



**General Certificate of Education**

**Government and Politics 2151**

**GOV3A     The Politics of the USA**

**Report on the Examination**

*2011 examination – January series*

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Set and published by the Assessment and Qualifications Alliance.

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## **Government and Politics**

### **GOV3A – The Politics of the USA**

#### **General**

At the top end of the entry there were some exceptionally impressive scripts, whilst at the bottom end there were far too many scripts that showed little, if any, progression from AS; demonstrating a lack of preparation for the examination.

As in previous examinations, a large number of candidates are giving too much, often irrelevant, UK information in their answers, which does not lead to higher marks. A synoptic approach to answering questions helps candidates see the links between the four specification topic areas. Synopticity also means understanding key political debates, for example concerning the use of referendums, the outcomes of different electoral systems or pressure group activity. Artificial UK references are to be discouraged as candidates may give top level 4 answers without them. They can be useful only when focused and relevant, adding to the candidates understanding of the topic.

There is evidence of selective revision taking place which is not helpful to candidates. All four areas of the specification and the inter-relationships between them should be understood. The understanding of American politics in a holistic sense is deficient in many candidates' responses.

Up-to-date information, evidence and examples are to be encouraged. Outdated and irrelevant information is not helpful. Candidates should be encouraged to keep up with political events and to be aware of political realities. Voting behaviour is different at each election; pressure group activity changes, the parties change and each election produces a different outcome. Candidates should be aware of these changes to illustrate their answers.

Candidates should also be advised to take care with spelling, especially of political terms and names. Some scripts are barely literate or coherent and good grammar, capital letters, sentences and paragraphs are important to the overall view of the script and the AO3 communication mark. Legibility is also a major problem in some scripts.

Candidates should be advised to read the questions thoroughly.

#### **Topic 1 – The Electoral Process and Direct Democracy**

##### **Question 01**

This question presented no problem to candidates, the vast majority achieving high marks. Weaker candidates generally failed to develop their responses with required evidence and examples. Several candidates wrote that the invisible primary was when candidates tried to achieve the 'three Ms' - money, media and momentum - yet they failed to develop the importance of them before the start of the primary and caucus season, or give any evidence why potential presidential candidates needed them in the invisible primary period.

To achieve the higher mark levels on this question it was necessary to refer to the significance of the period by discussing the need to build a financial war chest because of the increasingly front-loaded primaries; or to achieve national face and name recognition before the real contests in the 50 states, or to build momentum for the gruelling campaign to come. Excellent candidates gave examples from the period before the 2008 or 2004 primary/caucus season to

demonstrate their understanding. Only a few were able to refer to the activities of the invisible primary period such as the Ames straw poll, the Jefferson-Jackson dinner or the numerous visits by potential candidates to crucial states such as Iowa and New Hampshire. This knowledge and understanding was well rewarded.

Surprisingly few candidates made reference to the fact that the invisible primary was underway in the US at the time of writing, although well-informed candidates wrote of the existence of SarahPAC and the launch of Sarah Palin's new book in Des Moines, Iowa as examples of such activities.

Several candidates questioned the significance of the invisible primary as the front runners in this period such as Hilary Clinton in 2008 and Howard Dean in 2004 did not go on to win the nomination. Such insightful analysis was highly rewarded.

## **Question 02**

Several candidates who had achieved high marks on Question 01 failed to maintain the high marks in response to this essay question. Many candidates did not demonstrate a clear understanding of the differences between initiatives and referendums although they knew that they were some form of the direct democracy that had been studied for GOVP1. When the two terms were not clearly defined or differentiated this tended to lead to analytical problems later on in the essay.

Some candidates however, spent so long on definitions and descriptions of the processes that left them little time to respond to the substance of the question on how democratic they are in practice. The majority of candidates did attempt to assess their democratic worth however, and most could present a basic democratic case for their use. Well informed candidates were able to question how democratic these devices are in practice with some excellent analysis of the problems that can arise with their frequent use.

Answers were distinguished by the evidence and examples that candidates introduced into their analysis and evaluation. Weaker candidates tended not to have any, with several relying only on examples from the UK. Stronger candidates referred to problems with the wording, petition-gathering, turnout and funding at the same time as covering more substantial arguments such as effects on minorities, emotional and financially uneven campaigns through the media, often financed by strong pressure groups, or the focus on short term individual gains rather than long term public interest.

