



**General Certificate of Education**

**Government and Politics 2151**

**GOV3A     The Politics of the USA**

**Report on the Examination**

*2010 examination – June series*

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## **Government and Politics**

### **GOV3A – The Politics of the USA**

#### **General**

The second examination of GOV3A showed that the majority of candidates had prepared well for the paper. Many demonstrated an excellent grasp of the realities of American politics and a clear focus on the questions set, giving analytical answers fully backed up by impressive evidence and examples.

However, there remains a very poorly prepared minority of candidates whose responses are little more than simplistic and superficial assertions, communicated in poor English, with minimal political vocabulary, answering questions that have not been set. In contrast, well prepared candidates showed evidence of serious study, wide reading and research, often going well beyond the available text books. They were able to make impressive references to recent events in American politics and the changes that have occurred, and integrated such evidence into their answers. This was particularly evident in response to Question 04 and the changes to the parties that have taken place in recent years. This use of convincing, up-to-date evidence often distinguishes between good and excellent answers.

As in January, there is some evidence that selective revision is taking place, perhaps with only two or three of the specification topics being covered. Teachers and candidates are strongly urged not to follow this course of action as considerable gaps in knowledge can be revealed. Also, synoptic understanding can be demonstrated by drawing evidence from all four sections of the specification, since the topics do not exist in a vacuum and require contextual awareness and understanding.

For example, in answering Question 08, knowledge of the federal system, separation of powers, entrenched constitutional rights and a more open political culture allowed good candidates to access the highest marks. Moreover, although UK references can be used to demonstrate a wider understanding of political similarities and differences, they should not be artificially introduced for every point made. It is important to stress that higher level 4 marks can be achieved without reference to the UK. However, where relevant and useful, candidates may utilise knowledge and understanding gained from their AS studies. For instance, many candidates referred to the impact of the televised debates in the 2010 UK election (01), the selection of candidates by parties, not primaries (02), the greater significance of third parties in the UK electoral system (03), the top-down party structure in the UK (04), the inability to split ticket vote (unless local and general elections are on the same day) (05), and the relative weakness of pressure groups in the UK due to the differing party and governmental systems (08). Many candidates did gain credit from such relevant examples, but it must be stressed that constant comparison is not necessary as this is not a comparative paper, and candidates should not labour to introduce artificial and unnecessary links. The answer should always be focused on American, not UK, politics.

#### **Topic 1 – The Electoral Process and Direct Democracy**

##### **Question 01**

Weaker candidates over-emphasised the 'significance' of the televised debates whilst presenting little evidence for this. Stronger candidates stressed that they were neither 'great' nor 'debates' and pointed to their emphasis on 'style' not 'substance' (many referring to the

1960 Kennedy/Nixon debates as evidence for this), the fact that they tend to reinforce rather than change voting intentions, and the emphasis placed on sound bites and image rather than policy substance. In their answers, good candidates were able to refer to several past debates where presidential candidates had been 'made' or 'broken' by their performance. Many also questioned 'significance' by pointing out that the 'winners' of the debates did not always go on to win the election. Weaker responses simply described the debates, making no reference to their significance and therefore failing to gain available AO2 marks.

### **Question 02**

Marks for this question related to candidates' ability to understand fully the role of the presidential primaries in the selection of the party nominee before analysing their advantages and disadvantages in this process. Weaker candidates tended to get stuck on descriptions, not always accurate, of the different kinds of primaries – invisible, open, closed, cross-over, New Hampshire, Super Tuesday – leaving little time for any clear analysis of their role. However, many candidates were fully prepared for this question and there were some excellent responses with evidence taken from recent primary seasons, particularly 2008. Although some responses were rather list-like, they did achieve good marks if several advantages and disadvantages were identified, especially where relevant evidence was used to back them up.

For example, several candidates said that primaries were divisive, a relevant argument worthy of credit. However, when they referred to the Clinton/Obama contest in 2008 or the Bush/Buchanan contest in 1992 to demonstrate party disunity that could be damaging at the polls, they achieved higher marks. When they referred to primaries 'weeding out' weaker presidential candidates, an example would have helped. A reference to 'low turnout' is more impressive when backed up by some statistical evidence. A significant number of candidates failed to conclude their essay with a judgement on whether the advantages did outweigh the disadvantages or not, which was the focus of the set question.

