

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	4
F853 Contemporary US Government and Politics	6
F854 Political Ideas and Concepts	8
F855 US Government and Politics	10

Overview

This was the first session of online marking for Government and Politics. It went smoothly from a marking point of view and the new format had no impact on student performance, indicating that centres had taken note of the information about the format and prepared their candidates accordingly.

There were encouraging signs, particularly with the growing awareness of the need to keep a focus on contemporary politics in both AS and A2. Students are becoming better at source utilisation at AS and here are some signs that the mandatory topics at AS are getting more careful coverage. Ways to improve are suggested in all the reports, none new particularly, but the critical importance of focus in answers, real awareness of what the precise assessment objectives are and the need to bear in mind the proportion of marks allocated to AO3, are the most obvious.

Given the small number of entries, there is no report for F856.

F851 Contemporary Politics of the UK

General comments

This was the first exam to be marked online and candidates did not seem to experience any difficulty with the new format.

As always, candidates were rewarded for providing direct answers to the questions asked and for doing so in balanced manner, using a range of arguments and evidence. However, candidates with quite a good knowledge of a topic often failed to make the most of what they knew because they wrote 'about' the question rather than answering it.

For example:

- in Q1(a) they wrote about types of pressure group, or pressure group methods, rather than pressure group roles;
- in Q1(b) they wrote about pressure groups and parties but didn't discuss which was now more important;
- in Q2 they discussed party policies rather than party values;
- in Q5 they described reasons for low turnout but offered no assessment.

Examiners give credit if an answer can be inferred from what has been written, but answers which are explicit will always do better.

It is also worth reminding candidates of the importance of revising all parts of the mandatory topics on the specification: a number of candidates were clearly not prepared for a question on basic party values.

Finally, candidates should be reminded of the importance of the 'quality of written communication when answering questions'. Candidates are required to write their answers in continuous prose, paying attention to spelling, punctuation and grammar. In this exam large numbers of candidates could not distinguish between 'number' and 'amount', 'fewer' and 'less', 'infer' and 'imply', 'effect' and 'affect', use apostrophes or plurals (especially 'parties' and 'policies') correctly or spell words like 'receive', 'perceive' or 'view' accurately. Examiners make allowances for the fact that candidates are writing under a degree of pressure, but where such solecisms are frequent and intrusive, full marks (16 out of 100 for the paper) cannot not be awarded for AO3.

Comments on individual questions

- 1 (a)** The best responses correctly identified, explained and provided examples of a range of pressure group roles. To do well on 1(a) questions, candidates should do exactly what the question asks for. In this case lengthy descriptions of pressure group types and methods were not required or credited.
- 1 (b)** Answers that suggested a number of reasons why pressure groups might now be considered to be more important than parties and then gave reasons why this might not be the case were well-rewarded. Answers that described various features of pressure groups and parties but left it to the reader to decide which was therefore the more important did not do as well.
- 2** The specification requires candidates to know the basic values of the main parties. The best answers correctly identified these values and compared them in order to determine whether there was, in practice, any real differences between them. Some candidates concentrated entirely on party policy, and although it was possible to infer an answer from this, it was not what was asked for.

- 3** Few candidates attempted this question. Those who did and who were able to correctly identify the electoral system in question and to discuss its advantages and disadvantages did well, especially when they provided examples from recent Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly elections. Answers about voting systems in general did not.
- 4** Few candidates attempted this question. High marks were gained by those who could clearly identify and explain a number of reasons why fixed-date elections (or fixed-term parliaments) were a good thing and then go on to explain why, equally, they were not. Although it was not necessary to know the details of the 2011 legislation to answer the question, familiarity with the arguments used at the time would have helped.
- 5** By far the most popular question on the optional section of the paper, most candidates were able to suggest a range of reasons for low turnout at elections. The best responses, though, were those that provided convincing, rather than plausible, explanations, supported with examples, and which then went on to assess them.

F852 Contemporary Government of the UK

General comments

It was good to see again an encouraging growth in numbers, although many were clearly retakes from the previous series. The other encouraging sign was much more evidence of intelligent source use on both Question 1(a) and 1(b). It was also good to see much greater awareness of contemporary politics and there was often real awareness of events in the past two to three years. There was much less on Thatcher, and more on Blair and Brown, Cameron and Clegg. Presentation is still an issue, and centres really need to stress to candidates the percentage of marks allocated to AO3. It was surprising to see how many students simply could not copy correctly words like 'committee' or 'responsibility' which were in the sources.