Stronger candidates referred to Burkeian democracy and supported elected and mandated legislators making informed decisions in the long term interest of the state and under conditions of electoral accountability. As in other responses, often the marks related to the quality of the examples and evidence presented.

There were some impressive references to Proposition 8 in 2008 on gay marriage in California, and proposition 19 on marijuana use in 2010. Even more impressive were references to earlier controversial initiatives such as proposition 13 on property tax in 1978 and its unintended fiscal consequences for California citizens. Some candidates unfortunately drifted into long descriptions of recall elections.

## Topic 2 – Political Parties

### Question 03

Far too many candidates explained the problems faced by third parties or why there was a two-party system. Even when there was an attempt to address the question, the answer was often quite narrowly focused.

Many candidates argued that the US did not have a two-party system as third parties existed. When they gave examples of these, usually drawing on the candidacies of Perot (Reform party in 1996) and Nader (Green Party) and occasionally Wallace (American Independent Party) they were able to reach Level 3.

Some well informed candidates also referred to the two Independents in the US Senate or Jesse Ventura as Reform Party Governor of Minnesota. There were also occasional references to other parties such as the Libertarian Party or the Prohibition Party. However, there are several *other* significant reasons why the US cannot be accurately described as having a two party system, one being the argument that because of federalism and de-centralisation, parties are organised at state level leading to the argument that, in reality, the US has a 50 or 100 party system, with the parties being different in each state.

A disappointing number of candidates used such evaluation in their response. Some very impressive candidates also argued that it was possible to argue that there was, in effect, a 1 party system in several uncompetitive states, or even that there is a 4 party system because each of the parties has a liberal/ moderate and conservative wing. This analysis was highly rewarded.

### Question 04

This question challenged candidates to decide the extent to which the description of the US parties presented in the quotation was *still* an accurate description of the two main parties today. Many weaker candidates were not able to rise to that challenge and their understanding of the differences both *within* the parties and *between* them appeared rather thin.

The majority of candidates were aware of the nature of the broad coalitions making up the two main parties in the US. Weaker candidates rarely got beyond the terms 'liberal' and 'conservative' but stronger candidates were able to describe the nature of the factions within the parties, with many impressive references to the Blue Dog moderates of the Democratic Party and the Tuesday Group of moderate Republicans, for example.

Marks were rewarded when candidates gave explanations and examples of why it is inevitable that US parties are so internally factionalised. The question also demanded analysis of some of the several ideological differences *between* the parties. Here, weaker candidates tended to either stress there were none (two bottles both empty) or asserted that they were 'separated only by abortion'. Therefore, the major ideological differences that do separate the parties such as economic and fiscal policies and the role of government were ignored.

Stronger candidates were aware of the polarisation of the parties in recent times and their greater ideological coherence. When they could demonstrate understanding of this new party cohesion by reference to the Contract with America, for example in 1994, or the party votes in Congress since the 2006 mid terms and Obama's presidency on such issues as the fiscal stimulus or health care reform, it showed their necessary attention to the key word in the question *still*. Candidates achieving the higher level marks demonstrated their knowledge of the parties being inevitably 'broad coalitions' and divided internally, but more ideologically cohesive than in the past and very ideologically different from each other. There were some

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impressive references to the shift of the Republican Party to the right under the influence of the Tea Party movement. There were also some over-simplistic narratives on the Obama presidency.

### Topic 3 – Voting Behaviour

#### Question 05

The mark for this question depended on the extent of the psephological explanation of the term and the statistical evidence presented. For example stating that swing voters are de-aligned voters lacking a deep party identification making up around 30% of the electorate and therefore targeted by party strategists as their vote could swing either way in an election would be worthy of more marks than saying swing voters are voters who change their vote at every election. Some candidates compared them to the aligned core voters that each party relies on.

Very high marks were gained by those candidates who also stated that swing voters were more likely to abstain or split their ticket when voting, thus showing contextual understanding. Many were able to show Obama's lead among Independent voters in 2008 (+8%). However, the highest marks were given to those candidates who could argue that they may not be very important voters as electoral strategy may be to energise the base of core voters rather than appeal to swing voters as the Bush campaign did in 2004. A significant minority of candidates spent more time explaining swing *states* rather than swing voters.

