



General Certificate of Education

Government and Politics 2151

GOV4A The Government of the USA

Report on the Examination

2010 examination – June series

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Government and Politics

GOV4A – The Government of the USA

General

This was the first examination for the unit and, overall, candidates appeared to be well prepared for the demands of the paper. Indeed, there were very few examples of particularly weak responses. Similarly, there were relatively few Level 4 responses. It has also been noted that the length of answers to some of the 10-mark questions were as long as those for the 30-mark questions. Weaker candidates might have found the former more accessible and therefore wrote more extensively in these responses. It may explain why some candidates were able to gain relatively high marks for the 10-mark questions, while performing more modestly in their responses to the 30-mark questions.

There is some concern about the amount of synoptic material presented in responses by a number of candidates. In some cases, responses were effectively comparative analyses and bore a resemblance to the sort of answers that might have been expected for the comparative paper of the previous (6150) specification. Centres are reminded that candidates may make links with relevant elements of the AS units and the other A2 unit, but that there is no need for candidates to devote whole paragraphs to address synoptic issues. The specification requires candidates to address points relevant to US government; lengthy descriptions of synoptic points will inevitably divert time away from the more pertinent issues and are likely to lead to lower marks.

Topic 1 – The Constitutional Framework of US Government

This proved to be the most popular topic in the examination.

Question 01

This question was generally very well answered. The best candidates were able to address both aspects of the question, dealing with the principle of checks and balances as well as the practice. Many candidates examined the motives of the founding fathers in designing a constitution which aimed to prevent the overconcentration of political power in one person or institution. Furthermore, good examples of checks and balances were provided across the whole of the US political system. A number of candidates restricted their answers to the executive branch and the legislative branch; clearly these responses were not rewarded as well as those that also included the judicial branch. Some responses were unbalanced in that they focused almost wholly on either the principle or the practice and consequently achieved more limited marks. Weaker answers focused almost exclusively on the concept of the separation of powers without looking at checks and balances at all. Clearly the marks for such responses were not high.

Question 02

There were some very good responses to this question. The best candidates were able to make reference to a range of points that dealt with both sides of the debate raised in the question. As well as addressing the rigidity of the US constitution, by examining the relative difficulty in the amendment process, there were some exceptional examples of evaluation. These included examining the judicial interpretation of the US constitution and offering illustrations of key judgements. In addition, points were raised about the vagueness of many parts of the US Constitution and the fact that this has led to political institutions being able to

develop over the centuries. Examples of this were provided for the Supreme Court as well as the executive branch. Other responses mentioned the Tenth Amendment which potentially provides a further example of flexibility. Lower level responses were also able to evaluate the information, but their range was not as extensive. In the main, such responses quoted judicial interpretation as the example of flexibility and the process of constitutional amendment as the example of rigidity. Indeed, a few candidates spent far too much time on the Supreme Court and provided an answer which would have been more appropriate to Question 08. Weaker responses displayed misunderstanding of the amendment process and on occasion confused it with the legislative process. Most candidates offered some synoptic material; this was best when it was presented in passing reference rather than in whole paragraphs.

Topic 2 – The Legislative Branch of Government: US Congress

This was the least popular topic in the examination.

Question 03

This question was generally well answered. The best responses addressed both parts of the question, offering a detailed knowledge of how the process operates. These also highlighted the fact that impeachment was not restricted to the president. Examples of both Clinton in the late 1990s and Johnson in the late 1860s were often cited. Richard Nixon was also mentioned by very many candidates, although some were not clear about whether he was impeached or not. The best candidates were able to identify the distinct roles played in the impeachment process by the House of Representatives and the Senate, whilst weaker candidates tended simply to refer to Congress. Some weaker candidates believed that the impeachment process takes place in the Supreme Court, whereas strong responses mentioned the fact that it is the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court who presides over the Senate impeachment trial of the president. Many candidates looked at the practice of impeachment and examples of it, without really addressing the issue of its significance. Both practice and significance were required for candidates to achieve a high mark for this question.