Comments on individual questions

- 1 (a) Very few candidates went much beyond listing what was available in the sources. Some even missed the 'decisions' aspect mentioned in Source A and the 'key decisions' mentioned in Source B. The number who mentioned other roles, like the 'emergency' functions, were small, although there were some very good mentions of the work of COBRA in recent years. Few mentioned the co-ordination role. Some wrote on the merits/demerits of collective responsibility and even more in IMR – neither of which really had much to do with the functions. Some wrote so much about CR and IMR that they used the additional space at the back of the answer booklet. It should be stressed that there are only AO1 marks available for this question. There is no need to embark on a long discussion.
- 1 (b) On the whole there were plenty of sound answers. There was usually good knowledge of prime ministerial powers and it was good to read so many essays which considered the implications that the coalition might have on prime ministerial power. Considered opinion, and there really was quite a lot of it, was that the minute a prime minister got a clear majority again, the days of Thatcher and Blair would return. There were some really good essays which looked at the whole issue in some perspective, while others injected some excellent balance by looking at what some Prime Ministers achieved while at the same time looking at some of the barriers that could arise, ranging from the Murdoch press to backbench revolts.
- 2 There were some strong answers to this question, while at the same time there could be a surprising absence of knowledge on what is a mandatory topic. The best answers covered both the Lords as well as the Commons, and did not just lump both together, and avoided the usual list of roles. While some stressed that Parliament was in theory a sovereign body, they looked at what had happened vis a vis the EU and devolution. There were some good answers which looked at the revising role of both the Commons and the Lords with legislation as well as the developing scrutiny role of Committees. Some seemed to see PMQ as the only means of scrutiny. There were some good comments on the role of backbenchers and there were some impressive answers which brought in recent events covering the coalition and issues with backbenchers of various parties. Those that kept the focus on 'no longer' and had some good knowledge of the contemporary workings of Parliament did well.

- 3** The most popular of the optional questions by far and most found it very straightforward. There were some who just wrote about the Lords – In impressive detail – but we were looking for some comparison, the ‘most important’ being the key part of the question if high marks were to be gained. The most successful tended to spend about a third of their time on looking at the reform of the Lords and commenting on the nature and extent of this reform, and the remainder looking in depth at two or three other changes. Some argued that it was critical as it was the first real major change to the constitution for a long time and therefore set the precedent for what was to follow. Others argued that it did not actually change much, and other changes such as devolution, the Constitutional Reform Act or the Human Rights Act were to have much greater impact. Some were under the impression that we had joined the EU in this period and they tended not to be very successful.
- 4** Not done by many, but usually very successfully. There were some good definitions of what an ‘independent judiciary’ was, and the best then kept the focus very much on ‘extent’ and gave a balanced argument each way. There was usually good knowledge of the implications of the CRA and in some cases some excellent discussions on whether it actually changed much, or was actually more show than substance.
- 5** Again done by few, but it was encouraging to see a growing number of balanced and well informed answers. The best kept the focus on ‘limited’, looking at the various parts of the EU decision making process, such as the Council, the Commission, and Parliament etc and commenting on the degree of influence that the UK, or any member state, had on the decisions made. There were some excellent commentaries on the role that David Cameron had played in recent events in the Eurozone. What could often make marking difficult was that in an otherwise excellent essay there could be a long critique of the ECHR and the harmful effect it was having on the UK, many assuming that it was a central part of the EU.

F853 Contemporary US Government and Politics

General comments

The number of centres entering candidates for this paper remains fairly high which would indicate that taking this module in January seems to be a popular option. There was some indication that candidates had some issues with a fourth question but is an issue which also features with the June cohort. All questions on the paper were attempted in equal measure.

Centres would do well to emphasise the rationale behind each assessment objective. AO1 marks are awarded for detail and examples, preferably relating to contemporary developments in US government and politics. AO2 marks are awarded for arguments which relate to the question. On this paper, most questions required more than a recitation of the traditional, well-versed arguments relating to other questions on the topic in view. Candidates are advised to consider just what each question asks rather than providing pre-packaged essays.

Comments on individual questions

- 1** Congress: Most candidates were able to score highly on question 1(a), with a knowledge of the various types of committees in the Congress and examples, such as the work of the super committee on government debt and the Senate Judiciary Committee, to support their answers. Candidates made good use of the source to outline a range of institutional, constitutional and political reasons why Congress rejects more legislation than it passes.
- 2** The invisible primary: Many candidates were able to access the higher mark bands by discussing the Republican nomination contests in 2011–12. References to Cain and Perry and their problems before the Iowa caucus informed discussion. The best answers emphasised the importance of Iowa and New Hampshire as “make or break” events in the nomination contest and focused on the pre-primary stage.
- 3** Pressure groups: A popular question which posed a challenge. The ability to discuss the extent of elitism in the USA was the key to providing an effective answer to this question. References to the impact of *FEC v Citizens United* and the role of super PACs in the present nomination contest were rewarded.
- 4** The Constitution: This question invited a wide range of possible approaches and many considered the efficacy of checks and balances, redundant amendments such as the 3rd and the problems of amendment along with issues relating to flexibility. Rather like question 3, the key to success was answering the actual question.
- 5** The EXOP: There were some excellent answers to this question which provided and detailed and accurate knowledge of the role played by individual members of the EXOP. Perhaps surprisingly, the part played by the actual institutions such as the NSC, OMB and CEA was less to the fore.
- 6** Political parties: Candidates were generally secure on arguments relating to party decline whilst theories of party renewal were less well known. Those who referred to recent developments such as the passage of health care reforms, the debt ceiling crisis and increased polarisation of the parties in the Congress were rewarded.
- 7** The Supreme Court: Candidates who were able to define the meaning of “political” were able to argue effectively. The constraints upon the Court provided a good framework to establish the counter view that the Court plays more of a judicial role.

