



General Certificate of Education

Government and Politics 2150

GOVP2 Governing Modern Britain

Report on the Examination

2009 examination – January series

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Government and Politics

GOVP2 – Governing Modern Britain

Question 1

a) While this was a popular question and many candidates had a lot of information at their disposal, it was surprising how few managed to explain the term 'flexible constitution' effectively. Most candidates simply wrote that the British constitution was unwritten – itself very much a generalisation – and implied that it was, therefore, flexible. While examiners accepted that as a lower level response, they inevitably reserved the highest marks for those answers which explained that the constitution was flexible because it was easily amended. Only a minority explained that even the written sources of the British constitution could be easily changed because all that was required was a simple Act of Parliament. On the positive side there were many candidates who contrasted the easily amended British constitution with others that are less flexible and entrenched, the usual contrast being the US constitution and the difficulties there of amending the constitutional right to bear arms.

b) This question also was not always answered particularly well. The answer to the question, 'why the Human Rights Act may draw judges into the political fray', was clearly rooted in the extract; namely, that judges might need to challenge parliamentary statutes and other acts of government that conflict with the HRA itself. A surprising number of candidates, however, failed to grasp this. Many wrote lengthy explanations of judicial neutrality and independence, and the issues involved in general terms when unelected judges clash with elected politicians, but failed to grasp the central point of the question. Those who did usually illustrated their answers with particular examples. A common misunderstanding, evident even in some otherwise good answers, was that the Human Rights Act is a product of British membership of the European Union and that the EU's European Court of Justice would enforce it if British judges did not.

c) This was by far the best answered of the three part questions of question 1. As with question 1a there was a tendency in some cases for candidates to state simply without elaboration that Britain had an unwritten constitution. However, most candidates could offer some relevant discussion of the view that the UK does not need a written codified constitution, and some answers were very good indeed. Some candidates presented a rather one-sided picture, considering arguments for one view only, and some appeared to think that a codified British constitution would necessarily bring about a clearer separation of powers, entrenched rights or a more demanding amending procedure.(it could include all of these things but would depend upon what those entrusted with drawing up and ratifying a codified constitution felt about these matters). Most candidates, however, were able to present a balanced discussion looking at both sides of the question. As with question 1a) there were many answers that contrasted the British constitution with that in the USA or elsewhere. The main weakness perhaps, was a failure to recognise that the British constitution has, in a number of important respects, such as membership of the EU and the Blair government's devolution arrangements become increasingly 'written'. Overall, however, this was quite a well answered question suggesting that candidates are adapting well to the new specification.

Question 2

a) Most candidates could offer some relevant explanation of the term 'parliamentary sovereignty'. Some did so with one sentence definitions (eg supreme legislative power within the UK), but better answers were those that gave additional information (eg Parliament cannot bind its successor). The very best were those that, in addition, explained the implications for parliamentary sovereignty of developments such as EU membership and devolved government. Given that 5 marks are available for the a) questions fuller explanations will invariably tend to receive more marks than more superficial ones.

b) This question asked for an identification of the reasons why the House of Lords might be considered undemocratic. While many candidates were well informed, the main weakness was that too many produced rather unfocussed general essays about the House of Lords. Thus while some described the composition of the House, they failed fully to identify why this was a problem in a modern democracy through not explaining the legislative powers that the House still retained. Others correctly identified the limited legislative powers of the House of Lords, but failed to explain that this was undemocratic because membership of the House was unelected. The composition of the House of Lords, in fact, was a source of confusion for many candidates. While many were aware that Blair had reformed the House in some way, the precise details were often inaccurate; some, for example, thought that all the hereditary peers had been abolished, others that all the currently sitting life peers had been chosen by Blair. There were, however, a number of well informed answers that focussed firmly on the question – which asked for the *identification of reasons* why the House might be considered undemocratic rather than a full discussion – and these often identified additional factors such as the social and political composition of the House, the presence of senior clergy from just one faith/denomination, and the position of the Law Lords. It is important for candidates to understand that in the new specification b) questions are worth only 10 marks (compared with 22 in the previous specification) and that answers that are not firmly focussed are liable to receive less than full marks and waste candidates' time.

c) This question was also one where candidates generally appeared to be well informed. Most were able to discuss the main roles of the House of Commons, some in quite considerable detail. What, however, many of them lacked was an inability to discuss clearly the contention that none of these roles was performed very effectively. For example, many gave lengthy accounts of the legislative process, without any attempt to evaluate 'effectively'. Others described the pressure that MPs often came under from the whips, but failed to explain how this impacted upon the effectiveness or otherwise of Parliament's roles. Some, in fact, used this as a pretext to develop a prime ministerial government – type answer, with some even managing to confuse cabinet committees with House of Commons standing and select committees. There were, however, a number of very good answers, some of which discussed the effectiveness of the 'Commons against different variables such as size of majority, salience of policy, proximity to an election, political standing of the government and so on. Many of these used the extract imaginatively; indeed some candidates used the 'triggers' in the extract to structure an answer around themes such as the lack of power of backbenchers, the effects of parliamentary procedures, the limited influence of select committees, and the effective control of the Commons by government. The extract is intended to be helpful, and it is unfortunate that many of the weaker candidates failed to use it to best advantage when answering this question.

