

Government and Politics

Advanced GCE A2 H495

Advanced Subsidiary GCE AS H095

Examiners' Reports

January 2011

HX95/R/11J

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Chief Examiner's Report

It was good to note the steady increase in numbers while maintaining the high standards delivered by the majority of the candidates. It was encouraging to see evidence of better source use and knowledge of the mandatory topics in the AS papers. Improvement there could come with more of a focus on AO3 and more avoidance of the prepared answers. Increasingly there are signs of more contemporary political knowledge with examples being utilised from the experiences of the coalition government.

As in previous series, the prepared answer was evident in some A2 papers. The tendency to write the essay which the candidate has done before, or we have set before, on a topic does cost grades. We would suggest that a good way to prepare candidates might be to focus on what titles might come up and not on what has come up.

It was very encouraging to note the growing use of knowledge of contemporary politics in both AS and A2 (and in F853 in particular), and centres should do all they can to encourage it.

Few candidates entered for F856 in this series, so no report was possible.

F851 Contemporary Politics of the UK

General Comments

This January's paper illustrated, if such illustration was necessary, two key pieces of advice that all examination candidates should be given:

- 1 revise all parts of the mandatory topics;
- 2 and answer the question set.

1 **Mandatory topics**

Candidates should prepare and revise all the topics listed in the specification relating to political parties and pressure groups. In answer to Q1(a) in this exam, for example, many candidates struggled to identify and describe more than the forms of party income contained in the source material and therefore failed to gain more than half marks (or, to put it another way, lost up to six marks).

2 **Answer the question**

Answering the question set is fundamental to any good exam result, but many candidates often fail to do so. In this exam, for example, some candidates wrote about pressure group methods in answer to Q2 without considering how, or why, these might pose a threat to democracy and when answering questions 4 and 5 often simply described a range of factors associated with voting behaviour rather than attempting to assess the relative importance of the mass media or the party leader.

It is worth reiterating advice to candidates given before in these reports and at INSET:

- in most cases introductions at AS are, literally and metaphorically, a waste of time. Most candidates simply say what they are going to say - often at great length - before going on to say it. There are exceptions to this, of course, for example, it might be useful to explain what might be meant by democracy in Q2 before considering whether pressure groups are a threat to democracy, but in most cases, introductory remarks use time and space better devoted to substantive argument;
- do exactly what the question asks - no more and no less (focus);
- look at both sides of the argument (balance);
- provide a number of different points (range);
- explain each point fully and provide examples (depth);
- and if you must write a conclusion, don't simply summarise what you have already said.

Comments on Individual Questions

1a Using the sources and your own knowledge, outline the main ways in which political parties are funded in Britain.

The best answers identified four or five sources of party funding and provide examples of each. Weaker answers were limited to membership fees and donations and gained no more than half marks. A significant number of candidates stated that there was no state funding of parties in the UK or that state funding (as opposed to benefits in kind) was provided for election campaigns.

It is worth reminding candidates that there are only AO1 marks for Q1(a): there is no need for any contextual or introductory remarks or for candidates to do anything else other than do what the question asks for.

1b Using the sources and your own knowledge, discuss the view that there should be more state funding for political parties.

There were many good answers to this standard question and candidates were generally aware of the arguments both for and against increasing state funding to parties. The best answers were focused, discursive and made good use of recent examples, however, some candidates ignored the question and wrote about expenditure while others assumed that more state funding meant that all parties would have the same amount of money, or that parties would not be permitted any other source of income.

As with all the essay questions on this paper, candidates who considered only one side of the argument struggled to gain more than half marks, no matter how good the points they made were.

2 Discuss the view that pressure groups are a threat to British democracy.

Another standard question that elicited many good responses with candidates able to argue both sides of the case and deploy a range of arguments. The best answers contained a number of points and included contemporary examples, for example, the recent tuition fee demonstrations. Weaker answers lacked balance or simply described pressure group methods without discussing why these might represent a threat to democracy or not.

