



**General Certificate of Education (A-level)
January 2012**

Government and Politics

GOV3A

(Specification 2150)

Unit 3A: The Politics of the USA

Report on the Examination

Further copies of this Report on the Examination are available from: aqa.org.uk

Copyright © 2012 AQA and its licensors. All rights reserved.

Copyright

AQA retains the copyright on all its publications. However, registered centres for AQA are permitted to copy material from this booklet for their own internal use, with the following important exception: AQA cannot give permission to centres to photocopy any material that is acknowledged to a third party even for internal use within the centre.

Set and published by the Assessment and Qualifications Alliance.

The Assessment and Qualifications Alliance (AQA) is a company limited by guarantee registered in England and Wales (company number 3644723) and a registered charity (registered charity number 1073334).
Registered address: AQA, Devas Street, Manchester M15 6EX.

Unit 3 (GOV3A): The Politics of the USA

General

As in previous years, there were several excellent students who produced scripts of great breadth and depth of knowledge, who understood the realities of American politics and had impressive essay writing skills demonstrating wide reading and research that has yielded comprehensive evidence and examples. However, there were still many very poorly prepared students whose responses to the set questions were simplistic and superficial, lacking any backing evidence and examples and were incoherent in expression. A lot of evidence remained of highly selective revision in far too many students, hindering the development of contextual understanding and synoptic skills showing linkages between the specification topics necessary for higher level understanding and higher level marks. For example, many students answered questions on voting behaviour without a strong understanding of the parties and their differing ideologies affecting electoral behaviour. Many students answered questions on pressure groups, lacking any understanding of the political system in which they operate.

Some UK references remained but were less in evidence than in earlier examinations, however students must be reminded that their answers should always be focused on American politics using American examples. Selective revision can also seriously narrow the choice of questions with disastrous consequences. GOV3A is composed of four inter-related topics within a context of a governmental system which affects the way elections, parties, voters and pressure groups operate and the students who achieved higher level marks were able to demonstrate that wider contextual understanding.

Question 1

By far the majority of students focused their answer on the concept of ‘balancing the ticket’ even though this was not the actual question asked. When they demonstrated knowledge of how and why presidential candidates attempted to do this however, they could access the higher marks. This was especially so when their answers gave several examples of ticket-balancing from different electoral contests, explaining the need to maximise votes by choosing vice-presidential candidates who were different from them in terms of factors such as age, experience, gender, religion, geography or Washington ‘insider’ or ‘outsider’ status.

Some students went back to explain the Kennedy choice of Johnson in 1960 which gained credit when well explained, but by far the biggest majority used only the 2008 choices of Obama and McCain to illustrate their answers, which gave them a narrow focus and high marks were only achieved when this was explained accurately and in full. However, many used this question to deliver long descriptions of the choice of Palin and Biden with often highly inaccurate and unsupported analysis. In particular, many over-simplified McCain’s choice of Palin and the reasons why he chose this younger, female, Washington outsider but who had executive experience in Alaska. Very few used Bush’s selection of Cheney as evidence although there were some impressive references to, and explanations for, the ‘unbalanced’ Clinton-Gore ticket of 1992. At the top end, excellent students picked up on the word ‘significance’ and argued that the selection either was significant, because of ‘heartbeat away from the presidency’ arguments, or that it wasn’t significant, because the vice-presidency is not a significant office, a popular Vice President cannot save a more unpopular presidential candidate from defeat and the choice was largely made for electoral reasons and in recent years by the candidates themselves before the national party conventions.

Question 2

Many students attempted this question with a very limited knowledge and understanding of the role of campaign finance in US elections. In order to achieve high marks, students had to address all three parts of the question- 'regulate,' 'dominance' and 'success' to some degree, but many were unable to do so. There was often a very sketchy knowledge of any campaign finance reforms and the reasons why they were regarded as necessary because of spiralling campaign costs and the belief that elections were 'for sale to the highest bidders'. Good students linked the reforms to the changing nature of campaigns in the USA and the increasing emphasis on raising large war chests because of the need for constant TV advertising, for example, and transporting huge campaign teams throughout the states during the 'permanent campaign' seeking momentum.

Most students knew, to a greater or lesser extent, of the significance of the FECA reforms in the 1970s, the impact of the 2002 McCain-Feingold reforms and well-prepared students were able to discuss the Citizens United v FEC Supreme Court decision in 2010 and its huge impact on the way election campaigns are now financed in the USA, giving evidence from the 2010 mid terms and the current primaries.

