



**General Certificate of Education (A-level)
June 2011**

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, there is evidence of either selective or ineffective revision taking place, leading to candidates writing scripts that fail to achieve the grade that was expected.

The stronger candidates used up-to-date, accurate and convincing evidence and examples in their responses, focused clearly on the question, identifying key discriminators within it and produced a structured and coherent response.

A problem remains of many candidates introducing too much, often irrelevant, UK references in their responses. Although it is always possible to demonstrate synopticity by reference to UK politics it is not helpful to produce an almost comparative response. Synopticity can be demonstrated by showing the links between the four parts of the GOV3A module or from the other A2 papers. Most of the essay questions demanded knowledge and understanding of the wider US political system and the system of government for a level 4 answer.

Question 1

The majority of candidates responded well to this question with most giving the example of the recall of Gray Davis as Governor of California in 2003 but many did not go much further than this. Higher marks were attained by those candidates who could accurately describe the process of recall showing knowledge of where, why and how it occurs. This knowledge, for example of petition-gathering in the states that use it, was variable. Weaker candidates thought that recall involved federal politicians which showed their lack of understanding. A few candidates knew nothing of the process, speculating that it was something to do with the results in Florida in 2000 or when elections do not produce clear winners. High AO2 marks were gained by those candidates who could give some evaluation of their use, introducing excellent analysis of greater accountability and transparency, the notion of 'buyers regret' or the hi-jacking of the process for partisan, political ends. Excellent candidates suggested that recall procedures may discourage state politicians or officials from taking necessary but unpopular decisions in the long term interests of the state. Some candidates even knew of the attempted recall process currently taking place in Wisconsin after the anti-union vote in the state legislature.

Question 2

It was rare to see a poor response to this question. Some candidates accessing the higher level marks gave developed explanations of the changing roles of modern nominating conventions. Some weaker answers were list-like, describing 'formal' and 'informal' functions without a good understanding of what goes on in the party conventions and why they have changed. The stronger candidates took each function and analysed it using examples and evidence from past conventions. For example, whilst some candidates simply stated that the modern conventions 'crown' or 'confirm' the party's presidential candidate, higher marks were gained by those who gave a convincing explanation of why this was so, bringing in their knowledge of McGovern-Fraser recommendations, frontloading of primaries and committed delegates to explain this. This was also the case for the selection of the vice-presidential running mate and the drawing up of the party platform. Stronger candidates explained the changing significance of these functions incorporating the reasons why. Most candidates knew that the 'informal' functions of the conventions had grown in response to the changing nature of the conventions themselves, but higher marks were gained by those candidates who could explain why the 'informal' functions were more important today.

Excellent candidates gave examples of keynote speeches, super-delegates, National Committees and balanced tickets. They could refer to specific conventions which had gone well for the candidates and their parties (eg the unity displayed at the 08 conventions) and when they had not, because of intra-party divisions on display. Not all candidates picked up on the term 'slick media events' in the quotation and some related it to the emphasis on image, photo-opportunities and sound bites in modern American politics, compared to the old politics of party bosses in 'smoke-filled rooms' choosing the candidates.

Question 3

A few ill-prepared candidates thought this question was referring to the 'religious rights' found in the US Constitution and simply wrote about these. Others wrote a generalised account of the role of religion in US politics, especially in influencing voting behaviour even though this question was in the Political Parties section. Responses included explanation of Catholic and Jewish voters and WASPs. Few marks were gained for such responses. The best candidates recognised that the term 'religious right' referred to the changes in the Republican Party, the Bible belt and among evangelical Christians. They could relate this to the growth of secularism and the impact of the Roe v Wade 1973 Supreme Court decision. They explained that the 'religious right' became the Republican Party's base, core support; shifted it to the right and impacted on its ideological views and internal divisions. They were able to discuss their socially (as opposed to fiscally) conservative views on issues such as abortion, gay rights, stem cell research and creationism. Top level candidates could refer to the US's 'culture wars', 'values voters' and the 2004 election. Some related it to the growth of the Tea Party movement and politicians such as Sarah Palin. Excellent candidates were able to consider its importance as the question asked and several argued that it loses influence when there is a Democratic administration, when fiscal issues become more dominant or when it begins to alienate more moderate, mainstream Republicans with its perceived extremist positions. Such analysis was very highly rewarded.

Question 4

Many weaker candidates were unable to address the key demands of this question. Several wrote an over-generalised (and often inaccurate and out-dated) response on US political parties often with an almost exclusive focus on ideological differences or internal divisions. Some, having revised third parties were determined to discuss them even though they had no relevance to the question asked. Many candidates attempted to answer this question with little knowledge or understanding of parties as organisations and the ways that they operate in the US under a federal system with a separation of powers. Stronger candidates started their analysis by stating that under such a federal and separated system parties are bound to be more weakly organised than their UK counterparts for example. This question presented a clear opportunity for candidates to explain the difference between, and the characteristics of, the 'strong' centralised UK parties and their weaker de-centralised US counterparts but many failed to do so. Many candidates were able to discuss the features of US parties that led to them being labelled 'weak' such as the absence of leaders, members and national manifestos or the weaker whipping system in Congress, and the loss of some of their functions such as selecting and financing candidates without giving any clear explanations as to why. This reduced the potential AO2 mark for the response. The majority of candidates knew of Broder's 'The Party's Over' thesis, but weaker candidates failed to address the second part of the question as to the accuracy of the description 'weak' in US politics today. Candidates at the higher levels of response were aware of the numerous changes to, and 'resurgence' or 'renewal' of the parties since Broder's writings in the early 70s. They wrote of changes to the parties' nomination process with supporting evidence and explanations. Such excellent focus led to high marks for those candidates who were able to construct such a focused and up-to-date response.

