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Examiners' Report January 2010

GCE Government and Politics 6GP03/3C

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New GCE 6GP03 3C - Processes in the USA

General comments:

This year saw the introduction of the new syllabus for A2 Politics, with its new criteria for assessing synopticity. A substantial proportion of the candidates who took the UK Politics exams in January understood what was required in order to be rewarded for demonstrating synoptic skills, but a significant minority did not. It is worth revisiting, therefore, what examiners are looking for when awarding marks for synopticity.

There are contrasting viewpoints on all of the most significant (and most interesting) issues in politics. By the time that candidates of Politics complete A2, they are expected to be able to demonstrate that they understand this key characteristic of Politics. It is also expected that they will be able to explain rival views and weigh up which of them makes the more persuasive academic case. Synoptic marks are given to candidates who show that they understand why the issues being addressed in the essay questions have become an arena for debate *and* can articulate effectively both sides of the debate (or, in some cases, more than two sides) *and* can reach a well-argued conclusion as to which viewpoint is the more compelling.

At its simplest, this is done by outlining one point of view, followed by another, and then offering a conclusion. This approach, while synoptic, lacks of sophistication and this will be reflected in the marks awarded. An essay that analyses the strengths and weaknesses of both sides (or each side) of the debate and evaluates which, on balance, is making the stronger case, has greater depth and will be rewarded accordingly. The most effective essays will capture the dynamic nature of political debate – going beyond simply setting out the strengths and weaknesses of each position but the criticisms levelled at the other side and the rebuttals of those criticisms.

This approach to assessing work provides opportunities for the strongest candidates to demonstrate their academic ability with essays that are well-informed, insightful and well-argued and we look forward to seeing more such essays as centres become more accustomed to the new specification.

Question 1***Why are US presidential elections so long?***

This was a very popular question and done well by a substantial proportion of the candidates. It required candidates to analyse the distinct phases of US Presidential elections and the factors that have led to the increasing length of the overall campaign. The phases are:

- The invisible primary, lasting at least a year, with preparation for running in elections being made even earlier (the 2012 website for Mike Huckabee has already been set up)
- The primaries which, if front loaded as heavily as in 2008, means that the invisible primary has to start earlier and with greater intensity
- The national convention that dominates politics in the summer of election year and, if no clear winner emerges from the primaries, is where a nominee could be chosen
- The general election of the autumn, featuring the head to head debates between the candidates and between their running mates
- The electoral college which, in extreme cases such as the 2000 election, may lead to the battle continuing beyond election day

Weaker responses tended to overlook the invisible primaries.

Stronger candidates were able to describe each phase of the campaign, but provided limited evaluation of why the overall campaign has lengthened over the past twenty years (even though many quoted figures comparing the length Nixon's campaign and Obama's campaign).

The strongest candidates were able to both assess the dynamics of elections campaigns and recognised that the frontloading of primaries puts pressure on candidates to declare earlier that they are running and that they have to achieve more, in terms of fundraising and establishing a public profile, more quickly than in the past.

Question 2***Why, and to what extent, does the Republican Party oppose affirmative action?***

This was also a popular question. However, as a hybrid question, requiring candidates to analyse different shades of opinion in the Republican Party on this policy issue, it proved a challenge to some candidates to address both elements of the question. Candidates were expected to recognise that almost all Republicans oppose affirmative action. There are some exceptions on the moderate wing of the party but, overall, resistance to affirmative action is very strong. However, the reasons/justifications for this position vary:

- Some argue that there are serious inequalities in US society that need to be addressed but that race-conscious programmes are not the preferred method of addressing them. Rather that they should be class based, providing support for the most needy regardless of race
- Others argue that America is a land of individual success/failure in which the government should not intervene to help those who have not succeeded. Doing so merely encourages a dependency mentality and harms both those who feel entitled not to help themselves and those who provide (through taxes) their support
-

Weaker candidates tended to discuss criticisms of affirmative action in general terms without specific reference to the Republican Party as if it could be safely assumed that all Republicans share the same position on this policy.

Stronger candidates were able to provide a link between the Republican Party and opposition to affirmative action, but without looking at the shades of opinion.

Strongest candidates were able to explain what it was in Republican ideology and support which inclined leaders of different strands of opinion in the party to oppose the affirmative action.

Question 3

In what ways, and to what extent, do pressure groups exert influence through initiatives and propositions?