## **Topic 2 – Political Parties**

### **Question 03**

Too many candidates could not answer this question without referring, sometimes in great detail, to the *unimportance* of minor parties in US politics. This gained them no marks and was poor use of their time. High marks were gained by the identification of several explanations of their 'importance' such as more democratic choice, alternatives to the two main 'catch-all' parties, raising issues on the political agenda, their effects on the two main parties and their policies, as well as their potential to influence the outcome of elections. Many candidates simply concentrated on the latter point, and high marks were achieved if they were then able to demonstrate this by reference to candidates such as Wallace in 1968, Perot in 1992 and Nader in 2000, and their parties, fully explaining these interventions and the impact they had. Many candidates, however, answered this question without a single reference to any minor parties, whilst others were confused in the evidence, statistical or otherwise, that they presented. Apart from the three figures mentioned above there were also references to the Libertarian Party and the Socialist Party from well-prepared candidates. Only a small minority of candidates referred to the possibility of Electoral College deadlock caused by third party intervention, as almost happened with Wallace's American Independent Party in 1968, followed by Nixon's 'southern strategy' to woo ex-Wallace voters in the 1972 election.

### **Question 04**

This was a popular question, but generally tackled badly by weaker students, many of whom did not seem prepared for its demands. Several of them accepted the two described characteristics

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as correct and thus described the two parties in those terms. This was despite the word 'still' in the question suggesting that the more appropriate response was a challenge to the statement, given the numerous changes to the parties in recent years. Of course, it remains possible to describe the two parties as 'organisationally weak', given the effects of federalism, absence of membership, leaders, national manifestos and four yearly national conventions. However, stronger candidates recognised, and gave evidence of, organisational resurgence in recent years and gave impressive evidence to that effect such as the Brock Reforms, super-delegates, the 1994 Contract with America and the greater input of the parties into candidate finance and the direction of campaigns, as well as growing party discipline and party voting in Congress. Weaker candidates could give no evidence in this area.

Similarly, weaker candidates accepted the description of the parties as 'ideologically similar', saying they were 'separated only by abortion' or 'two empty bottles but with different labels'. This is despite the growing partisanship and ideological cohesion of the two parties, particularly since the Reagan years and the loss of more moderate Republicans, and the Democrat Party's loss of its southern conservative wing. The question demanded evidence and analysis of ideological differences that separate the parties but, sadly, this was lacking from many candidates' responses. The weaker ones put too much emphasis on issues such as abortion and gun control to the exclusion of more significant ideological differences regarding the role of government, especially in the economy. Clearly, there are differences regarding liberal and conservative attitudes to social and moral issues but too many candidates seem to imply that these are the only ones. Excellent candidates gave evidence of the current state of the parties, especially the Republican Party moving more to the right under the influence of the Tea Party movement, and the Democratic Party becoming more Liberal under Obama's premiership and the leadership of Nancy Pelosi and Harry Reid. There was some very impressive analysis of recent voting in Congress on the Health Care Bill and Fiscal Stimulus. There were many references to the fiscally conservative 'Blue Dog Democrats' and their voting, with a pleasing number of candidates relating this to the internal coalition nature of the American parties. Such up-to-date analysis is very impressive to examiners.

### **Topic 3 – Voting Behaviour**

#### **Question 05**

Weaker candidates were generally able to demonstrate some knowledge of the Hispanic vote, yet were unable to focus on 'increasing importance'. Several candidates referred to the 'sleeping giant' of American politics without any explanation of what the term meant or of its implications. Well-prepared candidates did explain this by reference to electoral demographics, including the fact that the potential vote of this group was high because of differential birth rates, and also their concentration in key swing states with high Electoral College votes. As with most voting behaviour answers, marks are higher for those candidates who are able to use statistical evidence in their responses such as the high Hispanic vote of 43% for Bush in 2004 (with explanations) and Obama's 67% in 2008 (with explanations). There was some impressive analysis of the Hispanic vote, therefore, as a key 'swing vote' that both parties had targeted and would have to target in the future as its numerical significance increased. Some excellent candidates referred to attempts to increase Hispanic support such as campaigning in Spanish, a focus on socially conservative issues or Obama's recent appointment of the first Hispanic Supreme Court Justice, Sonia Sotomayor. Several candidates were also up to date on the increasing importance of the immigration issue and its effect on the Hispanic vote in American politics.

