



General Certificate of Education

Government and Politics 2150

GOVP2 Governing Modern Britain

Report on the Examination

2010 examination – January series

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Government and Politics

GOVP2 – Governing Modern Britain

General

In general, candidates appeared to find the paper accessible. There were very few candidates who had issues with time management and therefore most completed the required number of items. There were also few, if any, examples of rubric infringement. All of this suggests that the candidates have been well schooled in the format, structure and timing of the examination. Despite this, some candidates spent a little too much time on part (b) questions, sometimes writing as much as for a part (c) question. Responses to part (a) questions were generally answered appropriately with most going beyond the simple one-sentence definition. While spelling and political vocabulary were generally good there are still a number of candidates who are unable to spell correctly key terms like 'Parliament', or even terms mentioned in the extracts.

Overall, Question 1 was probably the most popular question whilst Question 4 was easily the least popular.

With some questions there was a tendency for candidates to write extensively about the USA and to develop answers that were almost comparative in focus. While comparative material is welcomed and will be rewarded where relevant, it has to be remembered that the focus of this unit is Governing Modern Britain. Material from other political systems should be used where appropriate for purpose of analysis and comparison but should not obscure the primarily British focus expected of answers. Candidates studying A2 US units along with AS level units do need to bear this in mind.

Question 1

Part (a) was answered well by many candidates who explained the term 'judiciary' accurately, often giving other relevant information – such as judicial independence and neutrality – to expand their explanation. The main weaknesses, however, were to explain the *role* of the judiciary instead of its nature, or to equate it with the courts. Many, perhaps the majority, of answers surprisingly made no reference to the word 'judges'. While there was much up to date information, such as the recent creation of a Supreme Court, there was sometimes a tendency to assume that this was the only level at which the judiciary operated.

For part (b), while most candidates correctly identified the flexibility of the constitution, coupled with the fact that it is uncodified, fewer went on to explain those sources of the constitution that enable the political system to adapt easily to change. Thus, many failed to explain that a simple Act of Parliament is sufficient to change the constitution while only a small minority referred to the ease with which conventions can be changed or ignored. Those who did, however, usually gave good examples of recent legislation – such as the Human Rights Act and the devolution statutes – that have amended the UK's constitution although, again, conventions were rarely exemplified. Many candidates, perhaps the majority, made relevant and accurate contrasts with the US Constitution, and while this strengthened answers, in some cases there was more US than UK material with the result that the focus of the answer became somewhat blurred.

Part (c) attracted responses of widely varying quality. A large number of candidates, for example, focused on the separation versus fusion of powers argument rather than the specific

demands of the question, and many also failed to identify the specific aspects (fusion of the executive and legislature) that arguably result in government dominance. Many others also wrote about the power of the government, 'elected dictatorship', executive dominance, etc, without any attempt to root the discussion in the 'absence of a separation of powers'. Even those who did attempt to discuss 'separation of powers' too often gave an unbalanced account; for example, by showing how executive/legislative fusion gives the government considerable power over Parliament, but ignoring the extent to which this aspect of fusion makes the government accountable to Parliament and subject to scrutiny by the Opposition and backbenchers. Because of this, 'too much power' was rarely addressed satisfactorily. There was also a tendency to accept uncritically the implicit contention in the question that there is an 'absence of a separation of powers in Britain'. Those who did challenge it, by analysing the implications of the new Supreme Court and the changed role of the Lord Chancellor for judicial separation, were usually amongst the better answers. As with part (b), there was a good deal of comparative material which, when used appropriately, was given credit. However, some responses devoted far too much discussion to the USA and insufficient to Britain, such candidates often giving the impression that they were answering a comparative question.

Question 2

In response to part (a,) there were many strong answers. Candidates were able to explain the term 'backbenchers' accurately, to give examples and to explain aspects of their role. Weaker candidates, by contrast, often tended to identify backbenchers by their physical position in the House and by explaining that they 'were not frontbenchers'. While better candidates usually also explained that 'backbenchers' were not members of the Cabinet, relatively few explained that the term also excluded ministers, and even fewer drew a distinction between Opposition frontbenchers and backbenchers.

Part (b) was generally answered well. Most responses identified the reduction in the numbers of hereditary peers as a factor (although a sizeable number suggested that *all* hereditaries had been removed) and a number also mentioned the Constitutional Reform Act. Some also used the extract to good effect by picking up on the fact that no party in the House of Lords has an overall majority. While answers covering these points usually scored well, quite a number went beyond the requirements of the question by discussing reforms that by no stretch of the imagination could be regarded as 'recent'; such as the 1911 and 1949 Parliament Acts and the 1958 Life Peerages Act. Such answers were not marked negatively, but the candidates concerned invariably found themselves writing over-long answers for a part (b) question. In terms of political vocabulary, the term 'Peers' seems to be poorly understood. Most answers referred instead to 'Lords'; and, in some cases where the alternative term was used, it was written inaccurately as 'Piers'.

