



General Certificate of Education

Government and Politics 1151

GOVP1 People, Politics and Participation

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

GOVP1 – People, Politics and Participation

General

Topics 1 (*Participation and Voting Behaviour*) and 4 (*Pressure Groups and Protest Movements*) were again the most popular with candidates. Fewer candidates tackled Topic 2 (*Electoral Systems*) with Topic 3 (*Political Parties*) being the least popular. This largely reflects the pattern established across the four previous GOVP1 examinations.

The January 2011 paper elicited a full range of responses. However, relatively few scripts were consistently in Level 1 or at the top end of Level 4. Most candidates appeared to have little difficulty coping with the format of the paper. As was the case in the four previous GOVP1 examination series, dividing the time available between the various sub-questions was again clearly an issue for some of those sitting this paper. Many candidates wrote far too much in response to the 10-mark questions (particularly on Question 05 and Question 08), with the result that their 25-mark responses (particularly Question 06 and Question 09) often lacked the necessary range and depth. A number of candidates also introduced material into 5-mark answers (particularly on Question 01) that would have been more productively deployed in answering the longer 10-mark questions that followed. In tackling the longer 25-mark questions many candidates at the lower levels of response are still failing to address the precise demands of the questions posed; instead producing rather generic responses. This tendency was particularly apparent on Question 03 and Question 06.

Topic 1 – Participation and Voting Behaviour

Question 01

The vast majority of candidates were able to define the term effectively, with most choosing to develop the theme by looking at rates of electoral turnout. At the higher levels of response candidates generally recognised that low turnout was not necessarily a product of political apathy and drew a distinction between ‘apathetics’ and other ‘abstainers’. Some candidates introduced material better reserved for Question 02.

Question 02

Most candidates were able to identify two distinct factors. Common examples included a loss of trust in formal politics (particularly post-expenses scandal), class dealignment, and the rise of pressure group activity. At the lower levels of response candidates failed to explain the factors they identified fully, or drifted into lengthy descriptive passages (eg on the course of the expenses scandal). Candidates at the higher levels of response identified two distinct factors and explained them fully, using appropriate examples. Some candidates chose two factors that were not sufficiently distinct, or failed to effectively distinguish between the two factors identified. As a result they ended up exploring different aspects of a single factor (eg pressure group activity, community-based campaigns and consumer boycotts) rather than fully meeting the demands of the question posed.

Question 03

At the lower levels of response candidates often wrote in either an overly narrative (ie chronological, descriptive) way or, conversely, in a style that was entirely theoretical (ie making few specific references to the 2010 General Election). Such approaches rarely allowed candidates to make it into the higher levels on AO2.

The majority of candidates at the higher levels of response tended to focus on shorter term 'recency' factors, with a good deal of focus on the impact of the Sun's shift in allegiance towards the Conservatives, 'Bigotgate' and the three televised debates (touching on 'Cleggmania'). Indeed, many referred to 2010 as a 'recency election'. In this context it was not surprising that many candidates also chose to focus on the state of the economy and criticisms of Gordon Brown's style of leadership.

Top level responses tended to put these short term influences into context alongside the enduring 'influence' of certain long-term factors eg the continuing link between social class and voting behaviour. Such candidates also tested at least some of the points put forward, with evidence drawn from the 2010 election results eg Cleggmania set against a relatively modest return for the Liberal Democrats in terms of percentage vote and seats won.

Topic 2 – Electoral Systems

Question 04

Most candidates were able to offer a definition of the term. At the lower levels of response some candidates struggled to identify precisely which systems could be regarded as proportional and which were not. Some candidates spent a good deal of time discussing the merits of AV (not proportional) or SV (not proportional), whilst others drifted into material best reserved for Question 05. At the higher levels of response candidates were able to identify PR systems (eg list, STV) and develop their answers - often by considering some of the characteristics of PR systems (eg multi-member constituencies and the greater likelihood of coalition government).

Question 05

Many students had a great deal to offer in response to this question - with some writing as much as might be expected in response to a 25-mark question. This may well have affected their ability to do themselves justice when answering Question 06. Candidates were asked to consider just **two** criticisms of first past the post. Those candidates who tackled the question collectively identified an impressively wide range of factors; the most popular being the likelihood of safe seats/electoral deserts, and the lack of proportionality/fairness - particularly towards the 'third party' (though many also referred to the so-called 'winners bonus'). A significant minority of candidates chose to offer more than two criticisms (not required) or offer arguments in favour of first past the post (not relevant). Some offered a conclusion in which they summed up the arguments for and against electoral reform and 'gave a nod' towards the planned referendum on AV (again, not necessary).

Question 06

The question asked candidates to consider the arguments in favour of the wider use of referendums in the UK. This clearly required some awareness of the way in which referendums have been used in the UK previously (ie as context for arguments over possible 'wider use').

By far the biggest failing in lower-level responses was a tendency to entirely ignore the question posed and instead launch a polemical attack on referendums. Whilst higher level responses often considered the arguments against referendums as a means of pointing out the weaknesses in (and therefore 'analysing') the arguments in favour, a one-sided attack on the use of referendums was always unlikely to meet the demands of the question posed. A more widespread, if perhaps less fundamental, flaw was the inability (or at least reluctance) of many candidates to offer any examples or evidence by way of illustration. With the question being so squarely rooted in the UK experience, one might reasonably have expected at least some passing reference to referendums past, proposed, or currently scheduled. Far too many responses simply offered a selection of undeveloped generic arguments in favour of referendums, followed by a handful of similarly limited generic points against.