3 To what extent do elections in the United Kingdom fulfil their purpose?

Elections in the UK have a number of purposes and the best candidates were aware of this. They were also able to discuss the extent to which these purposes were met and supported their arguments with a variety of recent examples from national, regional, local and European elections. However, some candidates were handicapped by a lack of awareness of the variety of roles performed by elections, while others tried to turn the question into one on the case for and against the First-Past-the-Post system.

4 How important has the mass media been in deciding the outcome of recent general elections?

Questions on the mass media are always popular, but often badly done. The closeness of the last election, the televised leaders' debates and the prominence given to events like 'bigotgate', meant that candidates had plenty of examples to draw upon, but while better answers used this knowledge to illustrate their arguments, weaker ones tended to use it as a substitute for analysis.

In better answers, the use of theories of media influence – direct effect, reinforcement, agenda setting, framing, for example – enabled candidates to get to the heart of the question quickly, but weaker answers were often devoted entirely to describing the mass media and sometimes ignored both its power and limitations. Others described a range of factors thought to influence the outcome of elections without considering the relative importance of the mass media.

5 Discuss the view that it is the party leader that is the most important factor influencing voting behaviour.

Another popular question which some candidates failed to answer well – and for much the same sort of reasons. The best answers considered why party leaders might have a significant impact on voting but also took into account the importance of other factors, both short and long-term. They also went beyond 'Brown bad, Blair/Cameron good' and discussed the importance of personal appeal, leadership style, party management, personal philosophy and media ability. Weaker answers typically concentrated on the party leader to the exclusion of other factors or provided the generic 'all I know about voting behaviour' type of essay which did not address to the question.

F852 Contemporary Government of the UK

General Comments

The route to success remains much the same. Candidates need to use the sources when asked, keep the focus on the question set (and don't write the essay **they** want to write), and remember that this paper is called 'Contemporary Government'. They could be better at 'discussing' than just 'describing' which we always find surprising. However we did feel overall that progress has been made. There was a better grasp of the mandatory topics, more evidence of the sources being intelligently used and more recent examples utilised to back up points made. The one area that was still very concerning was the poor presentation of many of the scripts, with some poor spelling and grammar. It is worth stressing that 16% of the marks are going for AO3 and that there were too many cases where candidates quite unnecessarily dropped at least a grade because of their low level of attainment in this respect.

Comments on Individual Questions

1a Using the sources and your own knowledge, describe the membership of the House of Lords.

As always there were three types of response. The first relied totally on the sources. The second ignored the sources and simply used their own knowledge. The third made intelligent use of the sources and added their own knowledge. The latter did best. It still surprises us that some candidates simply ignore the obvious points made in the sources, such as the bishops, number of women and cross benchers. Some candidates really had excellent knowledge and were aware of the changes made by the Blair government over hereditary peers and Law Lords. Try and avoid the tendency to get into a great debate over the merits and demerits of the current House of Lords. There are only AO1 (descriptive marks) going for this question. Save the debate for other questions.

1b Using the sources and your own knowledge, discuss the need for parliamentary reform.

The better candidates ensured that 'Parliament' and not just the Commons or Lords was discussed, and made intelligent use of the points made in the sources and then developed them utilising their own knowledge. Some got a little carried away with the need to reform the electoral system, and while we were prepared to give some credit for it, there were limits as we did want the focus to be on reforming the institution rather than its selection process. Some focussed entirely on the Lords and felt the need to replicate what they had written in 1(a), and while they could get some credit for dealing with the need to reform membership etc, they really could not get out of L2 for such a narrow answer. We got some very good answers which ignored the Lords totally, and they could go to L3 if they rose above just reiterating the points made in the sources. A few managed to deal with not only the Lords and the Commons, but also argued that given the abolition of the hereditary principle in the Lords, it might be time to start reviewing the role of the final part of Parliament – the Monarchy. They got highly rewarded! It was interesting to note that some candidates who managed to make considerable use of the sources in 1(a), then ignored them totally for 1(b).

