



General Certificate of Education

Government and Politics 1151

GOVP2 Governing Modern Britain

Report on the Examination

2010 examination – June series

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Government and Politics

GOVP2 – Governing Modern Britain

General

The introduction of the new style of examination answer book and the change to the numbering system seem to have been assimilated by candidates without giving rise to rubric infringements. Time management was effective and although there were, as usual, inaccuracies in spelling and grammar, it was gratifying to note the number of references made by candidates to the recent general election and the subsequent political changes resulting from the installation of the coalition government.

The first three topics all attracted a sizeable number of answers, with Topic 3 proving the most popular. Topic 4 was the least popular, although in some centres all candidates attempted it, suggesting that the questions were accessible to candidates from centres that had focused on it in class.

Topic 1 – The British Constitution

Question 01

This question was very poorly answered. Many responses relied on just using the extract and nothing more, while many incorrectly linked the ECHR to the EU. However, most responses showed a general awareness of the Court's role and, where approached correctly, candidates gave some excellent answers.

Question 02

This question attracted a wide range of answers. Weaker candidates merely paraphrased the extract or simply argued that parliament could make new laws. Whilst a number of candidates were able to define parliamentary sovereignty, relatively few correctly linked this with the question. A surprising number tended to focus on Europe and the threats posed by the European Court of Human Rights, or in some cases the EU, to parliamentary sovereignty. Better answers did use the extract to show that courts have no power to strike out laws and, because Cameron himself was planning to repeal the Human Rights Act, that the Act itself could be repealed or amended. There was, however, relatively little information from candidates' own knowledge, for example, about the power of the courts to issue a declaration of incompatibility, cases where this had happened, or about the increasing judicial activism that has led some observers to feel that a threat to parliamentary sovereignty might exist.

Question 03

This question was generally answered more effectively than Questions 01 or 02. A large number of candidates correctly identified and analysed the impact of the Constitutional Reform Act and of the establishment of the Supreme Court and the Judicial Appointments Commission, although too many simply equated this with independence without addressing it explicitly. Better answers often also discussed security of tenure and judicial remuneration as aspects of independence. Referring to the 'impartial' element, many candidates also discussed the background of judges and the impact of judicial review although, again, impartiality itself was often not addressed explicitly. The best answers dealt separately and explicitly with the issues of independence and impartiality. Often these drew useful comparisons with the judiciary in the

USA, and offered theoretical perspectives around the concept of separation of powers. Weaker candidates often lacked clear understanding of the differences between independence and impartiality, and/or offered out of date analyses which ignored recent reforms. While some candidates usefully referred to particular cases to indicate possible bias within the judiciary, examiners were not impressed by references to the Taff Vale judgement which is now more than a century old.

Topic 2 – Parliament

Question 04

This question was generally answered well. Many candidates identified the parliamentary questions as a way of scrutinising the government and holding ministers accountable. Some pointed out that many backbenchers used parliamentary questions as a means of highlighting constituency issues. The best explained that questions could be asked in written form as well as orally, although very few indeed referred to questions in the House of Lords as well as the Commons. The main weakness, perhaps, was that some answers focused only on Prime Minister's questions. Some candidates had little information to offer, confusing parliamentary questions with, for example, debates, select committees and even, in a few cases, the BBC television programme 'Question Time'.

Question 05

This question attracted a wide range of responses. At the weaker end were those who failed to identify the link between dissolution of Parliament and the calling of a general election, although many gained marks by, for example, explaining that power would be taken out of the hands of the Prime Minister, thereby reducing prime ministerial power as well as being more democratic. Some also pointed out that reducing prerogative power would reduce not only the power of the Prime Minister but also that of the Monarch. Those who did make the link with elections usually scored well. Such answers often pointed out that it would remove the power of the Prime Minister to call elections at a time when opinion polls and political circumstances favoured the governing party; also, that it would remove a disciplinary weapon that the Executive could sometimes use against backbenchers. The very best pointed out that, in normal circumstances of majority government, the change would probably make little difference as the Prime Minister could secure support for a dissolution anyway. Particularly impressive was the reference in many answers to the fact that events had been overtaken somewhat by the Coalition Government's proposed fixed term Parliament. At the other end of the spectrum, some answers confused dissolution with recalling Parliament or even, in some cases, abolition, while some went off at a tangent by discussing prime ministerial power rather than the question asked.

Question 06

Responses to this question were mostly competent in their analysis of the ability of Parliament to control government, and some answers were excellent. There was a good deal of informed discussion about whips, parliamentary questions, public bill and select committees, confidence votes, and so on. Most also discussed the role of the House of Lords, although this was not always the case even in some otherwise very good answers. There was also some perceptive conceptual analysis in which terms such as 'executive dominance' and 'elected dictatorship' figured prominently. The main weaknesses, however, were threefold. The first was a tendency to focus on the question as though it was about the growth of prime ministerial power. The second was that too many responses focused on only one side of the question, usually agreeing with the contention in the stimulus and ignoring backbench rebellions, defeats/delays by the Lords and other instances where parliamentary controls are sometimes effective. The third weakness was the fact that few responses dealt with the 'no longer effective' part of the question. Of those candidates who did, however, some were particularly impressive,

contrasting the large majorities enjoyed by Brown and Blair with Major's small majority; Callaghan's Commons defeat in 1979; modern times with the 'Golden Age of Parliament'; even, in some cases, Cameron's coalition with recent one-party majority governments. Overall, this question was answered better than other essay questions on the paper, suggesting that Parliament is a well-covered topic in class.

