



General Certificate of Education

**Government and Politics
1151/2151**

GOV3A The Politics of the USA

Report on the Examination

2010 examination – January series

Further copies of this Report are available to download from the AQA Website: www.aqa.org.uk

Copyright © 2010 AQA and its licensors. All rights reserved.

COPYRIGHT

AQA retains the copyright on all its publications. However, registered centres for AQA are permitted to copy material from this booklet for their own internal use, with the following important exception: AQA cannot give permission to centres to photocopy any material that is acknowledged to a third party even for internal use within the centre.

Set and published by the Assessment and Qualifications Alliance.

Government and Politics

GOV3A – The Politics of the USA

General

The majority of candidates responded well to the new format of the examination and there were almost no rubric infringements and few problems with timing. However, there were still some candidates who spent far too much time on their part (a) questions leaving insufficient time to complete their essay responses. Other candidates provided an essay plan which was longer than the essay itself. At the top end of the entry, there were scripts of extraordinary competence, packed with relevant evidence and analysis, often with a clear theoretical perspective and impressive contextual understanding. At the bottom end, there were candidates who seemed to be totally unprepared for the examination and its demands, showing little understanding of US politics and little, if any, development from their AS studies. Also, although good synoptic understanding can, at times, be shown by referring to UK politics, it is not necessary to make a UK connection to every argument that is being made, as was the case in some responses. Indeed, synopticity can be demonstrated in many ways, including drawing on knowledge from other specification areas or of key political debates. Candidates should be encouraged to keep up with developments in US politics, as often the most impressive evidence is the most up-to-date-evidence. The failure to gain marks, however impressive the evidence, was usually related to the failure to focus on the precise demands of the question. There were also several scripts where there was an absence of any backing evidence. Others relied on simple, and often superficial, assertion. There were also some incoherent and illegible scripts.

Question 1

In relation to part (a), many candidates saw this as a generic question on primaries and caucuses, and wrote long responses explaining the different types of primaries or the advantages and disadvantages of caucuses, thus wasting time and failing to gain the available marks. The best responses focused on the significance of these earliest tests of the presidential candidates, especially those which did not just mention “momentum” but explained what the term meant and why presidential candidates needed it in the early stages of the nomination battle. Higher marks were also given to those who gave examples from recent elections such as Bill Clinton in 1992, Howard Dean in 2004, or Rudy Guilliani in 2008. Others referred to Obama’s win in Iowa but his loss of New Hampshire to Hillary Clinton in 2008, thus questioning the “significance” of these two contests. Others questioned the “significance” of these two important but unrepresentative states.

Many candidates attempted part (b) without showing a clear understanding of the actual workings of the Electoral College. This hindered their critical evaluation of this “device” for indirectly electing the president. The best candidates clearly explained how the Electoral College works in practice before attempting to critically evaluate its workings. Most candidates could outline some criticisms, such as the vote distortions that take place, or the Bush win in 2000. However, many failed to explain why the popular vote is distorted or why Bush won in 2000, despite losing in the popular vote. Weaker candidates did not explain its effects on third party candidates, for example by referring to the problem of a dispersed rather than a concentrated vote. Some wrote about third parties being underrepresented in terms of “seats”, or gave arguments that they were “under-represented” without explaining how they could be “represented” in the election of a single executive. “Faithless” or “rogue” electors were often mentioned without adequate explanation. Only the more well-prepared candidates spoke of the

effects of the Electoral College on the campaigns of the candidates, with supporting evidence from recent campaigning. Although most candidates could make some criticisms of the Electoral College, only the better ones addressed the second part of the question. They explained the lack of reform either by explaining why it can be defended as a device for the election of the president or by explaining the difficulties involved in constitutional reform in a federal system, or by both. It was not necessary to go into long detailed suggestions for reform, but it was impossible to reach the higher level marks for this question without addressing the issue of reform.

Question 2

Part (a) was generally done well, with the majority of candidates being able to explain at least some of the electoral difficulties facing minor parties, even if it sometimes ended up looking like a learned list. Stronger candidates were able to illustrate their answers by reference to specific candidates such as Wallace in 1968, Perot in 1992 and 1996, or Nader in 2000 or 2004, with discussion of the impact or lack of impact on the result. Also, higher marks were gained by the use of specific evidence or examples of minor party difficulties. Some candidates, for example, questioned whether having financial backing, as Perot did in 1992, would have made any difference to their electoral success, given the financial and ideological dominance of the two main parties or the working of the first-past-the-post, simple plurality electoral system.