Many wrote knowledgeably of various loopholes in campaign finance regulation allowing unregulated 'soft money' to be used and spoke of 'bundling' by PACs, the role of the new 'Super PACs', issue advocacy and independent expenditures. Excellent students related this to the free speech provisions of the first amendment and many contrasted this to the way in which campaign finance is legally regulated in the UK where campaign costs are much lower. Weaker students could give little evidence of either campaign finance spending or its regulation and often drifted into giving alternative explanations of why candidates won (usually using Obama as the example). Level 4 students often concluded by arguing that although money was vitally important to success (linking this with most other electoral factors such as image or name recognition), more of it would probably not have helped McCain to win in 2008 and that high spenders including multi-billionaires could often lose, often citing Meg Whitman or Ross Perot as their examples.

Question 3

Weaker students answering this question failed to pick up on the emboldened words '**both**' and '**and**' and simply argued that the Republican Party was a conservative party, often comparing it with the more liberal Democratic Party. There were few marks to be gained by this approach. Better students were able to distinguish between fiscally conservative views, such as low taxes, balanced budgets and low spending with as little government intervention in the economy as possible, from the more socially conservative views of traditional values, pro-life and anti-gay marriage held by many Republicans, especially since Reagan and the increasing influence of the religious right. At the highest levels of response, students argued that not all Republicans were *both* fiscally *and* socially conservative, citing factions in the Republican Party such as the Main Street Partnership, the Log Cabin Republicans and politicians such as Rudy Giuliani or Olympia Snowe or even G.W. Bush's 'compassionate conservatism' as evidence. They extended their analysis by arguing that although all Republicans were likely to be fiscally conservative to some degree, they were not necessarily all social conservatives and many had more moderate views on social issues and the so-called 'culture wars'.

Some weaker students used the opportunity of this question to write extensively, although to little purpose, of the Tea Party movement. Stronger students understood the impact of the Tea Party on the Republican Party although there were surprisingly few references to the greater importance of fiscal issues in the last few years especially in arguments over the stimulus, bail-outs and the federal debt. There were some impressive references to some of the divisions on conservative policy on display in the 2012 Republican primary contest.

Question 4

In response to this question, many weaker students simply produced pre-prepared, list-like responses on the difficulties facing third parties, paying little attention if any to the quotation presented for analysis and evaluation. Better students structured their response around the 'sting' and the 'die' of the description. Generally, the more in-depth evidence presented of both third parties and independent candidates in US elections, the higher the mark.

Most students were aware of Perot in 1992, but fewer gave accurate analysis of the Wallace intervention in 1968 and his regional and concentrated vote that 'stung' the Democratic party in the South. The intervention took electoral college votes that could have deadlocked the Electoral College, and contributed to Nixon's successful 'southern strategy' in 1972, and only the better prepared students could give such evidence in their responses. Perot's 19% of the popular vote was found in the majority of answers, but few students spoke of this in terms of 'sting', eg taking away votes from Bush and helping Clinton to win in 1992. Similarly few went on to analyse his drop in votes in 1996 and the death of the Reform Party, or his 'sting' in contributing to policy changes regarding the federal deficit. The same was true of the analysis of Nader's contribution to both Gore's loss of Florida in 2000 and the drop in his vote in the 2004 election.

Students who argued that the 'stinging' and 'dying' was inevitable in a strong two party system where third parties face almost insurmountable barriers to electoral success were rewarded as long as the focus on the question was maintained. Excellent students widened their analysis by arguing that some third parties did not necessarily die as parties such as the Libertarian Party or the Green Party still put up candidates although they did not achieve any 'sting' either, and referred to the meagre 1% of votes achieved by third parties in 2008. Very well-informed students, who had gone further than producing a list-like response of the difficulties facing third parties, argued that the two independent senators, Lieberman and Sanders could and did 'sting' as their votes in the Senate, were crucial on frequent close votes, although most pointed out that both Senators caucus with the Democrats. Many students wrote at some length on the Tea Party, seemingly unaware that this was not a political party, and as such as it did not put up candidates for election. However, some perceptive students speculated on the possibility of a third party intervention in 2012 if a more right wing conservative candidate was not selected by the Republican Party.

Question 5

Although this was the most popular question on the paper, far too many students attempted this question without having a clear understanding of what split-ticket voting actually is, or gave a confused definition. Without clarity it became very difficult to explain why many voters do it. Many students thought that it was voting differently at presidential and mid-term elections and referred to the Republican takeover of the House in 2010 as evidence. Better students explained STV via understanding of de-alignment, decline in partisanship, the growth of candidate and issue voting, the effects of incumbency on congressional re-election rates and the desire to achieve greater checks and balances within the governmental system. Some students strayed into explaining some of the consequences of STV such as gridlock, which was not required. The best answers contained evidence of its extent, knew

that it fluctuated depending on the circumstances of each election and was at its height in the 1980s with the so-called 'Reagan Democrats,' with 19% of voters splitting their ticket in 2008. There were also some impressive references to Clinton's win in 1996, despite facing a Republican dominated Congress.

