

Examiners' Report/
Principal Examiner Feedback

January 2012

Government and Politics 6GP04 4C
Governing the USA

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Publications Code UA030563

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General Comments:

The 4C paper in January remains a minority pursuit and entries remain at about a quarter of the entry for 3C. Nevertheless, as last January's report pointed out, there is a sound case for taking 4C first, as probably more knowledge of institutions is assumed in the study of representation than the other way round. Achievement in both units was roughly on a par, and there were some very impressive scripts at the top end of the mark range.

All the questions were in the mainstream of the specification and candidates seemed to find it an accessible paper. There was an interesting spread of answers, in that the Supreme Court was the topic of the least popular short answer and the most popular essay. Perhaps surprisingly, the short answer question on the separation of powers was the most popular but, for reasons discussed below, this may have not been the best choice for a number who attempted it. The long answer question on presidential careers was the least popular but, for those who thought through its implications, it offered a straightforward route into a discussion of the nature of presidential power.

It is worth pointing out to any centres which have not so far found them that further notes of guidance on topic C were issued last summer, and they can be found via the 'GCE from 2008' politics page on the Edexcel website under 'Teacher Support Materials'.

The 'Threshold Guidance' examiners receive has been added to the end of the report on each question; this defines the characteristics of typical bottom Level 2 and bottom Level 3 answers.

Comments on individual questions:

Question 1

It was surprising that this question was the least popular of the five short answer questions, as the personalities on the Supreme Court always seem to be one of the attractions of the topic for candidates. It may have been that the specified year left some uncertain as to which justices were being asked about but, in any event, those that did attempt had a generally secure grasp of both the identity of the justices concerned, and the implications of their appointment for both the ideological direction of the court and the extent to which it represents the nation. The term 'swing justice' seems to be one candidates like to deploy, and at least three of the four appointees were credited in different answers with assuming the role. The appointment of Samuel Alito has clearly been the most significant appointment in terms of the ideological balance of the court, but strangely he was the one of the four appointees who candidates were most prone to miss out.

Threshold guidance

To attain level 2, candidates typically need partially accurate knowledge of at least two recent nominees, and make two points with fairly simple and/or superficial explanation.

To attain level 3, candidates need mostly accurate knowledge of at least three recent nominees, a range of points (typically at least three/four well developed distinct points), a sense of competence and control in their handling of the material, and a logical structure.

Question 2

Many candidates seemed well prepared for this question and the recent history of voting in Congress gave them plenty of evidence to refer to in their answers. Many rewardably cited the near unanimous opposition of the congressional Republicans to the Obama agenda, and the defections of

some Democrats on some key votes, such as the health care reforms. They were also able to point to some examples of bipartisanship, such as the ratification of the START treaty and the vote to raise the debt ceiling last August. 'The folks back home' were predictably the other source of influence most frequently cited, and a few candidates rewardably referred to the recent banning of earmarks and the problems this has caused members of Congress.

Threshold guidance

To attain level 2, candidates typically need to consider two possible influences on members of Congress with fairly simple and/or superficial explanation.

To attain level 3, candidates need to consider at least three possible influences on members of Congress, a sense of competence and control in their handling of the material, developed use of contemporary/recent examples to support most points, some degree of balance and a logical structure.

Question 3

This was another question which had evidently been anticipated by a good number of candidates, and they had a variety of influences to discuss, supported by evidence from both the Obama administration and earlier. The 'egg' formula was almost universally known, although some weaker answers struggled to move beyond this, and fell back on a recitation of what sounded like the factors that might influence a UK prime minister, almost wholly unrewardably.

A crucial term of the question was 'most significant' and required candidates to evaluate the relative significance of the factors they discussed; failure to do this, and simply to present the examiner with an undifferentiated list, meant that an answer could not progress beyond Level 2.

Threshold guidance

To attain level 2, candidates typically need to consider two possible factors that influence the President with fairly simple and/or superficial explanation

To attain level 3, candidates typically need to consider at least three possible factors that influence the President, a sense of competence and control in their handling of the material, developed use of contemporary/recent examples to support most points and a logical structure.

Question 4

Questions on federalism are always popular and, no matter what their wording, elicit from the majority of candidates a historical sweep beginning in 1787 (or earlier) and proceeding via several different varieties of federalism to arrive in the present day. These narratives were certainly rewardable but would in most cases have benefited from a more sharply analytical approach. Some candidates (or more likely their teachers) had evidently been researching federalism online, and were able to refer to some varieties, such as the 'crazy quilt' federalism of the Obama administration, which have not yet found their way into most textbooks.

Threshold guidance

To attain level 2, candidates typically need two points with fairly simple and/or superficial explanation.