Question 3

a) Despite its prominence within the specification, and the information given within the extract, relatively few candidates demonstrated a clear understanding of the term 'core executive'. Many answers simply referred to the Prime Minister and Cabinet and then proceeded to write about the often-repeated debate about relationships between the two. Others recognised that term included junior ministers and/or civil servants and some then decided to write about minister-civil servant relationships. Those who made reference to 'the Cabinet system' or 'the centre of government' usually demonstrated better understanding but even many of these failed to mention specific institutions such as the Cabinet Office or actors such as the Cabinet Secretary. There was also little recognition of what the core executive actually does or the interdependence of the various elements within it.

b) This question asked why ministers might feel that special advisers are more likely to support government policies than the permanent civil service. Again, the extract contained useful material for candidates to frame their answers and many candidates used this to draw a distinction between neutral civil servants and handpicked special advisers. Many also drew from the extract to point out that ministers might find it difficult to trust civil servants who had worked with a previous government controlled by a different party. While use of the extract in this way is entirely appropriate – as b) questions usually invite use of 'own knowledge as well as the passage' - many candidates struggled to add further information from their own knowledge and so failed to gain higher level marks. Of those who did many gave a somewhat 'lop-sided' account, writing a good deal about civil servants but ignoring special advisers or vice versa. Some also wrote about civil service/ministerial relationships more generally and subsequently found themselves repeating the material when answering question 3 c). It is crucial, especially as each question now has three parts, for candidates to read all three sub-questions before beginning to answer any of them.

c) This answer, requiring an analysis of the relative influence of civil servants and ministers within government departments, was generally quite well done. Most candidates were able to bring a good deal of own knowledge into their answers and in some case illustrated these effectively by using specific policy examples. Many answers recognised that influence was a variable dependent upon factors such as personality, experience, policy salience and so on. With weaker answers the most common failing was to write a generalised unfocussed essay about the civil service dealing with a whole range of matters – Fulton, Next Steps, special advisers, ministerial responsibility, etc – without any real attempt to draw out the significance of these to the relative influence of civil servants and ministers. Very few answers also drew upon analytical models of civil service/minister relationships. However, the main failing – noticeable even in some otherwise good answers – was the lack usually of any attempt to address 'within government departments'. As a result points such as the tendency of ministers and civil servants in a particular department to work together to defend departmental policy and territory against threats by other departments, or the possibility that civil servants might try to divide junior ministers in a department against the Secretary of State or vice versa, were almost never mentioned. The very few candidates who did address 'within government departments', therefore, tended to score most heavily.

Question 4

So few candidates attempted this question that it is difficult to draw general conclusions, other than the fact that Europe remains an unpopular topic with many centres and candidates. Probably only those candidates who had studied and revised this topic in some depth attempted it and, therefore, answers overall tended to be good, in one or two case extremely good. Comments on this question are relatively brief:

- a) This question required an explanation of the term 'supranational', a key concept specifically mentioned in the specification. While one or two candidates had little of relevance to offer, the few who did produce informed answers usually scored well. The best not only offered a definition, but drew a distinction between supranational and other terms such as intergovernmental, and pointed to supranational institutions within the EU.
- b) The few candidates who attempted this tended to produce good answers. Most pointed to the fact that Qualified Majority Voting in the Council of Ministers could be criticised because it deprived any one country of a veto. Some gave actual voting strengths of particular member states and of majorities required to agree decisions. Some answers also pointed out that countries sometimes forged alliances with other member states to create voting blocks to strengthen their position.
- c) Most candidates saw the reference to 'non-elected bureaucrats' as meaning the Commission and wrote mainly about this in their answers. The very well informed also included other bodies where unelected bureaucrats exercise influence within the EU –such as COREPER - and wrote about these also. Some otherwise well informed candidates appear to have been confused by the term 'bureaucrats' (even though 'bureaucracy' is a key concept referred to in another section of the GOVP2 specification). This may explain why a small number also wrote about other unelected bodies within the EU, such as the Council of Ministers, even though these do not consist of bureaucrats. Examiners accepted such answers on their merits.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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