#### **Question 06**

Many candidates seem to have been caught out by this voting behaviour question, possibly as a result of selective revision. In particular, the 'why do voters split their ticket' part of the question

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was not answered well by a significant number of candidates. One problem was that the concept of split ticket voting (STV) was not properly understood and consequently no convincing explanations could be given for it. Because many weaker candidates could give no definition of what STV is, their answers became muddled, saying, for example, that it was due to 'apathy' or 'confusion' or a result of mid-term elections, when voters changed their minds. Many candidates stated that American voters split their tickets because 'they can'. This is not an adequate explanation unless answers fully explain *WHY they can*, such as federalism and the separation of powers creating complex ballots with lots of choices of candidates for different offices on the same ballot paper. Again, as with all voting behaviour questions, candidates who can use psephological language and explanations in their responses tend to do better. There were many impressive arguments relating to partisan de-alignment, rational choice theory, the nature of incumbency and issue and candidate voting. The second part of the question tended to be answered better than the first, with references to 'divided government,' 'gridlock', greater checks and balances and the need for bi-partisanship and compromise in law making (all gaining higher marks when explanations and examples were given). Most candidates recognised that consequences could be deemed 'good' or 'bad', depending on differing views of the outcomes of STV. Even at the highest levels, however, there was little, if any, statistical evidence of STV and its fluctuating nature. Many top level candidates, however, discussed the 'Reagan Democrats' of 1980 and 1984 and the highest level of STV recorded in 1972, although they recognised that it had declined in recent years, a factor linked with increasing partisanship.

## Topic 4 – Pressure groups

### Question 07

Weaker candidates were not able to give a convincing definition of direct action as a pressure-group method of influence, leading to difficulties in explaining why it is used by some pressure groups to achieve their aims. Some thought it was lobbying, others thought it was grass roots activities. However, in order to access the higher level marks, candidates had to explain WHY pressure groups used direct action, rather than giving a description of it. Well-prepared candidates understood that it tended to be used by 'outsider' groups with no insider access to decision-makers, or that it was used as a way of indirectly influencing them when other avenues had failed. Many distinguished between peaceful and non-peaceful forms, often citing the actions of the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, or gave more modern examples such as the Million Mom March, anti-war or anti-globalisation protests or the more extreme actions of anti-abortion groups. Several referred to the anti-health care reform and anti-tax demonstrations of the Tea Party movement. There were, examiners noted, far too many references to Fathers for Justice in far too many answers when it was American examples that were required as evidence.

### Question 08

Far too many candidates failed to focus clearly on this question specifically relating to the power of US pressure groups, and answered questions that had come up on previous papers such as reasons for success, or why groups use different methods to achieve their aims or why some groups are more successful than others. Whilst there may have been some marks in such a response, candidates cannot hope to achieve the higher level marks unless they are focusing on the specific question set. The candidates who achieved the higher marks in response to this question concentrated on the factors that made pressure groups *very powerful* in the US, with some comparing their power with that of the relatively weak political parties. Top candidates wrote of the more open political culture, the entrenched first amendment rights, the federal system with a separation of powers within it that led to a multitude of access points (not simply saying that 'the political system has many access points' without explanation), the weaker parties, the influence of pressure groups in supporting (or opposing) candidates and financing

campaigns through Political Action Committees. When they backed up this analysis with examples of powerful pressure groups such as the NRA, AIPAC or the AARP, their marks increased. However, too many candidates failed to do this and offered over-generalised assertions, lacking any convincing evidence and/or examples. References to terms such as the 'revolving door syndrome', 'Iron Triangles' or 'amicus curiae' briefs are becoming more common and the examiners are impressed with such knowledge. However, it must be stressed that these terms do not speak for themselves and must be explained in context with examples. Too many candidates failed to do this. At the same time, it must be noted that some very well-prepared candidates were familiar with recent attempts to curb pressure group power such as the Honest Leadership and Open Government Act of 2007, or they referred to countervailing groups as a curb on excessive pressure group power.

## **Mark Ranges and Award of Grades**

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