

GCE 2001

January Series



Report on the Examination

Government and Politics

-
- Unit GOV1 Electoral Systems and Voting Behaviour
 - Unit GOV2 Parties and Pressure Groups
 - Unit GOV3 Features of a Representative Democracy

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Kathleen Tattersall, Director General

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Government and Politics

General Comments

Entry to the initial set of AS examinations was not uniform across all modules with significant numbers sitting GOV1 in contrast to low entries for GOV2 and GOV3. Whilst most observations about candidate performance are thus drawn from the experience of GOV1, comments apply equally to GOV2 and GOV3. Overall this set of examinations elicited an encouraging response from candidates. Very few candidates ignored the rubric and most successfully interpreted and incorporated the stimulus material into their responses.

Time management skills proved a difficult area for some students, since their responses to part (b) of each question, which is worth a maximum of 12 marks, were in as great or greater detail than their responses to part (c) which is worth a maximum of 22 marks. Students are, therefore, urged to treat the mark allocation on the examination papers as a guide to the time they should devote to each part of the questions.

The examination was a successful discriminator of candidate ability in the discipline of Government and Politics. The overwhelming majority of students showed evidence of benefiting from a course of study, with the best displaying impressive levels of subject knowledge and academic skills. The factor which most often discriminated between good and very good answers was the ability of candidates to argue in a mature manner and to draw conclusions from their arguments.

As might be expected from AS candidates, the level of maturity reflected in academic writing style generally fell short of that observed at A level. Amongst all but the strongest candidates, interpretations tended to be more simplistic in nature and there was less call made upon examples or academic sources. Having said this, a substantial number of the strongest candidates showed remarkable levels of subject knowledge and political realism gained from a short period of study.

GOV1 Electoral Systems and Voting Behaviour

Question One

This question was compulsory.

In part (a) many candidates linked the concept under question to registered or eligible voters and commented on the low turnout in the Welsh Assembly elections. Fewer candidates, however, discussed or commented upon the significance of low turnouts. Only a small minority failed to understand the concept, misunderstanding it as a calculation based on seats won and lost.

In part (b) examiners were pleased by the proportion of candidates which included comparative evidence in their responses, especially referring to Italy, Germany, New Zealand and Israel in assessing the inevitable weakness of coalition government. There was appropriate reference to concepts such as the mandate, legitimacy and political stability. Weaker candidates tended to assume that PR automatically resulted in weak coalition government, whilst stronger ones were able to discriminate and comment successfully on complex, seemingly contradictory examples.

In part (c) a surprising number of candidates confused AV with PR, with a surprising few demonstrating an awareness of the Jenkins proposals. On the other hand, most candidates were able

to comment in an informed way on the differences in voting patterns between PR systems and first-past-the-post. The strongest responses showed an awareness of differences between different PR systems.

Question Two

In part (a) almost all candidates successfully interpreted the stimulus data in arithmetic terms, although fewer linked the patterns of gains and losses with specific groups of core voters.

In part (b) candidates discussed the catch-all concepts with considerable confidence and many were able to place the concept in the context of Labour's electoral support from categories such as class, age and sex. A significant number of candidates challenged any description of Labour as a catch-all party, and presented a competent if not always persuasive argument.

In part (c) disappointingly few candidates were able to explain the significance of the different media in influencing voting behaviour at general elections. Most candidates focused only on the impact of newspapers and in particular on the influence of the *Sun* in 1992 and 1997. Many candidates were able to quote *Sun* headlines, and the strongest answers discussed press influence in the context of the possible growth in the importance of short-term factors on voting patterns. In this respect, the most discussed topics were volatility and dealignment in voting behaviour. Other candidates discussed the significance of television with a handful of candidates mentioned the 'new' electronic media and their likely significance. A good number of candidates incorporated appropriate concepts into their responses, referring in particular to agenda-setting, new-management and the role of spin doctors.

A large proportion of responses compared the significance of media influence with other factors that might influence voting, such as age or sex. There were some sophisticated arguments regarding the relationship between public opinion and press partisanship.

Question Three

In part (a) almost all candidates discussed successfully the increasing use of referendums drawing from examples mentioned in the stimulus as well as other examples.