2 Discuss the view that the cabinet is no longer an important part of the executive of the UK.

It was good to see that there was a higher level of knowledge on this mandatory topic than has sometimes been the case in the past. The better candidates showed a real grasp of the role of the cabinet and what had happened to it since Thatcher. Some answers seem to focus primarily on Blair and his 'sofa' approach and stopped in 2008, while some excellent ones commented on Brown and the impact that coalition might have on the cabinet. It was also really good to note how well the majority responded to the requirement to 'discuss' and tried hard to present a balanced case each way. It is worth stressing that this paper is called 'Contemporary Government of the UK', and we really do reward those who present a case based on recent (and relevant) events. There were still some candidates who were reluctant to move much beyond 1980 and have a rather dated 'Cabinet v Prime Minister' essay to peddle. We would like the focus to be very much on the 21st century now.

3 Discuss the view that further constitutional reform is needed in the UK.

By far the most popular of the three optional questions. The best looked at what reforms had been undertaken recently, looking at the Lords (again some helpful sources there!), the CRA, devolution and so on and then argued a case for and against any more. Some were determined to write another essay, either on the underlying principles of the constitution, or more often, the written/unwritten essay was produced. As always the route to the highest marks lies by actually answering the question set and not by writing the prepared essay on something else. As always it was intriguing to see how many candidates clearly knew more on their optional topic and got more AO1 marks on this question than they did on the mandatory Q2.

4 Discuss the view that having an independent judiciary is the best method of protecting the rights and liberties of UK citizens.

Quite a lot of candidates simply stopped reading the question at 'independent judiciary' and we got a discussion as to whether the UK had, or had not, an independent judiciary. We have set that one before. Some had an excellent essay on the Constitutional Reform Act which they felt was appropriate, but of course was likely to stay firmly in L1 as it did not have a great deal to do with rights and liberties. The better candidates looked carefully at the whole question, considered what the methods for protecting rights and liberties might be, and then put them into some sort of order. Some felt that the attitude of the 'establishment' was vital, but also looked at other 'protectors' such as the press, parliament and pressure groups. As always it was not done by many centres, but those that did it, and got the focus right, tended to score highly.

5 To what extent has membership of the EU benefited democracy in the UK?

Few did it and there were three types of answer. The first kept the focus firmly on 'democracy' and considered issues such as the HRA/ECHR and the UK's involvement in the whole decision making process in the EU. They tended to do very well as this is a complex topic involving some difficult issues and we are prepared to reward highly any candidate who is prepared to take them on in a balanced way. The second type of candidate ignored the 'democracy' bit and we got a 'merits/demerits of membership of the EU essay' which was of course of variable relevance and could prove quite difficult to mark as sometimes some of the material was relevant. The final type, mercifully going down in numbers, was the vitriolic eurorant accusing the EU of destroying all that is pure and decent in the UK.

F853 Contemporary US Government and Politics

General Comments

Generally speaking the quality of the answers on this paper was of a good standard. All of the questions were attempted in relatively equal manner and the compulsory source question did not pose any particular problems. The best answers were able to display both a decent essay technique which focused on the question set and knowledge of contemporary developments in US government and politics.

Comments on Individual Questions

1a Describe two types of pressure group and provide at least one US example of each to illustrate your answer.

It was quite interesting, but not entirely surprising, to see that 1(a) proved to be something of a discriminator in that on the US paper the typology of pressure groups does not receive as much attention as on its AS British counterpart. The lesson to be learnt by centres is to make sure that all items on the specification are covered as they do form the basis for exam questions. Indeed, particularly on a short answer question, there is the opportunity to focus on the more narrow aspects of the specification which might not feature so prominently in a longer essay question.

1b Explain why pressure groups are considered by some to be a threat to democracy.

1(b) posed fewer problems but as frequently mentioned in previous reports, candidates would do well to include more specific references to US pressure groups and US government and politics rather than making generic points about their role in a democracy. Key concepts and terms such as K Street and lobbying, the revolving door, iron triangles and policy networks provided a sound basis for discussion. Of course the Tea Party Movement offered scope for argument in terms of participation and representation. Similarly those who applied elitist and pluralist arguments were able to access the higher levels of the markband. Centres would do well to discuss a range of relevant arguments for and against pressure groups in a democracy as a matter of course. This is a standard topic and some answers were a little limited in their critique of pressure group activity. Some candidates did spend too long on this question given its allocation of 15 marks which impacted upon later answers.