- 8** Rights: A knowledge of the Bill of Rights and recent Supreme Court cases for each amendment went a long way to providing an effective answer to this question. Candidates who were able to refer to the roles played by the President, Congress and pressure groups were also able to write effective essays. Developments post 9/11 provided another rich seam to mine for material to use as a springboard for argument.

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 focussed use of political theory, including illustrating their theory based arguments with the views of specific theorists. Candidates are also taking more care over how to answer specific types of questions. This was especially true with regards to the comparison style questions. There were far fewer answers that were descriptive in nature, and the very best did present balanced comparisons in their responses. Also a pleasing number of answers established criteria for their comparisons.

The rubric of the paper was followed by all, with each candidate answering the compulsory question and three optional essays. All seven of the optional questions were attempted, with the democracy and authority questions being the most popular. There were very few short final answers, indicating that candidates are becoming better at allocating the correct amount of time to be spent on each question.

Comments on individual questions

- 1 (a) Good answers were able to outline a full meaning of conservatism, highlighting key values. Use was made of the source material, although better answers extended the range of focus and included ideas drawn from relevant conservative thinkers. Answers that only focussed upon the types of conservatism needed also to cover key values in order to access the higher mark bands.

This question should take approximately 10–12 minutes to answer, so need not be overly lengthy, especially in comparison to Q1(b).

- 1 (b) Most answers displayed a good working knowledge of One-Nation and New Right forms of conservatism, with the very best appreciating subtle divisions within each form, especially regarding socially conservative and neo-liberal factions within the New Right. Good answers were able to find at least 3 or 4 points of comparison with the best answers also providing balance within their comparison and considering issues of extent of similarity/difference between the two forms of conservatism. As 12 out of the 15 marks available are for AO2, there was no need to provide lengthy examples of the models in practice, nor for long descriptions of the models themselves.
- 2 Questions on democracy always are popular and, overall, answers tended to display at least a sound understanding of the central features of democratic thought. This question focussed on the criticisms of democracy and thus required an assessment of the theoretical problems associated with this system of government. As this is the Ideas and Concepts paper, there was no need for consideration of the practical problems of how democracy operates in its different forms and, thus, the best answers did focus on the generic criticisms of the principles behind democracy. These tended to include problems with majority rule, concerns over the abilities of the citizenship and the inevitability of elite dominance. In order to gain the highest marks for AO2, answers needed to assess the criticisms and not just describe them. Answers that presented standard arguments for and against democracy did less well than those that directly evaluated the criticisms raised.

