AQA

General Certificate of Education

Government and Politics 2150

GOVP1   People, Politics and Participation

Report on the Examination

2010 examination – January series

Government and Politics

GOVP1 – People, Politics and Participation

General

Questions 1 (*'Participation and Voting Behaviour'*) and 4 (*'Pressure Groups and Protest Movements'*) were by far the most popular. Fewer candidates tackled Question 2 (*'Electoral Systems'*) and Question 3 (*'Political Parties'*), though far more attempted the latter than in either the January 2009 or June 2009 examination series.

The paper elicited a full range of responses, though relatively few scripts were consistently in Level 1. Most candidates appeared to have little difficulty coping with the format of the paper and there were only a handful of rubric infringements across the entire entry.

As was the case in both examination series in 2009, dividing the time available between the various sub-questions was clearly an issue for some of those sitting this paper. Many candidates wrote far too much in response to the 10-mark part (b) questions, with the result that their 25-mark part (c) responses often lacked the necessary range and depth. A number of candidates also introduced material into part (a) questions that would have been more appropriately deployed in the part (b) or (c) questions that followed.

The majority of candidates appeared to have at least a reasonable grasp of the subject matter and many were able to select and apply knowledge appropriately in order to meet the precise demands of the questions posed.

Question 1

In part (a), many candidates struggled to provide a clear and concise definition of the term in question. Though many were able to lift points from the extract regarding the accuracy of polls (commonly referring to 1992), this reflected a general trend for candidates to offer more in terms of analysis than in explanation/knowledge; a problem, given that all of the five marks available on these part (a) questions are for AO1. At the lower levels of response candidates did little more than repeat statements from the extract verbatim. Higher level responses commonly referred to different types of opinion polls (eg tracking polls, exit polls), mentioned sampling, identified some of the companies involved (eg Ipsos-Mori, YouGov, etc), or gave examples of recent polls from their own knowledge. Many candidates developed the material provided by referring to the bandwagon and boomerang effects and/or the way in which some countries ban opinion polls in the run-up to elections. In some cases this led to discussion which could have been more easily credited if offered in answer to Question 1(b), where there are marks available for AO2.

For part (b), candidates adopted two broad approaches in answering this question. The first saw them picking up on the reference to increased volatility in the extract and using that as a way into the question. This approach often involved candidates introducing the concept of partisan dealignment and referring to the supposed increase in the numbers of 'weak identifiers' or 'floating voters', with the resultant uncertainty making it difficult to predict electoral outcomes. The second approach focused more squarely on the problems associated with polling: inaccuracies relating to sampling errors, respondents lying or being 'economical with the truth' when being polled, and the impact of differential turnout on the accuracy of predictions. A significant number of candidates drifted away from the central theme of why it is difficult to

predict the outcome of elections into a lengthy and often poorly focused discussion of factors affecting turnout or voting behaviour in general terms. The latter ran the risk of drifting on to the territory of Question 1(c).

Higher level responses were characterised by a more explicit focus on the terms of the question and by their use of supporting evidence. For example, many suggested that Labour's 1992 Sheffield Rally contributed to the late swing and poor polling accuracy in that election.

In relation to part (c), many candidates took this question as an invitation to reproduce a generic overview of voting behaviour. Whilst this was in many cases well done, such responses often lacked the necessary focus on the precise terms of the question posed. The majority appeared to take the view that social class was once important (commonly referencing Pulzer) but is no longer so. Only at the higher levels of response did candidates appear to acknowledge the enduring link between social class and voting behaviour.

Many candidates put the influence of social class into context alongside other long term factors (eg gender, geography, age, etc), though surprisingly few went on to assess the relative importance of short term factors. The best answers combined an evaluation of a number of key determinants with references to voting models and those involved in the academic study of voting behaviour (eg Pulzer, Crewe, Denver, etc).

Factual knowledge relating to the influence of social class on voting behaviour was rather patchy, with relatively few candidates being able to offer statistical evidence in support of their analysis. Many answers were disjointed, with even those at the higher levels of response tending to ignore the underlying connections between some of the factors identified (eg social class and geography).

Question 2

Of the four part (a) questions on the paper, this was probably the one which prompted the weakest responses. Whilst many candidates were able to mention the Droop Formula and identify the quota as some kind of 'target' that one needed to secure in order to 'win', few related it to STV, the use of multi-member constituencies or preferential voting. A significant minority of candidates confused the term with 'threshold' and focused on AMS as opposed to STV.

Question 2(b) was similar in format to Question 2(b) on the January 2009 paper – the only difference being that here the focus was on STV as opposed to AMS. Given the accessibility of the question, it was perhaps surprising that candidates struggled far more with this question than with the earlier one, the obvious conclusion being that many candidates are less secure in their understanding of STV than of AMS.

Many candidates wrote in general terms about the way in which the introduction of PR as such might impact on elections at Westminster, with little or no focus on STV. Such discussion generally focused on the perceived ills of coalition government (generally without evidence) and the likelihood of large numbers of BNP candidates being returned to the Commons (far more likely under a list system than under STV).

Where candidates did try to relate the discussion to STV they generally chose to refer to elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly. Here again there was confusion. Few candidates appeared to understand the requirements of 'power sharing' in Northern Ireland and this undermined their efforts to evaluate the impact of STV in the province and apply those lessons to the question posed.

Only at the higher levels of response were candidates able to offer developed analysis on the potential impact of STV in terms of voter choice, proportionality, the altered MP-constituency link, and the increased likelihood of coalition government.