2 Discuss the view that long-term factors are the key influence on voting behaviour in presidential elections.

The best answers were able to provide a detailed discussion of the 2008 election with details and statistics of the various factors that influenced voting behaviour. Generally, there was little reference to voting behaviour models and these should be included as part of the delivery of this topic. The models would have allowed candidates to distinguish between long- and short-term factors more easily. There was some confusion with reference to primaries slipping into some essays. Speculation about possible future elections based upon the mid terms of 2010 was not really relevant.

3 Evaluate the claim that political parties are in decline.

Perhaps the most surprising feature of this question was that the arguments in favour of party renewal were not to the fore. Centres might consider a sharper focus on the functions of parties as a basis to consider their worth today. Candidates who were able to make reference to the increased polarisation of the parties in the Congress and the battles faced by Obama over healthcare were rewarded.

4 Discuss the claim that the Constitution has evolved greatly since 1787.

It was anticipated that this would be an open ended question that would allow a consideration of a wide range of factors such as federalism, the separation of powers and the changing powers of the presidency. Most candidates however chose to take a narrower route through the question by focusing on the amendments that have been passed and those that have failed. There was some excellent discussion on the role played by the Supreme Court and reference to cases was, and is always, a quick way to gain AO1 marks. This was entirely legitimate and candidates were able to gain good marks with such an approach; however, it did seem to expose a tendency for candidates to rely on pre-packaged answers. Many candidates wanted to answer the question as to why there have been so few amendments. Whilst some of this discussion was relevant, the question did have a different focus and centres might consider placing greater emphasis on the need to focus on the question set. As a general rule of thumb, examiners are always looking to put a different spin on traditional topics and questions and sometimes the nuances of an individual word in the question have a great impact upon what is expected for a relevant answer.

5 Evaluate the factors which influence how members of Congress vote.

This was a popular question. Most candidates covered a wide range of influences but often without supporting evidence or examples though there were many pleasing attempts to consider the relative importance of each. The best answers were able to make reference to the present Congress and discuss issues such as Obamacare, the impact of the Tea Party Movement and subsequent increase in polarisation.

6 To what extent has Obama been a successful president?

Hand on heart, it is not often that an examiner can claim to have enjoyed reading the answers to some of the questions that are set; however, this was not the case with this question. We gained the impression that the students who attempted this question rather enjoyed it and it was rewarding to see that most were able to discuss developments in the first two years of the administration in some detail. To be critical, it would have been nice to have seen a greater focus on theories of presidential power which would have allowed the Obama presidency to have been placed in the broader context. As mentioned at INSET though, the focus on the present is something that we are keen to nurture and given the success of this question, centres and candidates should expect more of the same.

7 To what extent has the Supreme Court become more conservative in recent years?

Again this was quite an open ended question which invited a variety of responses with the potential to discuss appointments, rulings and voting blocs on the Court. The best answers were able to do all of this and make specific reference to the Roberts Court. They were able to recognise the balance of the Court and the role played by swing Justice Kennedy. The impact of the Bush and Obama appointments provided scope for discussion. There was some uncertainty about the meaning of conservative and this was confused on occasion with judicial activism. Issues relating to the politicisation of the Court and the constraints upon the Court also allowed relevant discussion.

8 Discuss the view that rights and liberties are not adequately protected in the USA.

As mentioned in previous reports, the best answers were able to discuss the rights protected in the Bill of Rights and provide a detailed report of cases from the Supreme Court which may or may not have protected rights. Inevitably, weaker answers relied on Roe and Brown and the better ones were able to discuss the significance of cases such as Carhart v Gonzales and Boumediene v Bush. The role played by the presidency and Congress after 9/11 was the driving force behind this question.

When one looks at the specification for this paper and the synoptic paper, and when one considers developments in the UK with the role played by the new Supreme Court and the impact of the ECHR, centres would be well advised to consider placing greater emphasis on the teaching of this topic.

