



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

**Government and Politics**

**GOV4A**

**(Specification 2150)**

**Unit 4A: The Government of the USA**

***Report on the Examination***

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## **Unit 4 (GOV4A): The Government of the USA**

### ***General***

Overall students were well-prepared for the demands of this year's examination. As in the examination in June 2011, there were very few really weak responses. There were more Level four responses however. The 2011 report on the examination noted that there was a reduction in the incidence of over-long responses to the 10 mark questions. This trend has continued into 2012. Another issue that was noted in 2011 was of a number of schools and colleges submitting scripts which contained far too much synoptic material. Such responses amounted to comparative analyses, bearing a resemblance to the answers that were required for the comparative paper of the former specification. This problem is no longer a real issue and hopefully there will be no further need to refer to it in reports in the future.

In the 2012 examination, it was apparent that a number of students were not prepared for some of the 10 mark questions. In particular, question 1 and question 7 were answered quite poorly by a number of students. The terms in both of these questions appear in the key concepts section of the subject specification. In responses to the 30 mark questions, a number of students attempted to use pre-learned responses to different questions. It should be noted that in order for students to achieve marks in the higher marking levels, the question as set should have been addressed.

### **TOPIC 1 - The Constitutional Framework Of US Government**

As in previous examination series, this topic was a popular one with students. Its popularity has declined however compared to June 2011.

#### ***Question 1***

This question was straight-forward for most students. It was generally well done with students explaining the importance of the codified constitution as the one authoritative base for all other laws in the USA. Fundamental law is a key concept in the subject specifications and the majority of responses did correctly identify fundamental law as essentially the US constitution itself. Most students referred to the complex process for constitutional amendment and/or the role of the Supreme Court although fewer went on to explain what would happen if there was a clash between federal or state legislation and the provisions of the constitution. Weaker responses spoke exclusively in terms of the Bill of Rights confusing the question with one about fundamental rights.

#### ***Question 2***

This question produced some very good responses and nearly all who attempted it had something of relevance to say. The best answers seen by examiners explained clearly separation, checks and balances and federalism with some going on to mention the Bill of Rights and the amendment process but then went on to look at the ebb and flow of the various constraints, giving examples both for and against. Some went on to mention briefly the impact of other related forces such as the prevailing political culture, public opinion and the media, arguing that Americans were more likely to accept more interventionist policies from the federal government during times of crisis. Some answers were one-sided in just arguing for limited government as a given and most saw unlimited government as 'big' government in some shape or form. Clearly a student might have produced a very convincing, one-sided essay, but will have failed to access the higher range of marks due to

the lack of evaluation in such a response. Some students focused exclusively on federalism, perhaps having prepared for a question on this section of the topic.

## **TOPIC 2 - The Legislative Branch Of Government: US Congress**

The questions on the legislature were more popular than in previous series of the examination.

### ***Question 3***

Nearly all of the students who answered this, could correctly identify the filibuster. There were many examples of very good understanding of the device, offering clear descriptions and evidence of its practice. These responses also included the manner in which a filibuster can be overcome. In order to achieve higher-level marks, students also needed to address the importance of the filibuster. Many responses focused upon it being an important example of checks and balances in the US Constitution. Better responses identified that the importance of the filibuster can depend on the number of seats held by the majority party in the Senate, with very good students highlighting the significance of the filibuster in a time of increasing partisanship in the USA. At the other end of the mark range, a worrying number of responses assumed that the filibuster could be deployed in the House of Representatives as well as the Senate.

### ***Question 4***

There were some excellent responses to this question. Good students could clearly identify the major differences between the two houses of Congress in terms of function and powers as well as status. Such responses were also able to examine 'shared' as well as 'exclusive' powers. Better responses offered a judgment based on this evidence. Many students concluded that the Senate was the more preferable house because, on balance, it was the more prestigious place to be a member of. Better students were able to see value in both houses, with a few very good responses arguing that some members of the House of Representatives might prefer their house because it offers a closer relationship to those who are being represented. Clearly this topic has been very well taught in schools and colleges, with students being able to offer both good levels of knowledge and understanding as well as evaluation and analysis.

## **TOPIC 3 - The Executive Branch of Government**

### ***Question 5***

Most students were able to correctly identify iron triangles. These responses tended to look at these from the perspective of the organised interest that forms one side of the triangle. Better responses attempted to examine iron triangles in relation to the executive branch. Clearly the question required students to offer an evaluation of the significance of iron triangles and most responses were able to examine the manner in which they can undermine the democratic process in the United States, with some arguing that this has pushed up the price to tax payers. The best responses were able to look at how the president may lose control of a policy area if an element of the federal bureaucracy 'goes native' in its relationships with an organised interest and a congressional sub-committee. At the other end of the mark range, there were some students who had no idea of what iron triangles were, with a few assuming that they were synonymous with the relationship between the legislature, executive and the judiciary.

### **Question 6**

The best responses answered the question as set and examined the nature of presidential power from the 1930s but without descending into a straightforward for and against-type response; a few did however succumb and offered a dimensions of/constraints to presidential power response. In order to achieve the higher range of marks for this question, students had to demonstrate that they understood the context of the terms and evaluate them appropriately. Some were very black and white arguing the imperialism ended with Nixon and all since have been imperilled and these had little understanding of the use/constitutionality, or not, of checks like the War Powers Act. The best responses clearly understood where the terms originated and the ebbs and flows of power that have been seen since they were coined.

### **TOPIC 4 - The Judicial Branch of Government: The Supreme Court**

Once again this topic was the most popular on the examination paper

### **Question 7**

Although the majority of students could identify the meaning of entrenched rights, there was a small number who could not. For some of these, the word 'entrenched' seems to have been a problem and because they did not understand the term, the rest was guesswork. Most responses were able to identify the Bill of Rights as entrenched and better students understood the notion that these rights are difficult to alter through the constitutional amendment process. Good responses also went on to examine the work of the Supreme Court in defending these rights. The best responses however questioned the concept of entrenchment and identified the often vague manner in which rights are expressed in the constitution and the latitude this then offers successive generations of Supreme Court justices in interpreting these rights. Some students cited examples such as 'cruel and unusual punishment' to underline their view that the way some rights are expressed, offers the judiciary great power and renders the rights themselves as far from entrenched.

### **Question 8**

This question produced some very good responses that were able to evaluate between the court's political and judicial personas. Some responses focused exclusively on selection and appointment of Supreme Court justices, but many went on to discuss judicial independence, philosophy, strict, loose, active and restrained and balanced the arguments for politicisation with some acknowledgement of their judicial role. One common error was to equate judicial independence with judges not being political and citing Earl Warren as someone who was not political because his judicial philosophy differed from that of President Eisenhower, who appointed him. There was also a tendency to be a little simplistic and black and white, dismissing Warren and Burger as liberal and therefore 'political' in contrast to the alleged restraint of Rehnquist and Roberts, who were 'not political'. While most knew that the court for the most part is an appellate court, very few pointed out that it does choose the cases it is willing to hear and that here judicial conservatism can be very 'political' in its broadest sense while hiding under the convenient garb of original intent. Very few used recent landmark cases like Citizens United given its impact on the US political process although Heller and MacDonald seem in the public domain. Good responses were able to evaluate the role of the court in judicial terms citing the thousands of non-politically contentious cases that make up the bulk of the court's work. The best students offered analysis suggesting that the court can be little other than political give that is called upon to resolve conflicts between political actors in American society, the very definition of politics itself, it might be argued.

### **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](http://www.aqa.org.uk/umsconversion)