Question 6

This question attracted a lot of very weak students writing simplistic and highly over-generalised responses. It is advisable not to attempt voting behaviour questions without a secure understanding of psephological concepts and without convincing statistical evidence, explanations of voting behaviour and voting trends in recent American elections.

The question specified three areas of analysis- the primacy, long term factors of region, race and religion and the significance of these factors in explaining US voting behaviour. The well-prepared students addressed all three in some detail and although they did not have to be equally balanced. For high marks, it was expected that all of them would be addressed to some degree. Many students wrote little on these factors and often wrote more about factors such as age, gender or income affecting voting behaviour, or drifted into explanations of the short term factors influencing voters at each election. This generally meant that these answers struggled to achieve marks above Level 2 at the most.

Far too many answers were simplistic in their analysis and evaluation and although links could be made on a very superficial level between voting behaviour in different regions, and by voters with different racial or ethnic backgrounds and with different religious beliefs, developed *explanations as to why* this was so, was lacking in a substantial minority of scripts. There were also very few explanations of why voting behaviour may change, such as the changes in the way the south voted after the 1960s, or the change to the black vote after the 1930s or why the Hispanic and Catholic vote fluctuated but the Jewish vote did not. The minority vote for the Democrats, the high vote of Christian evangelicals for the Republicans or the difference between urban and rural voting was rarely fully explained and evaluated.

The link between the ideologies and policies of the two main parties and their electoral support and partisan loyalty from different regions, races and religions were rarely explored, apart from at a very superficial level. Huge generalisations lacking any convincing explanation were made by far too many unprepared students with little or no evidence to back them up. The result was some very low marks for many answers to this question. Very few students analysed the impact of when the three characteristics inter-linked and overlapped, such as a black atheist voter living in an inner city area of Michigan or when voters had different characteristics that may pull against one another such as a Hispanic Catholic voter living in a rural area in Alabama.

Question 7

A surprising number of students had no real grasp of what lobbying is as a method used by pressure groups, especially 'insider' ones, and therefore could not explain its role. Some simply described a list of methods that pressure groups use in the hope that there would be some marks given for this kind of scattergun approach. Others seemed to think that it involved forms of direct action. The better responses covered professional lobbyists gaining access to decision makers at various levels of government, usually Congress, in order to influence the passage of legislation or policy in their favour. They argued that this is usually in the congressional committees where the details of legislation are worked out.

Students gaining higher marks discussed access, the need for expertise and information in policy-making, the importance of the K Street corridor in Washington D.C. and at the highest levels, knew of lobbying scandals such as the Abramoff case, the 'revolving door' and the

regulatory provisions of the 2007 Honest Leadership and Open Government Act passed in response to the excesses of lobbying activity in Washington. A select few knew of Obama's many quotations against the lobbying of special interests due to the access they achieved through contacts and funding of candidates. Some students wrote of lobbying the Supreme Court although their arguments here were often not convincing. However, if they framed their arguments to explain attempts to persuade and influence through Amicus Curiae briefs or to lobby in favour of the selection of certain kinds of Supreme Court Justices, then those arguments were rewarded.

Question 8

A large number of students who attempted this question did so without possessing any real knowledge or understanding of the operation of US pressure groups. Many students give pre-prepared responses on pressure groups and do not address the question as set. Some paid no attention to the term 'pluralist democracy' and failed to address the question of whether pressure groups have come to *dominate* decision-making in the USA. Some theoretical perspective on the role of pressure groups was necessary for the higher level marks, whether it was the pluralists view as expressed through the writings of Truman or Dahl, or the elitist perspective of those supporting the idea of a power elite such as C.Wright Mills. Weaker students drifted into a vague and generic response on pressure groups and these responses did not rise above Level 2 marks as they were so limited in question focus.

Examiners are still concerned at the lack of examples of specific American pressure groups in many responses and their specific activities and the different levels of influence over decision-making in US government. Examiners are pleased to note the introduction of terms such as 'revolving door', 'iron triangles' and 'issue networks' or 'countervailing pressure groups' into answers. However, the contextual understanding of these terms is often limited, with many students failing to demonstrate any depth of understanding other than a simple introduction of these specialised terms into the essay. When a clear contextual understanding is shown, along with convincing examples, then these students are highly rewarded for their insights.

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