



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

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 candidates appeared to be well prepared for the demands of this year's examination. As in June 2010, there were very few examples of particularly weak responses. Similarly, there were relatively few level 4 responses. Last year's report on the examination noted that the length of some of the 10 mark questions were as long as the 30 mark questions. This clearly led to poorer performance by those candidates concerned. It is pleasing to note that in the 2011 examination this has not been such a pronounced feature.

There were previously concerns about the amount of synoptic material deployed by a number of candidates. There is evidence to suggest that this was not as big an issue as it was in June 2010. It is noted, however, that a number of centres submitted scripts which contained far too much synoptic material. Such responses amounted to comparative analyses, bearing a resemblance to the answers that were required in the comparative paper of previous specifications. Centres are reminded once again that candidates may make passing reference to relevant elements of the AS units and their other A2 unit, but there is no requirement for candidates to devote whole paragraphs to address synoptic issues. The mark scheme requires that candidates should address points relevant to US government. Devoting time to writing whole paragraphs about UK government inevitably diverts candidates away from the more relevant issues and will inevitably mean a lower mark.

TOPIC 1 - THE CONSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK OF US GOVERNMENT

As with the examination in June 2010, this proved to be a very popular topic on the question paper this year.

Question 1

This question was very straightforward and taken directly from the subject specification. It was generally answered well by candidates. The majority of responses were able to identify the most widely used method of proposing and ratifying constitutional amendments (proposal approved by two thirds majority of both houses of Congress and ratified by three quarters of State legislatures), although a number of candidates were confused about the precise ratios required at each stage. Better responses were able to identify the national and state convention routes for proposing and ratifying constitutional amendments. Stronger candidates identified that only one amendment (21st) was ratified using state conventions. A number of good responses also examined informal mechanisms which are tantamount to amendment. The role of the Supreme Court in interpreting the Constitution was highlighted by a number of candidates. Another informal mechanism which was identified was that of convention and the manner in which federal institutions have adapted over time. There were a small number of very weak responses where candidates rather worryingly confused constitutional amendment with the stages that a bill must go through before becoming an act of Congress. Clearly candidates were given no credit whatsoever for responses such as these.

Question 2

Most candidates were able to identify the key separation of powers present in the United States constitution. Furthermore most responses understood that such a separation of powers might limit the effectiveness of government. Indeed many candidates made direct reference to the United Kingdom where a fusion of powers is present to highlight how much more effective government is there. Many responses went on to examination the manner in

which powers are separated in the USA. A number of these continued the theme by describing the checks and balances which in essence is what may be seen to slow the progress of government down. In evaluation of these arguments, stronger candidates were able to identify that the founding fathers wanted to prevent tyrannical government, therefore separated powers to ensure that this did not happen. Other analysis examined a thesis that powers are shared rather than separated and that bipartisanship and cooperation can lead to effective government. Better candidates were able to offer relevant examples to back up these points. Many candidates failed to analyse what is actually meant by effective government. A few very good responses argued that the founding fathers believed that limited government was effective government. The very best responses were able to identify that government is not synonymous with executive and that limiting the power of any one branch does not result in making government overall less effective. Many responses merely dealt with the executive branch and the power of the President and such responses tended to stray too far into the territory of topic three.

TOPIC 2 - THE LEGISLATIVE BRANCH OF GOVERNMENT: US CONGRESS

This was not as popular as the previous topic. However, there was an increase in candidates attempting this topic from 2010.

Question 3

It was clear that a number of candidates attempting this question did not know what advice and consent powers are. Their responses tended either to describe the general role of the US Senate or write in vague terms about Senators offering their advice. More were able to identify that one of the key functions of the Senate is the confirmation of presidential nominations. Such responses sometimes concentrated their analysis on either the Supreme Court or the Cabinet. Better responses looked to both and were able to offer examples of the confirmation process at work. Advice and consent powers also include the Senate's responsibility for ratifying treaties. A number of candidates were able to look at the second aspect of these powers. The best of these were able to identify examples, some focusing on the treaties that presidents have failed to see ratified by the Senate. Very good responses explained how advice and consent powers have become highly politicised and the very best mentioned executive agreements and recess appointments as counter evaluation.

