

Examiners' Report/ Principal Examiner Feedback

January 2011

GCE

Government and Politics 6GP04 4C
Governing The USA

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General Comments:

This year was the second time this unit has been available in January under the new specification, when its predecessor could only be sat in June. While numbers are still only about a third of the entry for 3C, possibly for reasons of habit as much as anything else, a number of centres has evidently decided that it is the more logical option to take first. The overall level of performance certainly justified their decision, and the best long answers on Congress and the presidency, for example, exceeded anything seen in 3C this sitting.

With the exception of the question on the vice president, all the questions were new in the sense that the same form of wording had not been used before, but they all offered accessible routes into the main topics of the specification. All the long answer questions lent themselves very readily to synoptic discussion, and few answers failed at least to attempt to look at different arguments.

There was a strikingly even spread in terms of number of responses across the short answers. It is traditional in these reports to comment on candidates' enthusiasm for the Supreme Court, but on this occasion neither Supreme Court question was particularly popular or well done. The long answer on judicial activism was the least attempted of the three, and an uncertain grasp of the key terms, discussed in more detail below, meant that performance generally lagged behind the answers on Congress and the president.

Question 1

The marks for this question were compressed within quite a narrow range. Nearly every candidate had at least an approximate idea of the meaning of pork barrel politics, and most could comment on one aspect of its significance, but were then hard pressed to find more. Many believed that the distribution of 'pork' was in the direct gift of the president. Pork barrel politics has certainly been in the news recently, and it was slightly surprising that the terms like the 'Cornhusker Kickback' and the 'Louisiana Purchase' did not capture the imagination of more candidates.

Question 2

Given one of the framers' major concerns was to dilute the power of the majority, candidates had a good range of material in the constitution to draw from. They were sometimes muddled, unsurprisingly perhaps, over the distinction between the concepts of separation of powers and checks and balances, since, as applied to the US system, the former is perhaps more helpfully understood as the separation of *personnel*. Candidates did not always distinguish carefully enough between measures to prevent the tyranny of the majority, and the checks and balances surrounding presidential power, designed to prevent the tyranny of one person.

Question 3

The role of the vice-president is an inviting question for many candidates; rather like third parties in 3C, it is a neatly self-contained topic and, should the question come up, it should represent a secure haul of marks. The question was phrased in the present tense, which should have been a clue to candidates that contemporary knowledge would be rewarded, but a number of answers were based almost wholly in the past. Candidates often spent more than half their answer cantering through a historical survey, including the same few ancient quotes, before perhaps moving on to discussing Dick Cheney and Joe Biden at the end. Both have been extensively covered in the press - Biden's role in opposing the Afghanistan 'surge' and promoting the president's agenda in the lame duck session of Congress (see for example <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/1210/46173.html>) - and it was slightly surprising that more candidates did not have some detailed knowledge of their role.

Question 4

The paucity of material many answers drew on suggested that candidates were less than fully prepared for this question, but, given that judicial independence is a key concept in the specification, its appearance should not have come as too much of a surprise. Life tenure and salaries 'which shall not be diminished during their Continuance in Office' were the factors most frequently mentioned. The appointment process could be cited; it is debatable whether it really does protect independence, but given the shortage of other points, enterprising candidates argued that it does.

Question 5

As is true of all questions, this question rewarded candidates who addressed themselves directly to it, and did not succumb to the temptation to answer their own. The appearance of the word 'federalism' in a question invariably prompts a good proportion to launch into a historical survey of its evolution over the last 200 years, and it is rarely more than marginally rewarded. It is inevitable probably that students need to be introduced to all the varieties of dual, layer cake, marble cake etc, but it is worth stressing to them that they are unlikely to be required to feature heavily in an answer.

Question 6

This was the first time, under either the current specification or its predecessor, that an essay question has been set on judicial activism, and a good number of the answers revealed some confusion in the minds of candidates as to its meaning. It is a term without an agreed definition, but, certainly to get into Level 3, candidates needed to show what *they* meant by it, and this was beyond many. It is not, for example, equivalent to a belief in the 'living constitution', nor is originality the same as judicial restraint, another popular misconception. Any of these terms, or the concepts behind them, could very easily be the subject of future questions, and it is important that candidates have a precise understanding of them if they hope to do well.

Question 7

This question was as broad a question on Congress as could be devised, and nearly all candidates were readily able to make their knowledge relevant to it. Consequently, it was unusual for an answer to be placed below Level 2, for AO1 at least, and what then differentiated answers was the sophistication of the development, and, as ever, the citing of relevant and recent evidence. The recent passage of health care reform provided an excellent case study, as it did for question 8 in a different context, in the strengths and weaknesses of Congress. Some candidates got themselves in a tangle trying to identify ideological positions in this discussion, and it would be worth pointing out to them that, in this unit, it is unlikely that either Congress or the presidency will be usefully seen in ideological terms.

Question 8

The 'power to persuade' was a phrase familiar to nearly all the candidates who attempted this question, and many were able to attribute it correctly as well. Attention to the recent passage of health care reform stood candidates in good stead for this examination, as, having referred to it as an example of pork barrel politics in question one, they could use it here again as a study of presidential persuasion. Some candidates' failure to keep the question in focus meant that their impressive levels of knowledge did not gain the reward they were clearly capable of.

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