



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

Government and Politics

GOV3A

(Specification 2150)

Unit 3A: The Politics of the USA

Report on the Examination

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Unit 3 (GOV3A): The Politics of the USA

General

As in previous examination series, at the top end of the entry are scripts demonstrating excellent and sustained focus on the question, with well integrated and relevant examples and up-to-date evidence expressed coherently using political language and concepts. These scripts also demonstrate excellent contextual understanding and knowledge of the realities of American politics. At the bottom of the entry are poorly prepared students who have selectively revised topics, are unable to focus on the precise demands of the question, making sweeping and over-generalised assertions and whose scripts lack coherence and clarity. For many students, failure to actually answer the question as set remains a perennial problem, explaining the failure to access the higher mark levels. There also seems to be, for some students, an over-reliance on pre-prepared revision answers to questions which have previously appeared on the question paper but which have not been asked on the one they are sitting. Excellent answers were distinguished by a clear understanding of the question and did not drift from its key demands. Students impressed examiners when their scripts showed that their studies had utilised the knowledge and understanding that comes from following American politics as it happens and changes, as well as demonstrating evidence of extended and extensive reading beyond the text books and revision guides.

A lot of information given in answers is out of date or wrong as well as irrelevant to the question asked. It is still necessary to advise students that comparative references to their studies of UK politics are not necessary in every answer and may not be necessary at all. It is more important that students understand the links between all four parts of the GOV3A specification to demonstrate a synoptic or holistic understanding than it is to introduce artificial and inappropriate UK references in every answer. Highly selective revision and the lack of understanding of the linkages and overlap of all four parts of the specification is more likely to lead to a lower grade than the lack of any references to the UK. At times analysis and examples of UK politics was more in evidence than that of the US, with a consequent failure to gain higher marks. UK references should be limited to when they are felt to be highly relevant to the question in order to demonstrate clear differences between the politics of both countries. It is possible to gain the highest-level marks for an answer without any reference to the UK within it.

Topic 1 – The Electoral Process and Direct Democracy

Question 1

The majority of students were able to describe the caucus system of delegate selection to a greater or lesser degree, as well as the kind of states that still used this system and why. Far fewer paid attention to the requirement to 'assess its significance' thus lowering their potential AO2 mark. Those that did were able to access the higher-level marks by, for example, questioning its significance because of low turnouts, domination by unrepresentative and often extreme activists of the party base, to the left in the Democratic party and the right in the Republican party, or the far fewer number of delegates to the NPC arising from caucus selection.

Excellent students were able to take their evidence from the 2008 or 2012 caucuses, citing Obama's 2008 win in the Iowa caucus and Santorum's 2012 win giving momentum to their candidacies. Other well prepared students who had followed the 2012 Republican nomination could cite the success of Ron Paul in winning delegates in the caucuses and the possible significance of caucus results in a very tight race. Weaker students turned their

answer into a primaries v caucus answer with a focus on primaries rather than caucuses, or focussed exclusively on the Iowa caucus which gained marks but only at the lower-levels of response.

Excellent context was provided by very well-prepared students who explained the importance of the McGovern Fraser Commission in ending the dominance of caucus selection in 'smoke-filled rooms' and the movement by most states to primary selection after 1968.

Question 2

A popular question with a variable response depending on the students' overall understanding of what the Electoral College is, how it works and why. Many students who did not explain the workings of the Electoral College in an opening paragraph, largely because it was not fully understood, were subsequently unable to clearly demonstrate either its perceived shortcomings, or why it can be seen to work well in the election of a single executive in a federal system, despite its 'anachronistic' nature.

Weaker students had seemingly learned a list of disadvantages of the Electoral College system and simply wrote about these, despite not being able to fully explain why it has distortions, why the result in 2000 happened, why third parties are disadvantaged or what 'rogue' electors were and whether they actually mattered. There was often an over-reliance on arguments such as the over-representation of some states that often lacked clarity of explanation, far too many arguments on the 'unfairness' of the lack of representation of third party candidates without explaining how Perot's 19% of the vote in 1992 could have led to anything other than failure to win the presidency. Very few students referred to the *reasons* for vote distortions or indeed how these could also be seen as an advantage of the Electoral College producing a president with a mandate and legitimacy. The most common reason for the failure to access the higher mark ranges was the failure to address the 'by far the best method' part of the question along with the numerous reasons for its continuation, despite all the criticisms. Several students drifted into overlong descriptions of alternatives and although one of the reasons for the continuation of the Electoral College are the problems associated with alternative methods and the unlikelihood of agreeing a constitutional amendment to bring about change, there was little return for such overlong descriptions in this particular question. For higher marks, the focus should have been more on the advantages of the system used to elect a person to hold the only nationally elected office in the federal USA, and students who did this were highly rewarded.