Topic 3 – The Core Executive

Question 07

This question was generally well answered. Most candidates were able to identify the policy role of government departments (although fewer mentioned administration) and to give examples. Most also recognised that departments were headed by ministers and staffed by civil servants. There was good evidence of current knowledge, with many students giving examples of current coalition ministers. There was less detailed knowledge, however, about ministerial hierarchies within departments (ie junior as well as Cabinet Ministers) or about civil service hierarchies (few, for example, mentioned Permanent Secretaries). A few answers were, however, outstanding, explaining that there were some non-ministerial departments, and also some departments whose administrative work was effectively delegated to Next Steps Agencies.

Question 08

This question was generally answered competently rather than well. Most recognised that the Prime Minister could appoint like-minded individuals to the Cabinet and dismiss them if they challenged him. Only a minority, however, gave examples and, where they did, these were often rather dated and generalised (eg Thatcher removing 'Wets' from her Cabinet). Some stronger responses went further by explaining that there are limits to the powers of patronage, for example, the need to represent various factions within the party, and the advantages of keeping rivals in the Cabinet, thereby binding them into Collective Responsibility. Again, examples were relatively scarce, but a few did point to the 'unsackability' of Brown by Blair, and that some of Blair's ex-ministers are happy to criticise the Iraq war now whilst having kept silent at the time.

Weaker answers often confused membership of the Cabinet with that of the parliamentary party, others confused dismissal with resignation or Cabinet members with special advisers, while others – perhaps predictably – wrote instead (and often at length) about prime ministerial power more widely (and in the process often ignored prime ministerial patronage which should have been the focus of their answer).

Question 09

This question was generally answered well in terms of minister/civil service relationships. There was clear evidence in many responses that the different models of civil servant/ministerial relationships had been well taught and understood by students. Some of the better answers also contained policy and other examples to illustrate the points made, together in some cases with analysis of key variables affecting the relative influence of the two groups. At the weaker end, however, there was often confusion between ministers and MPs, and between special advisers and civil servants. The main problem, however, was the failure, sometimes even in otherwise good responses, to consider the wider context of policy making within the core executive. The few who did, for example by discussing whether the Prime Minister or the Cabinet Secretary has more influence over policy than departmental ministers and civil servants, or the roles of ministers and civil servants within the wider Cabinet system, were inevitably the ones who tended to access the highest level marks.

Topic 4 – Multi-level Governance

Question 10

This question attracted many responses that focused almost exclusively on devolution or, if they did go beyond this, the EU. Relatively few answers dealt with local government and many also failed to mention UK central government, arguably the most powerful of all the various levels. Even fewer explained what actually occurs at the different levels or attempted to explain some of the implications of multi-level governance, such as for parliamentary and national sovereignty or the absence of an English level of government. Overall, this was the least well-answered of the five-mark questions.

Question 11

This question provided stimulus which most candidates used to explain that the Scottish Parliament had passed laws that had made a difference to the lives of people in Scotland. While quite a number went little further than this, those who did often added information about the Parliament's tax-raising powers, and gave examples of policy variations from the rest of the UK. (The absence of university tuition fees was most frequently cited.) However, all too often candidates did little more than this and failed to address 'significant' explicitly. Those who did, for example, by contrasting the powers of the Scottish Parliament with the less significant ones of the Welsh Assembly or the more significant powers of Westminster, inevitably scored the highest marks. Unfortunately, many candidates felt obliged to offer accounts, often tortuous and inaccurate, of the West Lothian Question, and to add to the powers of the Scottish Parliament by claiming that SMPs can vote on English legislation in Westminster. (In some such accounts the imaginary 'English Parliament' yet again figured prominently.) Some also tended to view this question as an opportunity to describe the referendum process.

Question 12

This question was, in general, poorly answered. Many weaker responses did little more than identify some of the main EU institutions, often without offering much information about their key powers and responsibilities. Despite the fact that several prominent EU institutions were mentioned in the extract, many answers ignored one or more of the main institutions; indeed, there were a number of candidates who answered this question without mentioning one single institution. Very few mentioned the European Council or, if they did, often confused it with the Council of Ministers. In terms of analysis, the reference in the question to 'policy-making processes within the European Union' institutions was often totally ignored. Even when answers did address it, detailed analysis was usually lacking. Instead, many candidates wrote at length about 'democratic deficit' which, although mentioned in the extract, was not the focus of the question asked. In fact, amongst some candidates there was confusion as to what the term 'institution' actually meant, with many taking this to mean individual countries within the EU. Other answers wrote about the impact of EU law upon parliamentary sovereignty. This was the least well answered of all the 25-mark questions.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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