

GCE 2001
June Series



Report on the Examination

Government and Politics

■ Advanced Subsidiary

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Kathleen Tattersall, Director General

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Government and Politics

General Comments

The overall quality of examination answers at AS level was good, confirming that candidates had been sufficiently prepared for all three units. Candidates scored well in terms of the assessment objectives, displaying sound levels of knowledge and understanding as well as effective communication skills. A minority of candidates, however, were somewhat deficient in examination technique. In such cases too much time was devoted to answering the relatively low mark questions (a) and (b) leaving too little time to tackle the highest mark question (c). Teachers still need to press the point that the mark allocation shown on the examination papers should be treated by candidates as a guide to the amount of time spent on each section of the paper.

Unfortunately for candidates, there was a measure of adverse media reporting at the time, on the matter of AS examinations and whilst there has been little formal reaction from teachers on the integrity of AS Government and Politics in general, there has been some anxiety expressed about Unit 3 “Features of a Representative Democracy”. It was argued that the relatively broad syllabus content of Unit 3 presented more difficulties for teachers preparing candidates for Unit 3 than for Units 1 and 2.

The evidence from the examination scripts did not support this claim since candidates tended to perform comparably on all units. Nevertheless, the concerns raised by centres and the issues arising, will be included as items for discussion at future INSET meetings.

Comments on candidates’ general performance on specific units and questions are set out below.

GOV1: Electoral Systems and Voting Behaviour

Question One

- (a) Most candidates were able to correctly define the term “parliamentary majority”. Here was a case where some candidates went into far too much depth for an answer worth only six marks.

Less successful attempts focused on the difference in seats between Labour and Conservative only.

- (b) Candidates were able to explain clearly the mechanics of tactical voting. The best responses then applied the impact of such behaviour to Liberal Democrat fortunes in the 1997 general election, relating the increased number of seats won with the concentration of the share of the popular vote. The defeat of Michael Portillo was frequently mentioned as a specific example. Some candidates were keen to speculate on the impact of tactical voting on the results of the 2001 general election.

- (c) Most candidates were able to discuss competently the strengths and weaknesses of first-past-the-post although surprisingly few referred to the Jenkins Report or to electoral reform in other parts of the political system.

Some candidates launched into discussion of the pros and cons of STV and list systems in ways not directly related to the set question.

Question Two

- (a) The general notion of swing was explained adequately by the majority of candidates with, as anticipated, very few candidates offering a strictly technical definition.
- (b) Most candidates were able to give at least an outline-to-sound account of the political significance of parliamentary by-elections. Some referred to the impact of governments losing by-elections in terms of the “mid-term blues” and protest voting whilst others mentioned the vulnerability of the Major government to by-election defeats.

Some relied on the source material for their example whilst others were able to cite other important by-election results such as Christchurch.

- (c) Almost all candidates were able to respond to this question with a level of success, with many of the strongest answers referring to the record low turn-out in the 2001 general election. There were many well constructed answers which discussed topics such as apathy, alienation, the impact of sleaze, contentment, the impact of opinion polls, media saturation and the “wasted effort” of voting in safe seats. Some focused specifically on young voters and voters from ethnic minorities as well as mentioning attempts to raise turn-out such as increased postal voting.

Some candidates referred to some of these topics then proceeded to focus too much on the impact of poor weather, popular television programmes and going away on holiday.

Question Three

- (a) Most candidates were able to explain the mechanics of first-past-the-post in a competent manner.
- (b) Most candidates were knowledgeable about STV and could discuss its weaknesses with reference to points raised in the stimulus material.

Some candidates challenged the thrust of the question and argued against the perceived disadvantages, referring to its successful use in Northern Ireland.

- (c) Most candidates could outline with competence the pros and cons of list systems and referred to the differences between “open” and “closed” lists and their impact on elections, parties and government. The strongest candidates explained the use of lists in hybrid electoral systems as well as their role in the Jenkins proposal. Examples cited by candidates included the devolution elections, the European Assembly elections as well as the importance of lists to specific politicians such as Alun Michael.

GOV2: Parties and Pressure Groups

Question One

- (a) This question was generally well answered although some candidates talked around the subject rather than providing a direct explanation.

- (b) This question produced some very good answers which include some historical awareness as well as contemporary understanding of the political parties over recent years. Some middle range answers lost momentum by including references to the Liberals/Liberal Democrats which were much less substantial than the discussion of Labour and Conservative.