Topic 2 – Political Parties

Question 3

The majority of students recognised that US parties are 'big tent' 'umbrella' coalitions, internally divided by ideological factions often connected to region. Some took the opportunity to give a potted history of the Democratic Party especially since the New Deal of the 1930s and the changes to the party after the movement to civil rights brought the breakaway of the 'solid south'. While there was some attempt to provide context here, often this took over the answer, leaving little time to focus on explaining the intra-party divisions that exist within the party or to give examples of such divisions. Many students did not get beyond a simple description of a liberal/conservative split, often with Obama as the only example in the response.

Excellent responses knew of the factions such as the liberal Progressive Caucus in Congress represented by Democrats from the more liberal states such as Nancy Pelosi, as well as the Blue Dog Caucus represented by members of Congress from more conservative

states in the south and the mid-west, often referring to their label as ‘Democrats in name only’ or DINOS. Along with this, they also could give examples and evidence of both fiscal and social issues on which these factions divide, citing controversial votes on the bail out, the raising of the debt ceiling and the Affordable Care Act. Far fewer made reference to the ‘New Democrats’ and the Democratic Leadership Council’s attempt to move the party back to the centre ground in the 90s or the more coherent liberalism and partisanship of the party in more recent times. A few students simply wrote of issues which have divided the party, often citing abortion or gun control, which gained few marks.

Question 4

Relatively few answers picked up on the paradox implied in the quotation, as to why a country of such huge size and social, ethnic, racial, religious and regional diversity has only two parties representing that diversity at all levels of government. A good synoptic comparison here could have been with the much smaller and homogeneous UK with 10 parties represented in the Westminster Parliament but almost no one made such a valid point. Many students simply described the two party dominance of the US political system, often at great length, citing the fact that of course it was a system dominated by two parties. However, they then failed to analyse in any convincing way *why* the hugely diverse USA is dominated by only two parties by looking, for example, at its First-Past-The-Post electoral system, Electoral College system, the strength of partisan alignment, the internal coalition nature of the parties leaving little ideological or issue space for other parties to break the mould or the financial and campaigning strength of the two ‘dominant’ parties amongst other valid reasons. Some turned the question into a why are third parties weak and whilst this could be an acceptable approach that gained credit, when it was the main focus of the answer then it was unlikely to have reached top Level 3 or Level 4 marks.

Also acceptable was the approach taken by some students who questioned whether the USA actually was a two party system at all given the huge differences between the parties in different regions, arguing that a 100 party system was a better description, or whether indeed there actually was a one party system as in some areas where one or the other of the two main parties dominated. However, when this became the main or only part of the answer, high-level marks were unlikely. A few students misunderstood the question altogether and relied on a pre-learned response to another question on party decline and party renewal. Such a lack of understanding and focus meant very low marks indeed.

Topic 3 – Voting Behaviour

Question 5

Possibly as a result of selective revision leaving no choice of alternative questions, many students who attempted this question did so with no understanding or evidence of the differences in voting behaviour apparent in the voting patterns of different age groups, nor any credible explanations for these significant age differentials in voting behaviour. One common ploy was to say one sentence relating to age and then launch into a myriad of alternative explanations for differences in voting behaviour in the USA, including race, gender, region and religion and ‘recency’ factors, which were then discussed at length. This usually led to Level 1 marks at the most. Higher-level marks were achieved by those students who had convincing evidence of the voting patterns of different age groups, particularly the young 18-29 and ‘seniors’ over 60 and could give valid and convincing explanations for these differences. Weaker answers simply stated that young people vote Democrat (especially for the ‘youthful’ Obama) and old voters vote Republican (particularly for the ‘older’ McCain) and that voters simply get more conservative as they age. Other better prepared students recognised this as an over-generalisation and referred to the high

level of young voters who supported Reagan in the 1980s and the support for the Democrats from older voters in the 1990s.

There was some excellent analysis relating to the more de-aligned volatility and higher abstention of the young voters, their focus on issues such as jobs and education, plus the likelihood of them having more 'liberal' views on social issues like abortion and gay marriage. This was compared to the more partisan, aligned older voters who grew up in a different period and whose views and traditional values reflected that political generation, who are much more likely to turn out to vote and be concerned with health care, retirement and tax issues. At the top end of the entry there were impressive references to the concept of 'differential turnout' citing the differences in turnout of young and old voters generally, but particularly in the mid terms of 2010 compared to 2008. Such evidence was indicative of understanding the importance of being up to date with electoral statistics and psephological evidence something frequently lacking in many answers on US voting behaviour.

Question 6

There was a very mixed response to this question that related to debates over the causes of high (and variable) abstention in the USA. Some students seemed entirely unprepared for this question and gave simplistic and very superficial explanations for why many Americans do not vote (bad weather, too far away from polling station, too busy, too bored). Most accepted that 'democratic overload' and 'voter fatigue' was the main (and often the only) explanation, despite not having a clear understanding of what the terms meant or what caused them. Most students were able to discuss the concept to some degree, often referring to the permanent nature of campaigning in the USA caused by a plethora of elections, although few indicated the causes of this in the constitutional separation of powers and the federal system of government. There were often accurate descriptions of all the different kinds of elections in the USA at both federal and state level and many legitimately also referred to the primaries and caucuses and direct democratic devices which can add to the idea of 'overload'.