F854 Political Ideas and Concepts

General comments

Even with a relatively small entry, there was a considerable divergence in the range of scripts. Some candidates had been very well prepared and fully understood the demands of this unit, whereas others struggled to come to terms with the subject matter. It was pleasing to see that nearly all candidates answered four questions, although there were a significant number who wrote very short final essays. Exam technique overall seems to be improving as centres and candidates become used to the format of the paper. It was also encouraging to see nearly all candidates had understood the advice to illustrate their answers with reference to relevant political thinkers and limited their application to modern politics (a skill reserved for the sister paper F856). What, perhaps, needs improving is the focus on the question set. There was still a temptation by some candidates to fail to fully think about the demands of the question, instead seeing key words and then writing a pre-prepared answer. Also of concern were those candidates that seemed to misunderstand how to answer compare and contrast questions. Many answers were very descriptive, failing to consider direct points of similarity and difference.

Comments on Individual Questions

1a Outline what is meant by the concept of equality.

As this was a part of the compulsory question it had a significant impact on the outcome for all candidates. The biggest problem candidates had with this question was their failure to adequately define equality, either using the word equal to define equality or choose only to write about the different types of equality, mentioned in the source. The very best answers were able to come to an overall definition relating to the concept of uniform apportionment.

1b Compare and contrast equality of outcome with equality of opportunity.

As with 1(a), being a compulsory question meant that candidates had to engage with the two concepts. Many answers only described the two concepts making very limited comparisons in a short final paragraph. A significant number did directly contrast the two concepts but failed to consider any points of similarity (eg need for state intervention) and thus produced an imbalanced response. Candidates need to be made fully aware of the demands of a compare and contrast question.

2 Compare and contrast protective with developmental forms of democracy.

Whereas most answers displayed a good understanding of the meaning of protective democracy, fewer understood the developmental model. A significant number confused it with the idea of the developmental role of the state and talked about promoting economic growth. With only effectively understanding one of the two concepts, it made it difficult to make valid comparisons. As with Q1(b), many answers unfortunately adopted a descriptive rather than a comparative approach to the question.

3 Discuss the benefits of the different forms of globalisation.

Some answers tended to focus more on political globalisation rather than economic or cultural, or were descriptive explanations of globalisation. There were, however, a significant number of answers that did understand the relative benefits and drawbacks of all three types and thus were balanced and effective. The very best answers did also use a range of contemporary theory going beyond the mainstream theorist traditionally taught by centres.

4 Discuss how consent is granted in both democracy and dictatorship.

Answers generally were aware of the importance of electoral consent in a democracy and often questioned if any legitimate consent could be given to a dictatorship, beyond references to the importance of charismatic authority, or compliance through force. Some very good answers did question the legitimacy of democratic consent through introducing Marxist style analysis of bourgeois hegemony and thus made parallels with totalitarian style mass propaganda in securing popular consent for dictatorial regimes.

5 Compare and contrast procedural and substantive forms of justice.

Those that chose to answer this question tended to be well prepared through having a good appreciation of the meaning of the two types of justice. Where some answers suffered, once again, was in their descriptive rather than comparative approach to the two concepts.

6 Discuss the view that conservatism is merely opposition to change.

This was a very popular optional question and one in which most answers had an appreciation of the different themes underpinning conservatism. A popular approach was to consider the importance of opposition to change in the different strands of conservatism. Many who adopted this approach tended to argue that the New Right was in fact advocating radical change, focusing on economic change. Answers tended to ignore the social conservative strand of the New Right in resisting attempts to modernise traditional social values. A number of answers also considered the range of values inherent with conservatism, although some did get sidetracked into a different question on whether conservatism was an ideology at all.

7 Compare and contrast liberal and socialist ideas on human nature.

A number of answers failed to address the final part of the question, instead undertaking a generalised comparison on the relevant ideas of liberalism and socialism. Those that did focus on human nature had broadly a good understanding of the attitudes towards human nature of both ideologies, although few highlighted socialist attitudes towards the malleability of human nature, thus requiring a transformation of society for the naturally cooperative and gregarious side of human nature to emerge. Once again, with the comparison questions, a significant number were too descriptive in their approach.

8 Evaluate the post-modernist critique of political ideology.

Those that did attempt this question tended to have a good idea of the basis of post-modernism. Some, however, were very much focused on literary rather than theory themes, thus failing to fully engage with the political ideology part of the question. The very best answers did produce a balanced approach in evaluating the question, considering issues such as whether the post-modernist rejection of meta-narratives was actually becoming a meta-narrative in its own right.