#### Question 06

Although this was a popular question, many weaker candidates struggled with its demands and produced pre-prepared responses. Responses were often over-simplified explanations of why Americans vote as they do, rather than on whether US voting behaviour can be accurately predicted given the vast social diversity of the US.

Many candidates who addressed the question explained that although voting behaviour could never be totally predictable by social groups, there were trends and patterns identified and explained by psephologists and these explanations, to a greater or lesser degree, had to be covered to gain high level marks.

If candidates are to attempt questions on US voting behaviour they should use convincing psephological concepts in their explanations and also be able to provide accurate statistical evidence from recent elections. Several candidates were unable to do both and achieved very low marks as a result.

The best candidates picked up on the reference to "huge social diversity" and took the opportunity to cover as much of this as possible usually referring to socio-economic status, race, gender, region and religion in their answers and the "predictability" of the links between these social characteristics and the distribution of the vote and partisanship.

Candidates who attempted to provide explanations of the links between various social groups and voting, particularly when backed up by correct statistical evidence, did very well.

There was some impressive evidence presented from both the 2008 election and the 2010 mid terms. Some candidates took the opportunity to explain changes in voting behaviour as a result of de-alignment (therefore less predictability) or re-alignment (as the South moving from Democrat to Republican voting since the 1960s).

Some candidates explained short term recency factors unrelated to predictability, which elicited few marks. Excellent candidates argued that predictability was easier when characteristics

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coincided eg a rich, white, male, protestant voter living in the suburbs, and less so when the characteristics were cross-cutting eg a rich, black, catholic, female voter from the rural south.

## Topic 4 – Pressure Groups

### Question 07

This was the least well answered of all the 10 mark questions although a surprising number of candidates attempted this question despite having little or no understanding of Political Action Committees (PACs). Most candidates knew that PACs had something to do with electoral finance, but that was the extent of their knowledge.

Stronger candidates were able to provide contextual information relating to FECA in the 70s and the McCain-Feingold reforms to campaign finance in 2002 and related this knowledge to both the “role” and the “significance” of PACs. They saw PACs as the “middle men” between the candidates and the organisations who wished to support (or oppose) them and were aware of the limitations on their funding and the “loopholes” that they were able to exploit.

Excellent candidates suggested that PACs were not always significant citing Obama’s rejection of PAC money in 2008 or the prevalence of rich candidates who had no need of PAC money. Very well informed candidates questioned whether they were at all significant given there was no proven link between PAC funding (which is transparent) the funding of incumbents and voting in Congress. There were a few very impressive references to the recent FEC v Citizens United Supreme Court decision which has had an impact on corporate and union spending in elections as seen in 2010.

### Question 08

Weaker candidates failed to focus on the question and instead discussed whether pressure groups were too powerful, or attempted an assessment of the methods that they use. Although some marks were given, they rarely rose out of level 2.

The on-going debate arising out of the quotation had to be fully addressed for top level marks. The majority of candidates were able to discuss the democratic advantages of pressure groups to a greater or lesser degree. Some got trapped into giving long lists of the benefits pressure groups bring to their members. The best responses demonstrated a theoretical perspective, discussing the pluralist view of pressure groups as shown in the writings of Truman and Dahl, along with their representative functions and their contributions to higher political participation and legislative activity.

To demonstrate concerns, stronger candidates applied the elitist perspective of pressure group activity seen in the writings of C Wright Mills among others, along with a critique of the power of some insider pressure groups to dominate policy-making through their access to decision-makers. When this was backed up by evidence from specific pressure groups and their activities higher marks were given. Some candidates however, gave little convincing evidence or examples of US pressure groups in action. Some very weak answers gave examples from UK pressure group activity, including the ubiquitous Fathers for Justice, which attracted few, if any marks.

The best responses addressed the precise question with a conclusion. As stated in previous years, weaker candidates use terms such as the ‘revolving door’ or ‘iron triangles’ or ‘countervailing groups’ with little explanation. Full explanations of the terms in context with examples gained high marks. Candidates may be reminded that pressure groups may not be as powerful or influential as many argue and there are restrictions on their activities may be less than many imply.

## **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>.