Question 4

Many candidates interpreted this question in terms of the various pressures on representatives and therefore the analysis of parties was somewhat limited in focus in such responses. Whilst it was relevant to mention other pressures, such as those from constituents, the essay really required an analysis of the significance of political parties in Congress and the extent to which they have grown in importance. Many candidates were able to highlight the weakness of political parties and offered a useful comparison with the well whipped party machines in the UK. These answers often linked party weakness with a separation of powers. Other valid points included the lack of salience of political parties when it comes to the funding of individual candidate campaigns. Better responses were able to evaluate the position of political parties. These often included reference to Newt Gingrich and the Republican Party's 'Contract with America' which led to greater partisanship and party salience in the United States Congress in the mid-1990s. Very good candidates suggested that this did not amount to a trend and that there has been an ebb and flow of partisanship since that time. There were a few very good responses which brought the analysis up to date to discuss Congress and the Obama presidency, particularly in the light of the influence of the Tea Party movement on the Republican side of the House of Representatives since the mid-term elections of 2010.

TOPIC 3 - THE EXECUTIVE BRANCH OF GOVERNMENT

It was clear that the question on the presidency attracted many candidates to attempt this topic. Unfortunately it was apparent that a number of candidates were unable to address the issue of bureaucratic power in US government.

Question 5

This question proved to be the most problematic on the examination paper. Many candidates did not understand the nature of bureaucratic power. Some responses discussed the US Congress while others covered more relevant territory about the US president. A number of candidates were able to correctly identify the term and offer responses which were of general but limited relevance. Such responses concentrated on the work of the US Cabinet and the various heads of department. More relevant responses examined the work of the departments themselves. Stronger candidates identified the work of government agencies as well, with the best responses examining the role of the independent regulatory commissions and government corporations. These were often supported with examples of each element. A number of responses concentrated analysis on the role of EXOP and credit was given to those candidates who wrote such answers.

Question 6

Too many candidates interpreted this question in terms of explaining the different powers of the president and a number effectively tried to recycle last year's essay question on this topic. The wording of the question is important and candidates needed to bear in mind the issue of persuasion throughout the essay. Unfortunately a number of responses briefly dealt with the issue of persuasion and then moved on to examine the other powers of the president. Better answers attempted to balance the need of presidents to persuade with those roles that are performed more autonomously. Very good candidates were able to contextualise their responses by examining the differing circumstances between and within presidential terms. Responses such as these were able to highlight examples showing the powers of persuasion (Ronald Reagan) and the lack of these powers (Jimmy Carter). The best answers went beyond presidents persuading Congress and examined persuasion of the federal bureaucracy, the media and public opinion as well. These responses also looked at more autonomous presidents (or presidential phases), but did so by focusing on the extent to which persuasion is the only power.

TOPIC 4 - THE JUDICIAL BRANCH OF GOVERNMENT: THE SUPREME COURT

Like Topic 1, this was a very popular topic.

Question 7

This question was generally answered well with many candidates being able to identify the manner in which the Supreme Court maintains its independence from the other institutions of government in the United States. There was frequent mention of the separation of powers and the effective security of tenure that is enjoyed by Supreme Court justices. Many candidates spoke in terms of Supreme Court decisions being made without fear or favour. Good responses identified that judicial independence can also be controversial and these were often backed up by appropriate examples and cases. There is clearly a link with judicial neutrality. Supreme Court appointments are political in nature and clearly one could argue that this fact might influence the deliberations of the justices. Many good responses made reference to decisions by the courts of Rehnquist and Roberts in this respect. However this could be contrasted with the courts of Warren and Burger whose decisions often antagonised the presidents who appointed them. Some candidates became totally

immersed in the issue of neutrality however and devoted virtually all of their response to this, thus limiting the marks they could achieve. Despite the links between judicial neutrality and judicial independence, the two conventions are distinct and should not be confused with each other.

Question 8

There were many very good answers to this question. However as with question 6, many candidates decided to recycle the essay on the Supreme Court from June 2010. As such the focus of these responses was mainly in terms of judicial activism and judicial restraint. Better responses were able to look at how the Supreme Court has both protected and undermined the rights of citizens in the decisions that it has taken over the past 50 years (indeed some candidates made reference to decisions made in the late 19th century and the early 20th century). These responses identified particular cases often linking them with the courts of Warren, Burger, Rehnquist and Roberts. Better responses identified specific themes such as abortion, gun ownership, school prayers, the death penalty and privacy and measured the responses of the various courts over time against them. A number of responses attempted to evaluate the limitations of the Supreme Court in terms of its reactive, rather than proactive, nature although a small number of stronger responses counterbalanced this evaluation by making it clear that the court never has a shortage of cases from which to choose and deliberate. Other responses mentioned the lack of enforcing powers and highlighted the difficulties following the Brown versus Board of Education case in the 1950s which culminated in 1957 with Eisenhower ordering over 1000 US paratroopers to enable black children to enter the high school in Little Rock Arkansas. The best responses were able to explain how more recently the court has modified the rights which appeared to have been protected by earlier court judgements. These responses attempted to measure the role of the Supreme Court by going back to the Constitution and the Bill of Rights examining the interpretation of original intent.

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