



**General Certificate of Education (A-level)
January 2012**

Government and Politics

GOVP1

(Specification 2150)

Unit 1: People, Politics and Participation

Report on the Examination

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Unit 1 (GOVP1): People, Politics and Participation

General

The paper elicited a good range of responses across the four topic areas. Whereas in previous series, marks on some questions had tended to bunch around the mid-range, the item-level (ie question by question) mark-range on this paper was much improved. Though very few scripts were marked at Level 4 consistently across the two topics (ie six questions) tackled, many more students were able to achieve this level on individual questions.

Topic 3 (Political Parties) remains the least popular option with just 17% of students attempting it. Topic 1 (Participation and Voting Behaviour) was by far the most popular, with around 89% of students tackling questions 01, 02 and 03.

TOPIC 1 - PARTICIPATION AND VOTING BEHAVIOUR

Question 1

This question was generally well answered. Most students were able to offer an accurate definition of the term and many were able to develop their explanations effectively using their own knowledge. A significant number of students cited Crewe or mentioned embourgeoisement. Some referred to the efforts of the main UK parties to adapt their manifestos and re-work their image in response to this dealignment.

Question 2

At the lower levels of response, some students simply repeated material that they might easily have included in Q01, without considering the broader relationship between social class and voting. Some sought to discuss other determinants of voting behaviour (particularly what might be termed rational choice factors), often making only passing reference to social class. Such students appeared to be answering a question along the lines of that which has appeared as a 25-mark item in previous examination series, rather than the question posed here. Higher-level responses were generally characterised both by a sense of historical perspective and by an ability to demonstrate an understanding that the relationship between social class and voting was difficult to disentangle from other sociological factors (eg family, geography, partisan identification). Such students were often able to demonstrate an impressive knowledge of the impact of demographic change.

Question 3

At the lower levels of response, students tended to write more generally on the theme of political participation (the focus of some earlier 25-mark questions on this topic) as opposed to focusing on those factors that might account for low levels of electoral turnout. Higher-level responses were characterised both by a clearer focus on the question posed, and by the ability to deploy statistics and other evidence in developing a number of relevant arguments. Coverage of the part played by apathy was generally good, with many students able to cite relevant recent research on the subject. Though students recalled turnout statistics with varying levels of accuracy, most were aware that turnout at recent general elections has been significantly lower than the historical norm. The political alienation and disaffection said to result from the ideological convergence in UK party politics was well to the fore in many responses. Students at the higher levels of response were often able to draw subtle distinctions between apathy and abstention.

TOPIC 2 - ELECTORAL SYSTEMS

Question 4

This was, by some margin, the most poorly answered question on the paper. Few students appeared to have a clear understanding of the term ‘threshold’ in context and very few were able to give examples of thresholds in use in the UK (eg in London Assembly elections) or elsewhere. Even those who recognised that the term might be linked to votes and seats often confused the threshold with the quota used under Single Transferable Vote (STV) or the simple plurality required under First Past the Post (FPTP) - thus defining a threshold as ‘the number of votes you need to win a seat’. Whilst some credit was given to those students who demonstrated an understanding of the term out-of-context (ie the use of thresholds in some referendums), many students produced answers that fell below the Level 1 threshold, thus scoring no marks. Students should be aware that whilst Version 1.0 of the specification only mentioned the FPTP, STV and Additional Member (AMS) systems by name, the current version of the specification refers to the ‘strengths and weaknesses of electoral systems used in the UK’. This would obviously include the system used in UK elections to the European Parliament and the Supplementary Vote (SV) system used in London Mayoral Elections, as well as those systems included under the earlier wording.

Question 5

This question was generally well answered. At the higher levels of response, students clearly understood how the system worked and were able to suggest some of the ways in which its adoption in elections to the Westminster Parliament might affect results. Particularly impressive were the many references to the power that parties would wield in terms of drawing up their lists and what this might mean for the socio-economic makeup of the Commons. Such responses often also drew on the 2009 UK elections to the European Parliament for examples of how parties and voters might be affected by the introduction of this system at general elections. At the lower levels of response, students tended to produce generic responses on the potential impact of introducing Proportional Representation (PR) to Westminster elections, without demonstrating any real understanding of the workings of the closed regional party list system.

Question 6

At the lower levels of response, students routinely reproduced generic responses detailing the arguments for and against referendums, with many of these answers at best only loosely related to the UK. Higher-level responses tended to address the precise terms of the question posed more explicitly. This routinely involved offering some definition of the term ‘representative democracy’ (eg references to the trustee model or Burkean references to the importance of an MP’s ‘judgement’). Surprisingly few students got to grips with the question of precisely what the ‘wider use’ of referendums might mean in practice. Those that did were able to recognise that whilst the phrase might simply mean using referendums more often, it might also involve the use of referendums over a wider range of issues (ie beyond constitutional issues). Those students that did take this line often referred to the use of such devices across a range of issues in countries such as Switzerland and in many US States. Students’ knowledge of past UK referendums was again disappointingly patchy, making it difficult even for the most fluent students to deal with the question effectively.