In part (b) most candidates demonstrated a sound level of knowledge and understanding regarding referendums as a means of increasing participation and widening democracy. Many introduced other factors into the discussions, such as the significance of the level of turnout, the nature of the referendum question and the level of public education. Although recent referendums were referred to, surprisingly few responses made effective use of them as evidence in arriving at the judgement called for in the set question.

In part (c) the question was generally well answered with candidates referring to issues or concepts such as representative democracy, theory of the mandate, legitimacy and elective dictatorship. As above, more candidates would have strengthened their answers through referring to or drawing upon examples to substantiate or illuminate their points and arguments.

GOV2 Parties and Pressure Groups

Question One

This question was compulsory.

Part (a) invited candidates to use the stimulus and explain what is meant by the term single-issue politics.

The question in part (b) invited candidates to use their own knowledge as well as the stimulus material to explain the decline of political parties as a means of political participation. Some reference to themes such as the rise of pressure groups and new social movements as well as increasing public cynicism about politics might usefully be referred to. Some candidates might have used this opportunity to discuss wider social change, such as the decline in the class politics and its influence on the significance of political parties.

In part (c) candidates were asked to assess the extent to which pressure groups influence public opinion and political parties, providing an opportunity to frame answers through reference to insider/outsider, indirect/direct, elitist/populist dimensions. Additional argument may have drawn on factors such as ideologies, media intervention, party membership and party programmes.

Question Two

Part (a) invited candidates to refer to the stimulus and explain what was meant by the term Thatcherite values. The stimulus provided direct links to the Conservative Right as well as indirect links to the free market and privatisation of welfare services.

In part (b) the causes of Conservative divisions since 1997 formed the focus of a debate which encompassed issues such as Britain's role in the European Union and participation in the single currency, leadership and welfare policies. The questions provided scope for candidates to discuss the nature of the divisions between the radical Right and Tory wings of the party. Some might argue at the level of issues whilst others might extend the argument to include deeper aspects of ideology and nationalism.

Part (c) invited a discussion concerning Conservative and Labour representing distinctive ideologies. There was scope for useful contextualisation for candidates wishing to display their knowledge and understanding of Conservatives representing Radical and One-Nation tendencies and Labour representing Democratic Socialism and Third Way tendencies, and the relationships between them. Candidates had the opportunity to introduce concepts such as individualism, collectivism, equality, equality of opportunity as well as institutions such as business and trade unions.

Question Three

The stimulus in part (a) focused on pressure group politics inside the European Union and candidates were invited to explain, through reference to the stimulus, the increase in people employed by pressure groups in Brussels.

The focus of the question in part (b) was on the general dominance of business interests in pressure group politics. There was an opportunity to include, for example, resources, interests, access, the impact of countervailing influence in the shape of rivals, and the decline of groups such as the agricultural lobby.

In part (c) candidates were invited to analyse the factors which determine pressure group success. An opportunity existed, therefore, to discuss factors which may influence the success of groups in achieving political goals such as the ability to mobilise support, application of wealth, publicity, communication and media skills, organisational factors, and the relationships between all or some of these in explaining success. Candidates might consider the nature of a group's political goals in terms of realism, their realisation within a political process based on consensus and the willingness of political actors to compromise.

GOV3 Features of a Representative Democracy

General Comments

This was the first sitting of this module and, with only ten candidates entering from two centres, firm conclusions about the examination could not easily be drawn. Of the optional questions slightly more attempted question 2, although question 3 was also attempted by several candidates. Despite the small intake there was a wide mark range suggesting perhaps that a wide ability range may become a feature of AS level entrants in this discipline. Comments on individual questions are:

Question One

Part (a) mainly required the simple extraction of material from the stimulus. It was generally quite well done, although a few candidates wrote overlong answers, which were not justified by the maximum of six available marks.

Part (b) again, generally quite well done. Some good candidates not only used the extract to effect but also drew from own knowledge by, for example, discussing the secretarial role of the Cabinet Office and changes under Blair. At the other extreme some weaker candidates confused the Cabinet Office with the Cabinet itself or with the Prime Minister's Office.