At the higher levels of response candidates targeted the question far more effectively, even when using well-rehearsed arguments and examples drawn not only from Switzerland, US States, Nazi Germany or Pinochet's Chile - but also the UK. Such responses often also touched on the style of representative democracy practised in the UK and the extent to which the wider use of referendums might undermine such traditions.

Topic 3 – Political Parties

Question 07

Most candidates were able to define the term *party manifesto* clearly and many gave examples of recent manifesto pledges. At the higher levels of response, candidates often looked to explain how the manifesto played a part in establishing the mandate. At the lowest level of response, candidates occasionally confused the two terms ('manifesto' and 'mandate'), explaining the latter. Many candidates made references to the 2010 General Election manifestos published by the main UK parties. Some took the question as an opportunity to lambast the Liberal Democrats for their failure to hold to their manifesto commitment over university tuition fees.

Question 08

At the lower levels of response most candidates simply considered the input of ordinary party members in establishing party policy. In this context many candidates made reference to some or all of the points made in the extract (eg Hague's Fresh Future initiative, Blair's use of focus groups). Very few candidates broadened the discussion into the areas of candidate selection or leadership elections.

Candidate knowledge on internal party organisation was surprisingly limited - given the scope of the specification in this area. One area where many candidates were able to write at length was when discussing Labour's 2010 leadership election - though even here the material offered was often incomplete and/or inaccurate. However, it was encouraging that relatively few candidates transposed 'MPs' for 'ordinary party members' when answering this question - a common failing in similar responses in previous examination series.

Question 09

At the higher levels of response candidates demonstrated a clear understanding of the terms 'multi-party system' and 'two-party system' and explored a number of facets of the debate over which label best characterises the UK system. Such discussion took in issues of party competition at UK-level as well as 'regional'/local variations (eg in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, North v South) as well as considering the extent UK general elections and other elections (eg European Parliament and local elections) reflected a move away from two-party competition, towards multiparty politics. Some higher level candidates explored the possibility that the UK could be said to have been a dominant party system at various points since 1979.

At the lower levels of response candidates appeared to have little understanding of the meaning of either of the two terms, focusing instead on charting the emergence of the coalition government in 2010 and concluding that as there are now two parties in government, and one in opposition, the UK has a multi-party system. Though some candidates also made reference to the success of the Green Party candidate Caroline Lucas in Brighton Pavilion, and the seats won by UKIP, the Greens and the BNP in recent European elections, their answers were often limited by a fundamental lack of theoretical understanding relating to different types of party systems.

Topic 4 – Pressure Groups and Protest Movements**Question 10**

Most candidates were able to offer a credible definition of the term, though a significant minority struggled to distinguish between the kinds of activities that might be regarded as direct action and those that might be seen more as mainstream pressure group activity.

At the lower levels of response candidates routinely suggested that letter-writing, lobbying and marching were forms of 'direct action'. Such a line of argument often fed into lengthy descriptions of the 2010 student marches in London against increased tuition fees. At the higher levels of response candidates often used phrases such as 'civil disobedience' and suggested a 'degree of illegality' as a means of distinguishing between direct action and more conventional means of protest. This commonly fed into discussion of the tactics employed by groups such as Fathers 4 Justice.

Question 11

Most candidates had a fair grasp of the insider/outsider typology. Many referred to Wyn Grant and most candidates were able to identify examples of both types of pressure groups. At the higher levels of response, candidates often demonstrated a more developed understanding of the typology by considering sub-categories (eg core insiders, potential insiders) and/or by questioning the wisdom of categorising groups in this way when there is so much evidence of movement from 'outside' to 'inside' and vice versa.

The degree to which candidates addressed the terms of the question varied massively. At the lower levels of response candidates were more likely to focus on how groups were able to become 'insiders' - as opposed to considering the advantages that such groups were said to enjoy once they had secured insider status. Higher-level responses recognised that insider groups benefit from regular contact with government and can therefore seek to influence the legislative process at an early stage (ie whilst proposals are still being drafted). These higher level responses - often incorporating excellent examples that were not provided in the extract - tended to characterise the relationship between core insiders and ministers/senior civil servants as genuinely two-way.

Whereas most answers focused more on the 'traditional' benefits of insider status, many candidates also commented on the 'traditional' problems faced by outsiders. At the higher levels of response this discussion involved candidates questioning whether it is still a significant advantage to be 'insider', or whether the rise of the mass media and direct action has made government more responsive to the strategies employed by outsiders.

Question 12

Most candidates approached the question from the perspective of whether or not pressure groups are 'good' or 'bad' for democracy. Some took a more theoretical approach - introducing concepts such as pluralism, alongside 'elites theory' - whereas others chose to outline case studies illustrating arguments on either side of the debate.

At the lower levels of response answers amounted to little more than generic lists of arguments 'for' and 'against' pressure groups. Though such answers were clearly well-rehearsed, they generally failed to address the precise terms of the question posed and were rarely supported by the depth of analysis or evidence required to make it out of Level 2 on AO1 or AO2.

Higher level responses addressed the precise terms of the question more explicitly. Particularly impressive were those answers that attempted to address the question of whether pressure groups do indeed 'ensure that all citizens have a political voice'. This led to developed discussion of those groups who might be excluded from pressure group politics (a key theme on the Specification). Such higher level responses often also considered the quality of 'voice' given to rank-and-file members. This naturally fed into a discussion of the issue of internal pressure group democracy. When addressing such themes, many candidates made effective use of political vocabulary (AO3) eg cheque-book membership, elites/cliques, accountability etc.

A very few candidates identified other ways in which citizens could be given a 'political voice' as a means of questioning whether pressure groups indeed played a 'vital role' in this regard. Though such an approach was uncommon and, to a degree, unanticipated, it was certainly worthy of credit.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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