The weakest answers made no references to ideology and discussed party preferences in terms of recent events or issues, such as Europe and the Euro. Clearly there was potential to relate relative stances on issues to ideology, but it was not realised.

- (c) Most candidates were able to offer plausible accounts in their answers although there was more vagueness in more answers than observed in other section (c) responses. Some candidates struggled to produce a balanced answer which covered both parts of the set question. Others substituted general “pressure group politics” for “direct action politics”. A few candidates interpreted the question as being about the decline in local government and answered accordingly.

Question Two

- (a) This question was generally well answered with a very high proportion offering answers which might have been expected of good A level candidates. A surprisingly high proportion of students wrote enthusiastically about “spin” and media management, citing examples of relevant personnel. Again, this raised questions in the minds of examiners about the relative standard of A and AS in the context of preparing students and the depth of specification covered.
- (b) Compared with (a) above, this question was less successfully answered. Whilst some candidates answered at an appropriate level of detail, others offered accounts which were too general in nature to score in the highest mark level.
- (c) This question differentiated effectively between strong and modest answers. Some of the best answers adopted a clear line of argument and offered persuasive examples to support the case being made. Some chose to combine the rival explanations and did so in a plausible manner.

Weaker answers were characterised by vagueness and relative absence of structure.

Question Three

- (a) This question was generally well answered by an overwhelming majority of candidates. There were no substantial problems, although some candidates could have strengthened their answers by providing an example of an insider group.
- (b) Some excellent answers were produced which provided an analysis of the relationship between pressure groups and backbenchers. Some discussed Nolan and Neill in relevant ways.

Weaker answers were either vague in nature or simply stated the most simple and obvious explanations.

- (c) This question was generally well answered with some very full and informed accounts which assessed the relative importance of different resources in terms of pressure group success. Frequently, answers contained support in the form of relevant examples.

Less successful candidates “twisted” their answers into a discussion of insider and outsider groups with little specific reference to resources.

GOV3: Features of a Representative Democracy

General Comments

This was the first examination of this specification with a sizeable entry – only seven candidates had opted for this particular module in January 2001. In general, most candidates performed well and a significant proportion would have done well at Advanced level.

Comments on individual questions are as follows:

Question One

This covered the European Union, an issue which appears in both 12.1 and 12.2 of the specification. Accordingly, almost all centres appear to have prepared candidates for it. Indeed, the main fault was that, although the specification called for only “main characteristics”, many students showed an impressive detailed knowledge (for example, the detailed provisions of the Treaties of Nice and Maastricht, and the history of British negotiations for entry in the 1960s). Some centres had clearly gone further than the requirements of the specification (by for example, studying the European Court of Justice). Such coverage was not necessary to do justice to the questions asked.

- (a) This was generally dealt with in an acceptable manner and many candidates obtained full marks. A number of students, however, went into quite unnecessary detail; for example, about the intricacies of Qualified Majority Voting.
- (b) This asked for a discussion of the role of the European Commission in policy-making. Most students could provide a convincing answer often drawing parallels with executive and legislative institutions in the UK and placing the Commission’s contribution within the wider policy framework. Even the weaker candidates were generally able to extract something from the source material. Although the *Teachers Guide* stresses that detailed knowledge is not required, again, many candidates offered considerable detail (e.g. about the backgrounds of individual Commissioners and factors governing nominations to the Commission).
- (c) This question asked “how democratic are the main institutions of the EU?” Most candidates had clearly not only studied the EU but had approached it in a manner appropriate for a module on Features of a Representative Democracy. Many candidates explained the criteria they considered appropriate for assessing “democratic” and were able to make a clear distinction between an appointed Commission, an indirectly elected Commission and a directly elected Parliament. Better candidates went further discussing issues such as low turnout in European Parliament elections and the relatively limited influence of the directly elected element (Parliament). Again, however, some went into surprising and unexpected

detail (for example discussing institutions such as the European Court of Justice and even COREPER). Some couched their answers with an impressive grasp of concepts such as democratic deficit and accountability and legitimacy. Inevitably there were some weaker answers but even with these most candidates could extract something of relevance from the extract.

Question Two

This was the more popular of the two optional questions and was generally well answered. Again, however, there was evidence that some centres had engaged in overmuch detail. For example, some answers covered the detailed recommendations of the 1968 Fulton Report, while others quoted from Northcote-Trevelyan.