F855 US Government and Politics

General Comments

There were a relatively small number of centres who attempted this paper although there was an increase on last year. This might reflect the view that there it is possible to tackle this paper in January with a sharper focus on a few topics rather than covering the whole of the US specification in one term as is required if sitting for F853 at this time. Certainly, it seems to be the case that the paper did not present any greater challenge to those who sat the paper now compared to a June sitting.

That said, the quality of the answers on this paper was of a variable standard. The best answers were able to display both a decent essay technique which focused on the question set and knowledge of contemporary developments in both the US and UK government and politics. Any references to the EU and other countries were well received. It is perhaps worth reiterating that this is not a necessity but, where appropriate and possible, it is a worthwhile strategy to incorporate into teaching and students' essay strategies. All of the questions were attempted in equal manner.

Comments on Individual Questions

1 To what extent does the media determine the outcome of elections?

This was a popular question although, perhaps, inevitably, the actual impact of the media as an influence upon voting behaviour often lacked depth and sophistication. Weaker answers simply assumed the media does influence voting behaviour along the lines of the oft quoted "It's the Sun wot won it". Better answers were able to discuss the competing theories surrounding the impact of the media such as the filter and reinforcement effects and also to consider the various forms of the media today such as the use of the internet. Discussion of a range of other relevant factors and models of voting behaviour also provided great scope for detailed discussion.

2 Analyse the view that parties sacrifice their principles in order to win elections.

The best answers were able to provide a detailed discussion of recent elections. It was anticipated that Cameron's attempts to move the Conservative party to the centre and the parallels that have been drawn with New Labour, together with Bush's compassionate conservatism, might have featured more heavily. Generally speaking party ideology does seem to present challenges to students which they find hard to overcome.

3 Examine the effectiveness of direct action and public protest as a means of pressure groups achieving success.

There were some issues with the meaning of direct action but most candidates were able to discuss a range of factors which can influence the effectiveness of a pressure group. The question did offer the opportunity to consider modern day developments such as the student protests against tuition fees and the Tea Party Movement. Better answers considered a range of factors such as leadership and economic and political leverage. The question also allowed consideration of different political systems such as totalitarian states.

4 Evaluate the claim that judiciaries alone are unable to provide an adequate protection of rights and liberties.

Many of the answers to this question rather assumed that judiciaries provide an adequate protection of rights. They would have done well to consider the arguments which suggest that the Supreme Court in the USA has become rather conservative recently and to assess the importance of parliamentary sovereignty in the UK. Generally, the role of legislatures, executives, pressure groups, media and culture in the defence of rights was in need of development. Those candidates who were able to refer to rulings from the UK Supreme Court and to discuss the provisions of the ECHR were rewarded. Mention of social rights and the role played by the ECJ (as opposed to the European Court of Human Rights) also provided the basis for relevant discussion.

5 Analyse the strengths and weaknesses of written constitutions.

This was a popular question. Most candidates covered a range of the standard arguments for and against written constitutions. Better answers considered recent developments such as the debate surrounding the EU constitution and the impact of recent constitutional reforms in the UK.

6 Contrast the effectiveness of legislatures in fulfilling their representative function.

This was not a popular question. Those who attempted the question were able to provide some discussion of the representative function with detail of the social, gender and ethnic representation in the Congress and Parliament. Some were able to refer to other chambers. Few mentioned the impact of electoral systems upon proportionality and so missed a good opportunity to access the higher markbands.

7 “A strong executive is vital for the effective formulation and delivery of policy.” Discuss.

Those who attempted this question generally needed to consider the wording of the question more precisely. Separation of formulation and delivery policy provided the basis for discussion of a range of issues. The impact of coalition government in the UK provided an opportunity for innovative analysis to this standard question.

8 Examine the importance of the judicial selection and appointment process in securing an independent judiciary.

Whilst knowledge of the US process was generally well evidenced, there was less discussion of changes to the UK's procedures following the Constitutional Reform Act of 2005. Similarly reference to concepts such as the rule of law and development of ideas relating to judicial independence could generally have been developed further.

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