Candidates answered part (c) in a variety of ways. Some dealt with socio-economic representation within Parliament, others with constituency and/or party representation. While examiners accepted any valid response, the question asked about Parliament's representative functions (in the plural) and hence the highest marks inevitably went to those candidates who discussed more than one aspect of representation. Some candidates unfortunately appeared unaware of Parliament's representative functions and wrote instead about legislative or scrutiny functions. 'How successfully' was rarely addressed specifically, although the conflict between an MP's duty to represent the constituency on the one hand and the party on the other was often noted. Better answers also often sometimes offered analysis of some of the barriers to constituency representation such as the whips, prime ministerial patronage, MPs' ambition and so on. Some candidates also pointed to the influence of the first-past-the-post electoral system in terms of strengthening the constituency/MP link whilst arguably inhibiting wider socio-economic representation. The electoral system was also identified by some as the reason why

parties often received more or less representation than was justified in terms of strict voting patterns. The question was about Parliament, not just the House of Commons, and those candidates who also discussed the House of Lords often received the highest marks. The main point advanced in this regard was that the House of Lords, being unelected, did not directly represent anyone, although socio-economic and party representation within the House was frequently discussed, as was the fact that the Lords Spiritual were drawn only from the Church of England which was increasingly unrepresentative of the wide diversity of faiths in modern Britain.

Question 3

Part (a) was generally answered adequately by those candidates who understood the meaning of the term. Usually such candidates explained 'bilateral' and offered other relevant explanatory information (eg favoured by Blair, aspect of 'sofa government', enabled speedy decision making, by-passed Cabinet). Candidates unaware of the term's meaning invariably answered badly, often only repeating material from the extract.

Surprisingly, many candidates struggled considerably with part (b). Only a minority mentioned that resignations by ministers in disagreement with Cabinet colleagues was governed by the convention of ministerial responsibility. Those who did, usually also explained that the convention was used to try to ensure that the Cabinet and government presented a united front, although quite a number of candidates appeared to think that the convention applied to all of the governing party's MPs and that it was enforced by threats from the whips, fear of deselection, etc. Very few explained that in normal circumstances ministers usually remain in post but often 'leak' their disagreement or signal it in other ways. Apart from those mentioned in the extract very few examples of ministerial resignations were given. A sizeable number of responses simply argued that ministers should resign as a matter of principle but often did not do so because they preferred the perks of office.

In part (c), many candidates responded as though this was a prime ministerial versus cabinet government question and virtually ignored other policy-making actors within government. Some also developed an over-comparative focus by indulging the 'presidential prime minister' debate. Others failed to focus on 'policy decisions *within government*' by discussing the role of Parliament, backbenchers, pressure groups, etc, in policy making. The best responses were those in which candidates did what the question asked, by discussing the role of not only the Cabinet and Prime Minister in policy making but other actors within the government such as Cabinet committees, No 10 and the Cabinet Office, government departments, civil servants, special advisers and so on. 'Main' was largely ignored, with only the very best candidates attempting to distinguish between policy decisions of different levels of importance. A considerable amount of material was devoted to the decision to invade Iraq, with the view often being expressed that this was taken by the Prime Minister alone despite the combined opposition of both Cabinet and Parliament. There was, however, recognition that policy-making processes can vary from one government to another and that Gordon Brown appeared to be less able than Blair and Thatcher to take the main policy decisions alone.

Question 4

In part (a), most candidates had some awareness that devolution involved the transfer of power from a central to a regional or local level but relatively few could express this with much clarity. The Scottish Parliament, Welsh and Northern Ireland Assemblies were frequently cited as examples of devolution in the UK, and a few candidates also cited the London Assembly, although frequently there was evidence of considerable confusion about the precise powers that have been devolved. Better candidates usually explained that sovereignty remained with Westminster. Quite a number also offered contrasts with federalism although, as with Question 1, such responses sometimes devoted overlong accounts of federalism in the USA.

Candidates in general struggled with Question 4(b). Surprisingly few candidates were able to identify accurately the services provided by local government (health being often frequently, but erroneously, cited). There was also a marked tendency to confuse local government with the role played by local MPs. The question was also often answered in a purely descriptive manner, with candidates appearing to forget that there are AO2 marks awarded on part (b) questions. Thus 'responsible for delivering *important* public services' was largely ignored, with few candidates bothering to consider whether local government services were or were not important. A few did suggest that local government services were important to everyday life, but almost none questioned whether the most important services were controlled by central government or whether local government provision was subject to extensive central control, allowing little local discretion. Knowledge about central/local government relationships appeared to be almost non-existent.

Part (c) was generally answered more convincingly than part (b). The strongest responses often showed an understanding of the different roles for which the various layers of government are responsible, although there was a tendency not to look at the whole picture, but rather to pick out different elements. For example, many candidates focused on the devolved element of multi-level governance but simply ignored the EU. This inevitably tended to preclude not only the highest levels for AO1 from being awarded, but also AO2, as the extent to which increased democracy and bringing government closer to the people is enabled depends to some extent upon the different levels of government being fully recognised. Some candidates developed relevant discussion of England, with the West Lothian Question sometimes being identified as an undemocratic feature, although a non-existent English Parliament still stalks the imagination of many candidates. There was a tendency also, mirroring problems identified elsewhere on the paper, for some responses to focus almost wholly on comparing/contrasting (UK) devolution with (US) federalism with a consequent blurring of focus and a failure to access the highest mark ranges.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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