To attain level 3, candidates need a range of points (typically at least three/four well developed distinct points), a sense of competence and control in their handling of the material, developed use of contemporary/recent examples to support most points, some degree of balance and a logical structure.

Question 5

Although this was the most popular short answer question, many candidates failed to achieve as highly as they would have hoped. Many found difficulty in disentangling the concept of the separation of powers from the related concept of checks and balances, and some straightforwardly equated them. The basis of the strongest answers lay firstly in an accurate definition of the separation of powers, explaining that the functions of legislature, executive and judiciary are divided in the constitution between separate institutions, and that no member of one is able to serve in another (although in fact the constitution explicitly disbars only members of Congress from serving in another branch). If checks and balances were mentioned, it was important to clarify the relationship with the separation of powers, recognising that the checks and balances the constitution creates among the branches dilute the separation of powers, by giving members of one power over another, so that, for example, the president through his veto has a role in the legislative process. Candidates who then went on to argue that the separation of powers enabled effective checks and balances to occur, and referred, for example, to congressional scrutiny and judicial review, were highly rewarded.

Threshold guidance

To attain level 2, candidates typically need two points with fairly simple and/or superficial explanation.

To attain level 3, candidates need a range of points (typically at least three/four well developed distinct points), a sense of competence and control in their handling of the material, developed use of contemporary/recent examples to support most points and a logical structure.

Question 6

This was another well prepared question, and produced a good number of strong answers. Some answers surprisingly concentrated almost exclusively on the confirmation process as evidence for the court's political nature which, while it is certainly highly relevant, is by no means the entire picture. Most candidates had more to say about the court as a political body than a judicial one, although there is plenty to say about its judicial role, and stronger answers referred to the court's willingness to defy public opinion, for example in their flag burning decisions, the unpredictability of a justice's decisions once installed on the court and the court's desire to avoid political controversy, for example in the Schiavo case. It is worth remembering that it is not necessary in essays to refer to liberal and conservative viewpoints to score synoptic marks, even in answers on the Supreme Court, and the ascription of views some candidates made to liberals and conservatives added little to their answer.

Threshold guidance

To attain level 2, candidates typically need a couple of undeveloped points on each side of the argument, or one more developed point, with some simple explanation; points need only be partially accurate; the argument may not be consistently clear, and some points made may not be relevant to the question.

To attain level 3, candidates typically need at least three reasonably developed points on both sides of argument; the answer conveys a sense of competence and control in both explanations and direction of argument; expression is mostly precise, and relevant contemporary examples are fairly consistently used to develop and qualify points; the argument keeps the question firmly in focus and has a convincing conclusion.

Question 7

This question on Congress's foreign policy role had not appeared before, but in many ways it was the reverse of the more frequently asked question about the president's power over foreign policy. Many candidates

rewardably made the war-making power the focus of their answer, and had a wide range of evidence to draw on, most recently Congress's contribution to the action taken last year against Libya. However, there were certainly other areas to consider, and stronger answers discussed Congress's role in scrutiny, appointment confirmation and treaty ratification, as well of course as its power of the purse, which was used recently to thwart the president's plans to close Guantanamo Bay.

Threshold guidance

To attain level 2, candidates typically need a couple of undeveloped points on each side of the argument, or one more developed point, with some simple explanation; points need only be partially accurate; the argument may not be consistently clear, and some points made may not be relevant to the question.

To attain level 3, candidates typically need at least three reasonably developed points on both sides of argument; the answer conveys a sense of competence and control in both explanations and direction of argument; expression is mostly precise, and relevant contemporary examples are fairly consistently used to develop and qualify points; the argument keeps the question firmly in focus and has a convincing conclusion.

Question 8

As already indicated, this question was an invitation to discuss the extent of presidential power and whether the restraints upon it are too great to allow the president to meet the expectations placed upon him. One or two candidates dwelt too long on exactly whose expectations were being considered, and at least one candidate focused their answer entirely on the expectations of the framers of the constitution, which narrowed the scope of the question unnecessarily. Obviously the career of the current president, and the expectations with which he entered office, were an excellent source of evidence, but some answers consisted almost entirely of a narrative account of his first three years, with the consequence that, while they could score high AO1 marks, their AO2 marks suffered.

Threshold guidance

To attain level 2, candidates typically need a couple of undeveloped points on each side of the argument, or one more developed point, with some simple explanation; points need only be partially accurate; the argument may not be consistently clear, and some points made may not be relevant to the question.

To attain level 3, candidates typically need at least three reasonably developed points on both sides of argument; the answer conveys a sense of competence and control in both explanations and direction of argument; expression is mostly precise, and relevant contemporary examples are fairly consistently used to develop and qualify points; the argument keeps the question firmly in focus and has a convincing conclusion.

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Order Code UA030563 January 2012

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