Part (b), demanded a knowledge of the ideological differences between the two US parties and a clear understanding of the words “liberal” and “conservative” in the context of US politics. Many weaker candidates struggled with this question and were unable to focus on these areas of analysis. They often resorted to an simplistic and superficial description of the differences between the parties in terms of social issues such as abortion or gun control, thus demonstrating little understanding of party ideology. Stronger candidates had a clearer understanding of ideological differences, often within a historical context, many explaining the more liberal ideology of the Democratic Party by reference to economic and social ideas and policies, whilst highlighting the comparison with the more socially and economically conservative Republican Party. The best candidates referred to the changes brought about to the Democratic Party from the 60s with the loss of the conservative southern wing of the party. They also referred to the changes brought about to the Republican Party during the Reagan years, the 1994 “Contract with America” and the “conservative revolution” within the party, which alienated many moderates. At the highest levels of response, candidates picked up on the word “clearly” in the question and wrote convincingly of the internal divisions and factions in both parties, discussing their “conservative” and more “moderate” or “liberal” wings. There were some excellent references to the current parties, especially with the election of the more “liberal” Obama and the recent ideological debates over health care reform. There were also references to the current debate in the Republican Party over the meaning and direction of conservatism under the influence of the Tea Party movement and the more hard line conservatives in the party. Frequent references to both Obama and McCain were acceptable if linked to the question, but far too many of these just became a narrative of the events of 2008.

Question 3

In part (a), many candidates demonstrated only a very superficial, understanding of the important psephological terms. Those candidates with a clear understanding were distinguished by their knowledge and usage of key voting behaviour terms such as ‘core voters’, ‘volatility’ and ‘political socialisation’, which achieved high marks. These marks increased when contextual information was introduced, such as the fact that aligned voters are more likely to register and turn out to vote, or that de-aligned voters are more likely to split their ticket when voting, or to abstain. It suggest that many candidates had not understood these terms in their AS studies, and so were even less likely to be able to explain them in an American context.

Many candidates who attempted part (b) may have done so because they saw an opportunity to show their knowledge of why Obama won the 2008 election, and this is what they did regardless of the actual question asked. The focus of the question was on the three long-term social factors that are known to influence the way in which voters vote in the US and candidates who addressed these three social factors did well, especially when they backed up their answers with psephological evidence from recent or past elections. Far too many answered this question without giving a single statistic, often with a very superficial and over-generalised response. Answers which attempted to explain the links between race and voting, gender and voting and religion and voting did better than those who simply described links and made sweeping assertions. Weaker candidates did not get much beyond saying that black voters and women vote Democrat, whilst white voters and men vote Republican. The links between voting behaviour and a voter's religion were usually not explored well at all. Better candidates, apart from explaining links, also knew that voting behaviour changes and voters re-align. They could give examples of both, such as the realignment of the black vote in the 1930s or the changes to the Catholic and Hispanic vote due to social issues such as abortion or immigration. Another common error in this question was to write a few lines on the three specific factors mentioned and then say they were not as important as all the other factors affecting voting behaviour that the candidate wished to discuss. There may have been a few marks in this ploy, but it did not disguise a lack of knowledge and understanding of the question.

Question 4

In relation to part (a), it was apparent that many candidates chose this question because they wanted to answer the essay question on US pressure groups, but did not fully understand the term and the theoretical perspective that it gives to pressure group analysis in the US. For the weaker candidates, it simply meant that there were lots of pressure groups and lots of access points in the US and lots of people joined groups. Stronger candidates had a deeper understanding of the term and looked at its meaning in the US context, through the actions of thousands of competing pressure groups representing varied interests with the potential to influence those with power. The strongest answers referred to the work of Truman and Dahl, and their positive view of the actions of pressure groups, and contrasted this with the work of C Wright Mills and the elite theorists with a more negative view of pressure group power. As a result they were able to access the highest marks.

In response to part (b), weaker candidates showed little, if any, development from their AS studies of pressure groups with more mentions of Fathers4Justice than was desirable for a US paper. Good candidates recognised that not all pressure groups are successful in achieving their aims and were able to identify and discuss the numerous variables involved in that success, such as their resources or the ideology of the party dominating Washington at the time. Some excellent candidates argued that it depended on what was meant by "success" as, to some pressure groups, public awareness in itself was "success", as much as was some change in the detail of the law. However, sweeping public policy reforms were unlikely to be "successful" and this argument was highly credited. As ever with questions on pressure groups, the achievement of high marks often depended on the selection of the evidence and examples. Many candidates stated the fact of the existence of "thousands of US pressure groups", but then provided very few examples of these, such as pro and anti-abortion groups, and sometimes only the NRA. However important the latter may be, there are many other examples of highly active US pressure groups. It is commendable that many candidates are now using specialised terms such as the "revolving door" or "iron triangles", but sometimes there is little evidence that they fully understand their meaning. They are also unable to relate them to the question asked, producing largely generic responses.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

Grade boundaries and cumulative percentage grades are available on the [Results statistics](#) page of the AQA Website.