TOPIC 3 - POLITICAL PARTIES

Question 7

Topic 3 was again the least popular option on the paper with only 17% of students tackling Q07, 08 and 09. Whilst most students realised that the Electoral College played some part in the process by which the Labour Party chooses its leader, surprisingly few appeared confident in their knowledge and understanding. With the theme of internal party democracy being so central to the topic and the system having been used so recently in the election of Ed Miliband, one might have expected students to have a clear understanding of the College's composition, role and function. Instead, many students appeared to be attempting to answer this question entirely on the basis of what had been given to them in the extract.

Question 8

Again, this question was not well answered, resulting in a great deal of lower marks. Whilst students were generally able to offer some criticisms of the system, such criticisms were generally drawn from the material provided in the extract (without further development) or framed in simple or superficial terms (eg 'the system is too complicated'). Some argued that the 12.5% qualification for prospective candidates was too low (without explanation); others maintained that it was too high (again, without explanation). Those students who were aware of the controversy surrounding the election of Ed Miliband often wrote at length about that election in a narrative style, without drawing out any general criticisms of the system that could be taken from that contest. At the higher levels of response, students were able to make relevant points about the role of the unions and the extent to which the votes of ordinary party members were weighted within the Electoral College. Many were aware of the fact that many of those voting for the Labour leader had more than one vote, due to their being a member of more than one of those groups represented in the College. Few students commented on the fact that the MPs play such a crucial role in establishing the field from which the leader is ultimately chosen.

Question 9

Students took two broad approaches when tackling this question. Some focused on the theme of party ideology and policy, arguing that a process of ideological convergence had been driven by a need to win elections above all other considerations. Others looked at the kinds of roles that political parties are traditionally said to play in the UK system, assessing the extent to which other roles (eg political recruitment, policy formation, allowing for political participation) are still relevant. Whilst some students focused almost entirely on the New Labour project, many students were able to draw on an impressive range of material from their own knowledge in support of the arguments advanced. Less impressive was the level of knowledge demonstrated in the area of party organisation and structure. Few students made reference to how the main parties formulate policy, develop their manifestos or organise and execute their campaigns; all areas that would have been relevant here. There was also evidence of a significant minority of students seeking to reel-off apparently pre-learnt responses with little or no attempt to address the precise terms of the question posed.

TOPIC 4 - PRESSURE GROUPS AND PROTEST MOVEMENTS

Question 10

This question was generally well answered. Many students were able to offer an accurate definition of the term, with those at the higher levels of response often making mention of the work of Dahl, Truman and other proponents of pluralist theory. Mention was also made of elites theory, with some citing C Wright-Mills' *The Power Elite*. At the lower levels of response, students sometimes took pluralism to mean nothing more than democracy and proceeded to explain how pressure groups relate to democracy. Some students also took an overly narrow view of pluralism, taking it as meaning little more than countervailing groups. Whilst some answers were largely theoretical, many students linked the theme of pressure group activity to their explanations.

Question 11

Although this question addressed a key theme in the study of UK pressure groups, it was not particularly well answered. A number of students appeared to be unfamiliar with the concept of internal pressure group democracy, with many writing at length about pressure groups and democracy in the broader sense. Those students who spent time describing the insider-outsider typology were rarely able to link such discussion to the question posed. Knowledge of the internal workings of pressure groups was extremely limited and many students also failed to make use of the material provided in the final paragraph of the extract. Only those at the higher levels of response really engaged with the question of who pressure groups represent and the extent to which they consult their members when claiming to speak on their behalf. Where students did do this, they were rarely able to link such discussion to the theme of legitimacy.

Question 12

At the lower levels of response, many students again reproduced pre-learnt generic responses detailing the arguments for and against pressure groups within a democratic system. Such responses made little attempt to get to grips with the idea of whether efficient government was 'strangled' by pressure group activity or what the term 'efficient government' might mean. At the higher levels of response, students were often aware of the origins of the quotation (Douglas Hurd) and were able to link his comments to the Thatcherite/New Right view of pressure groups. Students at this level were also able to address the concept of 'efficient government', often arguing that government is often made more (not less) efficient as a result of the input of those respected insider groups who are knowledgeable in a particular field. Examples were numerous at all levels of response, though those at the lower levels often slipped into lengthy narrative passages detailing various pressure group campaigns. Some of those at the higher levels of response returned to the themes identified in Q10 and Q11 (ie contrasting pluralism, elitism and Marxist perspectives on pressure groups or raising issues of group legitimacy in relation to the government).

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

Grade boundaries and cumulative percentage grades are available on the Results Statistics page of the AQA Website: <http://www.aqa.org.uk/over/stat.html>.

Converting Marks into UMS marks

Convert raw marks into marks on the Uniform Mark Scale (UMS) by using the link below.

UMS conversion calculator www.aqa.org.uk/umsconversion