Only the better students were able to give accurate evidence of turnout and the way that it fluctuates depending on the type of election (local, state, primary, mid-term, presidential) and also as a result of the different candidates in and issues surrounding specific elections and whether voters are enthused or engaged by these or not. Weaker answers simply cited 'apathy' or 'disillusionment' as causes of low turnout without considering the factors that may cause voters to be 'bored' 'apathetic' or 'alienated'. The majority spoke of 'apathy' which may have been a perfectly relevant explanation for the very low turnout in 1996, with a thriving economy and no salient issues dividing the voting population, but that could not be given as an explanation for the (much higher) turnout in elections such as 2008.

Students at the higher levels of response gave a multitude of plausible explanations for low turnout (and distinguished between the voting age population and the voter eligible population) referring to the electoral systems in place which may encourage low turnout through 'wasted votes', the Electoral College and the effects of 'safe' states where there may be little point in turning out to vote, the impact of the parties and their candidates at different elections when turnout may be higher or lower. Many referred to the incumbency effect in congressional elections, the lack of choice of parties and ideologies for some voters, the recent gridlock and scandals in Washington politics which can turn off voters and make them distrustful, and the money-dominated campaigns of American politics alongside constant negative advertising and hyper-partisan media. Such wide-ranging variables when discussed by students in their responses were able to gain very high marks especially when backed up by evidence of differential turnout from recent elections. Some students wrote at length on the registration effect on turnout, ignoring the effects of the Help America Vote Act of 2002 designed to minimise problems associated with voting.

Topic 4 – Pressure Groups

Question 7

This question elicited the least well-done answers in this series as many students were unable to focus on the demands of the question asking why US political culture is so conducive to the activities of pressure groups. Here was a question which, unlike many other questions, almost invited a synoptic UK response that compared the more closed system of UK government and lack of access points for pressure groups, but such responses were rare.

Many students saw this question as asking what the functions of pressure groups were, or why people joined them or what methods they used. Stronger answers referred to the importance of US political culture explaining the numerous access points created by the federal system and separation of powers encouraging pressure groups to gain access to influence decision making. They referred to the more open system of government with entrenched 1st amendment rights of freedom of speech, assembly and the right to petition government, leading to a focus on the guaranteed right to demonstrate, protest and engage in widespread political activities in order to influence. Excellent students also wrote of the impact of the weaker party system in the USA which encouraged group activity, as well as the campaign finance system and the initiative process. Some were rewarded for arguing that the increasing complexity of government and regulation of peoples' lives by government, was also conducive to pressure group activity, as was the huge diversity of the US population needing groups to represent that diversity in a pluralist society. However, selective revision may have corralled some students into answering a question that they were not fully prepared for and struggled to answer.

Question 8

As with pressure groups questions on previous papers, many students choose to answer these questions without a solid understanding of the realities of US pressure group politics and without convincing evidence and examples of pressure group activities (other than the ubiquitous NRA) to back up their arguments. Many saw this particular question as a green light to discuss pressure group methods and tactics generally, whether pressure groups were good or bad for democracy or why pressure groups were powerful. Many answers lacked focus on the words 'more successful' in the question and few questioned what was meant by 'success', was it influencing public opinion or influencing legislative activity in their favour for example?

When students did focus on 'successful' and identified the numerous variables involved in achieving success, and examples of it, they gained high marks on this question. Analysis relating to how some pressure groups gained access to decision-makers, such as through campaign contributions through PACs and other ways of supporting (or opposing) candidates, or the extent of their lobbying activities or through the expertise which they could offer to decision makers all of which were more likely to make them 'insider' rather than 'outsider' groups.

Excellent answers not only referred to, but also fully explained the importance of the 'revolving door' and the 'iron triangle' with supporting examples. Students were also rewarded for relating 'success' with such factors as the membership of groups whether large and/or active and why this mattered, or the success of different groups, depending on whether the Republicans or Democrats are controlling government. The strongest responses gave examples of this 'success' such as the NRA supporting and maintaining gun rights,

AIPAC in the support of Israel, the NAACP and civil rights, the AARP in support of Medicare and prescription drugs or the corporate and business lobbies on most economic issues.

Generally marks related to the evidence and examples given and whether they were convincing to examiners or not. There were some excellent references to the lack of success when there were countervailing groups, or when weaker groups were overly reliant on direct action, a sign of outsider status and lack of influence and mainly used when a group was not likely to achieve success by utilising insider methods of influence. Finally it is noticed that many weak students constantly ignore the fact that this is a US module and use examples of pressure groups from their UK studies particularly the ubiquitous Fathers for Justice, but also the NFU and the BMA and this is not recommended.

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>.

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

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