerial responsibility are no longer important.

Two types of candidates did not do well. The first simply had no knowledge at all of either convention (and often did not know what a convention was); the second thought it applied to MPs rather than Ministers, and spent a happy half hour on the dreadful things MPs got up to with their duckhouses and moat clearing. Many knew a lot about what their local MP had been up to and what had been ‘flipped’ and where. Very few actually used the IMR examples of Malik and Blears however. A few caused us some difficulty as they did one (usually IMR) very well indeed and totally ignored the collective responsibility. There had to be some awareness of both to get into Level 3, however good the knowledge and analysis of the other aspect was. Some lumped both together with a rather vague conclusion at the end which did not make it clear whether the comments applied to one or both of the conventions. The best tended to deal with both conventions separately. They usually started with a very accurate definition, kept the focus firmly on the ‘no longer’ aspect, and had a good range of contemporary examples which applied to Ministers and Cabinet Ministers.

3 Discuss the case both for and against the UK continuing with its unwritten constitution.

Of the optional questions this was by far the most popular and usually well done. There were some who had prepared essays on the sources of the constitution and wrote that. They had little of value to offer. Most had a good grasp of the topic, looked at both sides of the case and were well aware of what was required when it came to ‘discuss’. There were a few outstanding ones who thought a little about the purposes of a constitution before launching into their discussions. That’s sort of answer we are looking for at A2, so it was good to see it here. Some centres were clearly well aware of the current debates on aspects of the constitution, such as the prerogative (although most spelled it ‘perogative’) powers dealing with war and peace and there were some very intelligent discussions there. Some were better at discussing than substantiating their arguments with relevant factual material.

4 To what extent is the UK judiciary independent?

Few did it. Of those that did they were either very good indeed or exceptionally weak and left us wondering why they had done it at all. Evidently some centres do this topic very carefully and thoroughly. The best knew exactly what ‘independent’ meant in this context and had their answers well focused on ‘extent’. Detailed knowledge of the Constitutional

Reform Act was a major asset. Some based their answers on JAG Griffith's work, which in some respects is a little dated.

5 Discuss the UK's role in the decision making processes of the EU.

A minority of excellent ones knew their EU structure and decision making processes very well and also knew exactly what the UK's role was in it. There was a thorough knowledge of the Council/Commission/Parliament/ECJ and a good level of comment. However there were a significant number of scripts which contained little more than xenophobic rants based on prejudice.

Grade Thresholds

Advanced GCE Government and Politics (H495)
 Advanced Subsidiary GCE Government and Politics (H095)
 June 2009 Examination Series

Unit Threshold Marks

Unit		Maximum Mark	A	B	C	D	E	U
F851	Raw	100	74	65	56	47	39	0
	UMS	100	80	70	60	50	40	0
F852	Raw	100	73	63	54	45	36	0
	UMS	100	80	70	60	50	40	0

Specification Aggregation Results

Overall threshold marks in UMS (ie after conversion of raw marks to uniform marks)

	Maximum Mark	A	B	C	D	E	U
H095	200	160	140	120	100	80	0

The cumulative percentage of candidates awarded each grade was as follows:

	A	B	C	D	E	U	Total Number of Candidates
H095	23.4	44.7	61.8	77.6	88.3	100.0	777

777 candidates aggregated this series

For a description of how UMS marks are calculated see:

http://www.ocr.org.uk/learners/ums_results.html

Statistics are correct at the time of publication.

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