Question (c) was by far the best answered of the three Question 2 sub-questions. At the higher levels candidates considered a wide range of systems: STV and AMS (the two alternative systems mentioned explicitly in the specification), as well as SV and Closed Party List. Some candidates wrote at length on AV+ though such discussion was of limited relevance to the question posed.

Whilst lower level responses tended to be overly descriptive, those at the higher levels on AO2 made some excellent analytical points. The best responses considered not only electoral outcomes (ie 'winners' and 'losers') but also the knock-on effects for those areas governed by representatives elected under such systems. For example, the perceived benefits that Labour-Lib/Dem coalition government brought to the Scots up to 2007, eg free nursing care for the elderly.

Some candidates focused entirely on the use of STV in Northern Ireland, drawing much of what they had to say from the material provided in the extract. Whilst it is perfectly reasonable to use the material provided in this way, as indicated in the generic mark scheme, such a narrow approach rarely saw candidates achieve the higher levels on AO2.

Question 3

In answers to part (a), whilst many candidates were able to define nationalist parties as those which fight for the interests of their nation and provide examples (eg SNP, Plaid Cymru, BNP), relatively few were able to give a more developed definition. Some assumed that all nationalist parties wanted independence (wrong in the case of Plaid Cymru) or were inherently racist or xenophobic. Only at the higher levels were candidates able to refer to the ways in which such parties campaign on issues relating to a shared cultural identity, eg language and culture.

For part (b), at the lower levels of response, candidates tended to address the question 'how successful are minority parties?', as against the one posed. The result was that many part (b) answers focused almost entirely on the successes achieved by such parties at local elections (eg Greens, BNP) and at European Elections (UKIP, Greens, BNP). Whilst such an approach demonstrated relevant knowledge (AO1) it singularly failed to address the demands of the question set.

Higher level responses tackled the precise terms of the question more explicitly by addressing the roles that such minority parties might perform in the UK system, eg representing those who feel abandoned by catch-all parties, providing a vehicle for protest votes against the party in office at Westminster or allowing citizens to vote on a single issue in 'second tier' elections. Many candidates considered concepts such as representation and pluralism in answering this question.

In answers to part (c), although many candidates secured very good marks, most responses were historical in nature – with few moving beyond the launch of the New Labour project in the mid-1990s. Many candidates wrote at length on Butskellism, the post-war consensus, the growing ideological divide in the 1980s (often referring to the 1983 General Election and Labour's manifesto – the 'longest suicide note in history'), and Blair's 'rejection of socialism' from 1994 (with numerous references to Clause 4, triangulation, etc).

Only at the highest levels of response were candidates able to assess the extent to which the main parties were still at the centre of the political spectrum, with some suggesting a growing divide in the field of economic policy in the face of the global recession.

Most candidates appeared to have a lot more to say about Labour's journey to the centre ground than on the various positions taken by the Conservative Party in recent years. Few candidates had anything at all to say about the Liberal Democrats.

Question 4

In part (a), most candidates were able to explain the term effectively, with many deploying John Kingdom's succinct definition: the act of 'seeking the ear of government'. Surprisingly, perhaps, a significant minority of candidates struggled to offer any definition and some even confused the term with direct action (perhaps taking a lead from the focus of the extract). At the higher levels of response candidates were able to develop their explanation by referring to lobbying via a number of different access points. Those adopting this approach often made mention of the Civil Service, ministers and the European Commission as well as introducing the concept of insider groups.

In relation to part (b), the vast majority of candidates took 'the rise of direct action' and 'the increasing importance of pressure group activity at the European Union level' as their two areas for discussion. In the case of direct action, candidates were mostly deploying material from their own knowledge, with many referring to campaigns by Greenpeace, Plane Stupid and Fathers4Justice. When discussing the rise of pressure group activity in Europe most took their lead from the extract, whilst at the same time using their own knowledge to make reference to the rise of Eurogroups and the activities of groups such as Surfers Against Sewage on the European stage.

Significant number of candidates wrote at great length about the insider groups and corporatism/tripartism without explicitly linking such discussion to the question of recent 'change' in pressure group activity. Significant numbers of candidates also deployed historical material (eg, on the suffragettes/suffragists and the Anti-Corn Law League) with little or no attempt to relate it to the demands of the question posed.

In responses to part (c), at the lower levels, many candidates simply looked at a number of pressure groups (most commonly the Snowdrop Campaign, Fathers4Justice, Greenpeace, the BMA and the NFU) and considered whether they were successful, whether they were insiders or outsiders and whether they had money. Whilst this approach was not entirely without merit, such answers were often overly descriptive and very long.

Higher level responses generally took a more overtly analytical approach, assessing the relative importance of a number of factors that might be said to affect pressure group success. Those adopting this approach generally focused on the two areas offered in the title (group status and financial resources) whilst putting the importance of these factors into context alongside other variables (eg group aims, group methods, and the political context).

At the very highest levels of response candidates were able to demonstrate how some of the factors affecting group success are in fact linked: for example, that a group adopting aims which are extreme or out of touch with the popular *zeitgeist* are unlikely to secure insider status. A handful of top level responses took a far more theoretical, though equally valid, approach, by contrasting pluralist perspectives on group influence with elitist and Marxist perspectives.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

Grade boundaries and cumulative percentage grades are available on the **Results statistics** page of the AQA Website.