- (a) This was generally well handled with the source material giving clear direction. Many candidates scored full marks.
- (b) This was also quite well done. The best offered interesting contrasts with the US spoils systems and wrote about developments such as the recent increase in numbers of special advisers. Even weaker candidates usually managed to grasp and develop the point in the extract that, without civil service neutrality, the whole system of representative democracy would be meaningless. A common problem, however, among weaker candidates was to anticipate the answer to question (c). Perhaps at this level candidates need to have emphasised to them the need to read **all** the sub-questions before beginning their answer.
- (c) This was again generally well done. Many candidates were able to explain the advantages that civil servants had in terms of numbers, time, expertise, etc. and to balance these against the authority enjoyed by ministers in terms of policy making. Many were also able to offer policy examples (although some were quite dated – e.g. from Crossman – and often also unnecessarily detailed. Weaker candidates tended to construct a simple “Yes Minister” type of minister/civil service relationship.

Question Three

This was less popular than Question 2 and in most cases, but by no means all, was less well answered.

- (a) This was accessible to most students although some weaker ones confused “councillors” with MPs. Many, however, scored all six marks.
- (b) This again proved accessible to most students who attempted it. The extract gave detailed information about the social background of councillors and even weaker students generally proved able to construct a passable answer from this. Many noted that the Widdicombe Report (from which the source was taken) was now dated and that some attempt had since been made, especially by the Labour Party with the selection of parliamentary candidates, to make elected representatives more socially representative. As with Question 2(b), there was sometimes a tendency to anticipate the answer to question (c).
- (c) The bulk of candidates could distinguish between the demands of political and social representation and better ones had little difficulty in discussing the proposition that elected politicians should be socially representative of the communities which they serve. Quite a number could illustrate their answer with reference to developments such as “Blair’s Babes”.

However, it was surprising that answers to this question, which had partly been set in anticipation that the examination was very likely to be sat shortly after a general election, did not draw more from relevant examples from the election held only six days previously, (e.g. Woodward, and Butler, at St Helens, Keith Vaz one of very few ethnic minority ministers, low turnout amongst young people, continued under-representation of women – especially Conservative women MPs, record number of women ministers in Blair's second government). It is recognised that there would have been little if any time for revision between the general election and the examination but candidates would presumably have been advised to take note of media coverage of the election whilst preparing for the examination. The best candidates clearly did do but it is a pity that more did not.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

Government and Politics

Unit/Component	Maximum Mark (Raw)	Maximum Mark (Scaled)	Mean Mark (Scaled)	Standard Deviation (Scaled)
Module GOV1	80	80	50.5	11.9
Module GOV2	80	80	50.1	11.9
Module GOV3	80	80	48.8	12.0

GOV1 Electoral Systems and Voting Behaviour

Grade	Max. mark	A	B	C	D	E
Scaled Boundary Mark	80	59	53	47	41	36
Scaled Uniform Mark	80	80	70	60	50	40

GOV2 Parties and Pressure Groups

Grade	Max. mark	A	B	C	D	E
Scaled Boundary Mark	80	59	53	47	42	37
Scaled Uniform Mark	80	80	70	60	50	40

GOV3 Features of a Representative Democracy

Grade	Max. mark	A	B	C	D	E
Scaled Boundary Mark	80	56	50	45	40	35
Scaled Uniform Mark	80	80	70	60	50	40

Advanced Subsidiary award

Provisional statistics for the specification as a whole (1966 candidates)

	A	B	C	D	E
Cumulative %	22.6	42.8	63.6	81.4	91.5

Definitions

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

Mean Mark: is the sum of all candidates' marks divided by the number of candidates. In order to compare mean marks for different components, the mean mark (scaled) should be expressed as a percentage of the maximum mark (scaled).

Standard Deviation: a measure of the spread of candidates' marks. In most components, approximately two-thirds of all candidates lie in a range of plus or minus one standard deviation from the mean, and approximately 95% of all candidates lie in a range of plus or minus two standard deviations from the mean. In order to compare the standard deviations for different components, the standard deviation (scaled) should be expressed as a percentage of the maximum mark (scaled).

Uniform Mark: a score on a standard scale which indicates a candidate's performance. The lowest uniform mark for grade A is always 80% of the maximum uniform mark for the unit, similarly grade B is 70%, grade C is 60%, grade D is 50% and grade E is 40%. A candidate's scaled mark for each unit is converted to a uniform mark and the uniform marks for the units which count towards the AS or A-level qualification are added in order to determine the candidate's overall grade.