- 3 Good answers gave clear definitions of both internal and external sovereignty, although some did struggle with their understanding of external sovereignty. The question required attempts to identify similarities and differences. Very good answers often established criteria for comparison, utilising issues such as the location of sovereignty, its divisibility and necessity for the functioning of the state. Those that looked at similarity though their mutual compatibility also were credited. Answers that were descriptive of the two concepts did less well in terms of AO2 marks.
- 4 Good answers displayed a clear understanding of the meaning of authority, and avoided confusing it with the concept with power. All answers demonstrated familiarity with Weber's typology, ie traditional, legal-rational and charismatic. Good answers adopted a comparative, as opposed to a descriptive, approach. Once again, very good answers adopted criteria for comparing the three types. Issues such as how each type originated, extent of legitimacy and checks upon the extent of authority were often used. The very best answers were balanced in their comparison and considered extent of similarity/difference between the three types of authority.
- 5 Most answers demonstrated a good appreciation of the meaning of liberty and equality, with better answers having a more sophisticated appreciation of the different forms of each concept. This tended to include positive and negative liberty, foundational, equality of opportunity and outcome. This question focussed on compatibility and whereas many answers were able to highlight comparable themes behind the two concepts, the very best adopted ideological perspectives, outlining relative degrees of compatibility and in which particular form of each concept. Once again, for top marks in AO2, answers needed to consider the issue of extent of compatibility, rather than list different ways they were compatible/incompatible.
- 6 Many good answers were able to clearly define civil disobedience, going beyond breaches of law by political protest movements. As this is the Political Ideas and Concepts paper, there was no need for lengthy discussions of civil disobedience style campaigns by pressure groups and protest movements. As the essay required focus upon the arguments against civil disobedience, those answers that presented a list of for and against arguments did not perform as well as those that directly assessed the arguments against. This does not mean to say the ideas of Thoreau, Gandhi, Martin Luther King, etc could not be used in the answers to the question, but for the very best marks in AO2, these ideas needed to be deployed to challenge the criticisms of particularly conservative views on civil disobedience.
- 7 Good answers, in terms of AO1 marks, were able to clearly define social democracy and democratic socialism. A common error was to confuse democratic socialism with Marxism and not appreciate the revision of scientific socialist style beliefs advocated by nineteenth and early twentieth century style revolutionary socialists. For good AO2 marks, answers had to directly compare the two types of socialism, and, once again, the very best answers tended to deploy criteria for their comparison. Issues such as attitudes to capitalism, equality and the state were all relevant here. The very best marks for AO2 were reserved for those that considered the extent of similarity/difference between the two types of socialism.
- 8 Good answers in terms of AO1 marks did provide a detailed definition of religious fundamentalism and were able to outline its different forms. The very best answers demonstrated awareness that religious fundamentalism is not exclusively an Islamic phenomenon, but can be found within all or most of the major world religions. In terms of AO2 marks, answers needed to go beyond an explanation of the importance of anti-modernism, but also consider other pertinent features, such as the translation of a religious code to the operation of politics, adherence to a literal interpretation of a religious text and the acceptance of militancy as a legitimate form of political activity. The very best answers did consider the relative importance of a range of factors, producing a sophisticated assessment of the inter-relationship between each one.

F855 US Government and Politics

General comments

There was quite a significant increase in the number of candidates entered for this paper compared to last year and the performance of the candidates would seem to vindicate the view that taking this module at this time is a viable proposition, worthy of consideration by centres.

Most questions were attempted in relatively equal measure although the question on the protection of rights was probably the least popular. It may be worth reiterating the point made at INSET and in previous reports that rights is a standalone topic on the specification and, given the rapid development of issues relating to the Human Rights Act in the UK and developments after 9/11, centres might consider giving this topic greater emphasis in their teaching.

Comments on individual questions

- 1 Elections: Candidates who referred to developments in the USA such as the role of super PACs after *FEC v Citizen United* ruling and electoral law in the UK had a sound basis for discussion of the key arguments. A consideration of the other factors which influence voting behaviour provided scope for plenty of counter arguments to the assertion in the title.
- 2 Parties: A popular question with the best candidates actually referring to ideology as opposed to policy differences. Essays which included words ending in -ism generally tended to do well. There were few detailed discussions of the forces behind ideological convergence in the USA and the UK, evidence of polarisation and the ideologies of third parties.
- 3 Pressure groups: There were some excellent answers to the question as candidates were able to identify a range of factors supported with examples to illustrate the success and failure of pressure groups. The best answers went beyond the NRA and RSPB to evaluate the impact of the Occupy and Tea Party Movements in the US and questioned traditional views such as the insider status of the BMA given their opposition to the NHS reforms. Contrasts between the differing constitutional and electoral arrangements in the USA and the UK salon invited perceptive comment.
- 4 Rights: Good answers attempted to evaluate the role played by executives, judiciaries, constitutions and bills of rights, pressure groups and the media, alongside the role played by legislatures. Examples were given of rights being threatened and protected by each institution to provide a balanced answer and an attempt was made to identify the most important factors in the protection of rights such as identifying the pivotal role played by judiciaries and culture.
- 5 Constitution: There were some excellent answers to this question which successfully meshed the arguments for and against a written constitution. References to the “half-baked” nature of constitutional reforms since 1997 provided a good basis for relevant discussion.
- 6 Legislatures: In order to answer this question, candidates need details of the party compositions of chambers, electoral systems, ethnic, gender and occupational backgrounds of representatives and knowledge of the various models of representation such as those of trustee and delegate. References to other functions of legislatures were also valid and used by some to illustrate the increased importance of constituency work to MPs in the UK given their limited role in the legislative process.

- 7** Executives: Candidates who paused to consider what constitutes success for a chief executive, such as legislative and electoral success, were able to write an effective answer to this question. A consideration of the success and failures of the Obama administration and issue of expectations versus constitutional constraints was used by some to provide sound basis for analysis and evaluation. The economic crisis provided an opportunity for similar discussion.
- 8** Judiciaries: It was pleasing to read some effective answers to this question. The best answers emphasised the importance of the independence of the judiciary and the rule of law as part of the separation of powers and a system of checks and balances. This needed to take priority over narrative detail surrounding the process and recent appointments. The issue of the social composition of judiciaries was a further area of relevant debate.

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