Question 5

Although the majority of candidates were able to generally discuss the patterns of voting behaviour of males and females in the US, fewer were able to focus on the term ‘gap’ or give any accurate and supporting statistical evidence of such a gap from recent elections which lowered their potential mark. Most candidates tried to explain why women vote Democrat which gained some marks, but higher marks were given to candidates who could clearly explain the synoptic links between the ideology and policies of the Democrats leading to their higher female vote and the alternative ideology of the Republicans explaining their (usually) higher vote from males. Candidates who went further than simply saying the Democrats support abortion and the Republicans are pro-gun achieved higher marks, especially when their analysis went further than a simple list of policies. Some weaker candidates drifted into explanations of voting behaviour unrelated to gender. The highest marks went to those candidates presenting clear psephological explanations and evidence. Excellent candidates referred to the importance of ‘hockey moms’ in 92, ‘security moms’ in 04 and ‘hockey moms’ in 08 as the parties targeted these demographics as one of the keys to election success.

Question 6

A surprisingly large number of candidates failed to pick up on the paradox implied in the quotation regarding high political participation levels compared to low electoral turnout. They thus spent time discussing either but not both, with an answer lacking focus and some degree of balance. The fact that the US has very high levels of participation in various forms of political activity needed to be explained and contrasted to some degree with relatively low turnout at elections. The stronger candidates were able to do that, using a number of plausible explanations backed up by convincing evidence. Explanations for abstention ranged across factors such as the electoral system under federalism and democratic overload that it leads to, the perceived similarity of the parties and the qualities of the candidates themselves, as well as past difficulties of registration. Weaker candidates simply talked of ‘apathy’ or ‘hapathy’ without explaining why this may arise; or used terms such as ‘voter fatigue’ without demonstrating any clear understanding of the terms in context. There were many rehearsed responses with little question focus. Very weak candidates simply asserted voters were ‘bored’ or ‘apathetic’ with no explanations as to why they might be. Candidates were rewarded when they had correct evidence on voter turnout and the way it has fluctuated in recent elections, whilst offering explanations for both low turnout and reasons why it may increase. Weaker candidates often drifted into explaining voting rather than non-voting, or why Obama won the 08 election. As with past voting behaviour questions, candidates at the lower levels of response give no statistical or psephological evidence in their answers, offering very over-generalised responses. Excellent answers discussed the significance of the Voting Age Population (VAP) the ‘permanent campaign’, negative advertising, image politics rather than substance, the lack of engaging issues (as in 96) uninspiring candidates (as in 2000) the Help America Vote Act 2003 and its implications and ‘differential abstention’. Stronger candidates referred to the work of Robert Putnam in ‘Bowling Alone’ in their analysis.

Question 7

A significant minority of candidates attempting this question were unable to distinguish clearly between these two types of pressure groups operating in American politics. Also a surprising number were unable to offer clear and different examples of both. Some answers drifted into the methods used by different groups or explained the difference between ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ groups. A typology or classification of groups seems to be an obvious starting point for the study of pressure groups but too many candidates were unprepared for this question and had to resort to guesswork. Some just listed different groups and far too many offered UK examples rather than American ones, including the ubiquitous ‘Fathers for

Justice'. The better prepared candidates focused on differences between the two types of group, explaining sectional groups as 'protective' of specific interests and cause groups as 'promotional' of specific causes. Higher marks were gained by the use of accurate examples of both such as ABA, AMA, and the US Chamber of Commerce as examples of the former and the Sierra Club, ACLU or NARAL as examples of the latter. Higher marks were obtained when candidates were able to distinguish between the memberships of both groups, with sectional groups limited to the people whose interests they protected such as lawyers in ABA or doctors in the AMA and the wider and open membership of cause groups. The highest marks went to those candidates who argued that the different groupings were not necessarily water-tight and used the NRA, the NAACP and the AARP as examples of 'hybrid' groups with overlaps in their aims when attempting classification. Weaker candidates could give no accurate examples in their answers.

Question 8

There was a variable response to this question, with some extremely weak answers. The main problem was the failure to answer the question as set. The majority of candidates simply presented a list-like, learned response of the methods used by pressure groups in the USA. Whilst some marks could be gained by describing lobbying or electoral endorsement or direct action, the higher AO2 marks could not be accessed when there was no attempt at any critical evaluation of these methods, simply a description. Several candidates answered questions that had appeared on past papers on the effectiveness and success or otherwise of pressure groups. More focused answers did attempt a critique of the lobbying activities of pressure groups often referring to the professional lobbyists of the K St corridor in DC, the inequalities of access, the criticism of the 'revolving door syndrome' (often mentioned but less frequently explained and criticised) and the 'iron triangles' of US government (again referred to often but rarely analysed with confidence). Weaker candidates simply referred to 'lobbying' in the numerous 'access points' (again not always sufficiently explained) but showed little understanding of the realities of the lobbying process employed by pressure groups. Some excellent candidates referred to the activities of Jack Abramoff and the Honest and Open Government Act. Similarly, the majority of candidates referred to the 'Electioneering and endorsement' activities of pressure groups without offering any clear explanation of those activities and what groups were trying to do. Only a small minority referred to the impact of the FEC v Citizens United Supreme Court judgement and the boost to unregulated spending for and against candidates in elections by corporate and union groups in particular. Other activities such as grass roots campaigning, direct action, peaceful and violent protest was usually just described rather than critically evaluated although there were several references to the bombing of federal government buildings in Oklahoma and the killing of abortion doctors. There were very few critical references to the methods used by some pressure groups in trying to influence the outcome of direct democracy initiatives in the states and the advantages enjoyed by wealthier, more organised groups in these apparently highly democratic devices.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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