Part (c) answers were of variable quality. The best dealt with both Cabinet and Parliament, as the question asked, explaining how cabinet committees/the Prime Minister/the executive generally etc. essentially took the decisions confirmed by the Cabinet and Parliament. However, weaker candidates tended to focus only on the Cabinet. Some answers rather ingeniously referred to Europe and elections as the source of decisions confirmed by the Cabinet and Parliament, which was not really what the question was about. It is stressed that all questions, and particularly question one, are likely to 'straddle' across different sections of the module specification and centres should be aware of this when preparing candidates.

Question Two

Part (a) required an explanation of the term 'quango'. Using the extract enabled most to answer quite well.

In part (b) the extract contained a good deal of information from which answers to this question could be constructed and most candidates used this quite effectively. Some also used own knowledge to explain why quangos were so widely used in British government. Unfortunately, however, some candidates revealed serious confusion, one mistaking quangos for 'special advisers' and another, strangely, for Compulsory Competitive Tendering. One or two of these latter, despite their confusion, displayed good communication skills and scored quite well with Assessment Objective 3.

In part (c) most of the candidates who knew what quangos were could offer reasons why they may give rise to fears about a lack of democracy e.g. unelected, unaccountable, patronage etc. A few used concepts such as 'democratic deficit' to advantage. None, however, attempted to develop the 'democratic gain' argument (i.e. that quangos draw interested/expert members into specialist areas of public administration; increase citizen participation in the work of government), suggesting that at AS level even the better candidates are unlikely to produce answers as fully balanced and rounded as at A2 level.

Question Three

In part (a) much of the information necessary to answer the question was contained in the extract, deliberately so as devolved government is an emerging area and some texts are not yet fully up-to-date. Most grasped that the Secretaries of State represented Scotland and Wales in the Cabinet, although some weaker candidates confused Parliament and Cabinet and some appeared unaware of what a Secretary of State might be.

In part (b) some helpful information was contained in the extract and most candidates answered reasonably well. If there was a weakness it was a tendency to focus overmuch on the West Lothian question (as opposed to other factors like over-representation of Scottish and Welsh MPs at Westminster.) No candidates suggested that England retained an advantage, for example the overwhelming majority of MPs in the ‘sovereign’ Westminster Parliament represent English constituencies. Again, this supports the view that the responses at this level could be better balanced.

Part (c) was quite well done, especially where material was drawn from the extract. Only one candidate, however, went on to attempt an analysis of why Scotland might have more self government than Wales (e.g. because of the greater strength of nationalism in Scotland, and a higher ‘Yes’ vote in the referendum). Again, this would appear to reinforce the observation made at part (b) above.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

Unit GOV1 Electoral Systems and Voting Behaviour

Grade	A	B	C	D	E	U
UMS	80	70	60	50	40	0
Boundary Mark	56	50	44	38	32	0

Component	Maximum Mark (Raw)	Maximum Mark (Scaled)	Mean Mark (Scaled)	Standard Deviation (Scaled)
Written Paper	80	80	46.8	12.6

Unit GOV2 Parties and Pressure Groups

Grade	A	B	C	D	E	U
UMS	80	70	60	50	40	0
Boundary Mark	56	50	44	38	32	0

Component	Maximum Mark (Raw)	Maximum Mark (Scaled)	Mean Mark (Scaled)	Standard Deviation (Scaled)
Written Paper	80	80	41.0	0

Unit GOV3 The Features of a Representative Democracy

Grade	A	B	C	D	E	U
UMS	80	70	60	50	40	0
Boundary Mark	56	50	44	38	32	0

Component	Maximum Mark (Raw)	Maximum Mark (Scaled)	Mean Mark (Scaled)	Standard Deviation (Scaled)
Written Paper	80	80	36.3	14.0

Definitions

Boundary Mark: the minimum (scaled) mark required by a candidate to qualify for a given grade.

Mean Mark: the sum of all candidates' marks divided by the number of candidates. The mean (or average) mark measures a central tendency of a mark distribution (provided that the distribution is not skewed).

Standard Deviation: a measure of how widely candidates' marks are spread about the mean mark. When expressed as a percentage of the Maximum mark (scaled), small standard deviations indicate that the marks are “bunched” and large standard deviations indicate a wide spread of marks. In general, the marks of approximately two-thirds of all candidates lie in a range of plus or minus one standard deviation about the mean mark.