Question 04

Answers to this question were probably the weakest of all in this examination. There were two distinct parts, dealing with social *and* political representation of the US Congress. While most of the candidates who attempted this question were able to identify points relevant to social representation including gender, ethnicity, and age, there was some difficulty in identifying factors relating to political representation. There were a few very good responses which examined why the dominance of the two big political parties in the US Congress could be seen to undermine the political representation of the US Congress whilst at the same time addressing the idea that these two parties are essentially broad coalitions of opinion which may suggest they are politically representative of opinion. Most candidates, however, avoided this area of analysis. Some chose to interpret political representation to mean the different ways in which the House of Representatives and the Senate are elected and the differences in the size of constituencies for these houses. Such responses often concluded that the House of Representatives was more representative than the Senate, mentioning pork-barrel politics in illustration, and so managed to gain some marks on political representation. Many responses were simply confined to social representation and as such were unable to access many of the marks available for this question.

Topic 3 – The Executive Branch of Government

Question 05

Virtually all responses to this question understood the meaning of a presidential veto. Again, the question has two parts to it and only the best candidates addressed both the operation and the importance of the presidential veto. The most pleasing responses were able to highlight both the regular and the pocket veto and the differences between the two. Such responses usually also mentioned the line item veto which had been deployed by Bill Clinton in the 1990s, but was subsequently declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court. These responses also highlighted the nature of party politics in the US Congress over the years. Other answers were more partial, showing knowledge of the process but less in the way of examples to illustrate the points being made. Weaker responses showed some confusion over the types of veto, often naming the terms incorrectly. Many candidates failed to consider the importance of the veto and merely dwelt on the process. Clearly, these responses could access only some of the marks available for this question.

Question 06

This question posed a challenge to many candidates. There was the temptation simply to agree with the statement in the question and therefore concentrate solely on presidential power in foreign affairs and presidential weakness in domestic policy. Better responses did try to address the question as set and examined presidential power in terms of both foreign and domestic policy. There were a few outstanding answers which attempted to evaluate both the limitations and successes of presidential power, in terms of both foreign and domestic policy. Such responses were able to make use of appropriate examples picked from periods of recent US history as well as providing appropriate contemporary references. It is clear, however, that many candidates were hoping for a different question on presidential power and decided to answer that one anyway. Consequently, there were a number of responses which went through all the different sources of presidential power. These answers might have appeared to the candidates as thorough, but they fundamentally missed the point of the question. There were a number of candidates who appeared to have misread the question. Instead of examining whether presidential power is restricted to issues relating **to** foreign policy, some responses answered the question as to whether presidential power is restricted **in** issues relating to foreign policy. This slight misinterpretation of the question leads to a completely different answer to the one required. Such responses, therefore, concentrated entirely on whether the US president is restricted in the exercise of foreign policy or not. Some credit was given for this, but candidates normally restricted themselves to a Level 2 mark.

Topic 4 – The Judicial Branch of Government: The Supreme Court

Question 07

This question expected candidates to understand that there are two principal aspects to the selection procedure for Supreme Court judges, namely the nomination phase and the confirmation phase. The best candidates were able to identify the significance of such appointments in that they provide the US president with the opportunity to influence public policy for years after his presidency comes to an end. These responses were able to examine the factors that influence the president when nominating a Supreme Court justice. The best responses were also able to examine the confirmation phase and the role played by the US Senate. Examples of those who have been successfully confirmed as well as that of Robert Bork, who failed to become a Supreme Court justice, were highlighted in such responses. Indeed, many candidates were able to mention the names of Bork, Miers and Thomas. Many candidates provided uneven responses to this question which usually contained sound points

about the nomination of judges but then ran out of steam when they came to examine the confirmation phase in the Senate. Weaker candidates struggled to identify who precisely was involved in this process, omitting the role of either the president or the Senate (or sometimes both – one response suggested that it was the Supreme Court itself that manages the process of selecting new justices).

Question 08

There were some excellent responses to this question. Most candidates were able to identify the differences between judicial activism and judicial restraint. The best analysed the extent to which judicial restraint has now taken over from judicial activism. These contextualised the concepts in terms of the various courts since the 1950s, pointing to the activist courts of Warren and Burger and the more restrained courts of Rehnquist and Roberts. These answers then evaluated the extent to which either Rehnquist or Roberts could really be described as restrained, given that both of these courts have strayed into the political arena. These responses were well illustrated with cases to justify the points being made. Some concluded that the terms 'restraint' and 'activism' are relative and potentially emotive terms used by people when they disagree with a particular judicial decision. Lower level answers tended to go along with the implied statement in the question and offered no real evaluation of whether judicial activism has given way to judicial restraint. Weaker responses tended to offer no context or framework into which the terms judicial activism and judicial restraint can be placed. Such answers, which merely looked at examples of one or the other without attempting to examine the dynamics of change over time, failed to address the question fully and could not therefore access many marks.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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