This was the short-answer question on which there was the greatest gulf in performance between students. Not for the first time, candidates who had decided to attempt any pressure group question that appeared on the exam paper, were caught out by an unfamiliar question that required thought in the exam room (as opposed to reproducing model answers).

It required candidates to demonstrate an awareness that a number of factors enable pressure groups, especially wealthy ones, to influence public policy through direct democracy, including:

- To get an initiative or proposition onto a ballot a large number of signatures are required, and wealthy pressure groups have a record of hiring people to collect the signatures
- Wealthier pressure groups can also afford to recruit full time workers to set up campaign offices and organise volunteers so that their efforts are well-co-ordinated
- They can also afford expensive advertising campaigns
- They can even bring in extra support from outside the state (such as Mormon flooding into California to campaign for Proposition 8 that made Gay Marriage unconstitutional)

However, candidates should also be aware that all these advantages do not guarantee success in a public vote because:

- Less well-funded groups may have a more compelling message/cause
- Public inertia
- The signs of undue influence (a slick, expensive, campaign) may cause a backlash

For example, in 2008 all ten of the ballot measures in Colorado failed.

Weakest candidates simply failed to address the question and provided whichever pre-prepared question on pressure groups that they had memorised. Many of these students received no marks at all.

Stronger candidates were able to explain in general terms how pressure groups can take advantage of direct democracy, but demonstrated limited ability to illustrate their points with examples.

Strongest candidates could give examples of recent initiatives on issues relating to minorities, and who understood how these electoral devices work.

Question 4**Which groups of voters tend to support the Democratic Party, and why**

This was, by a wide margin, the most popular short-answer question and it was generally well-answered. It required candidates to demonstrate an awareness of the reasons that the following groups tend, with varying degrees of commitment, to support the Democratic Party:

- Traditional support from white working class families, including Catholics of European origin such as Italians, Poles and Irish, is significant especially among those who are in trade unions but has been declining for several decades, partly due to increased wealth and partly due to the Democratic Party's positions on social issues such as abortion and gay rights
- Jews, whose support has declined somewhat as the Republican Party, especially the neocons, has become more aggressively supportive of Israel
- Hispanics, whose support is fluid but tends to flow towards the Democrats each time that the Republican Party adopts aggressive policies in relation to immigration as they did in 2006/7
- Wealthy liberals, whose support has become progressively more solid with the rise of the Christian Right in the Republican Party, and its association with intolerance
- African Americans, whose solid support is linked to anti-poverty measures and affirmative action which Democrats generally favour and Republicans generally oppose
- Candidates were also credited for discussion of the defection of the 'solid south' in the wake of the Civil Rights movement.

Weakest candidates tended to provide *either* a list of groups that support the Democratic Party with limited explanations *or* an analysis of a limited number of groups that support the party

Stronger candidates struck a better balance between the number of groups analysed and the reasons for their support.

Strongest candidates placed greater emphasis on analysis than description and provided an informed explanation of the reasons that a range of groups support the Democratic Party.

Question 5**Assess the strengths and weaknesses of the Electoral College**

This was also a popular question. Candidates were expected to recognise that the following arguments are advanced in support of the Electoral College:

- It requires candidates to concentrate on key groups of voters (men have a different pattern of voting to women; ethnic groups vote differently; old and young, rich and poor have different concerns) and to concentrate on all regions of the nation, with their distinct issues and needs.
- It ensures that the States with the smallest populations can have a significant impact on the outcome of the election. Thus, while it is important to win large States, such as California and Texas, in a close race it is important not to neglect the small States.

Candidates were also expected to recognise that the following arguments are advanced in opposition to the Electoral College:

- Some States are solidly Democrat (often referred to as “blue” States), others solidly Republican (referred to as “red” States). This meant that voters in those States were largely taken for granted and had very little influence over the final result. Consequently, other States, especially ‘swing’ states have a disproportionate influence over the result.
- Disproportionate influence may arise because all States must have at least three Electoral College votes, making smaller States are over-represented compared to larger ones. If California had Electoral Votes in precise proportion to the three given to Wyoming, it would have 180 instead of 55
- Additionally, candidates representing minor parties have little likelihood of winning electoral college votes unless they have very high levels of support in a number of States.

Weakest candidates tended to provide an analysis of a majoritarian electoral system based on AS knowledge and understanding.

Stronger candidates provided an affective analysis of the weaknesses of the Electoral College but had less to offer on its strength.

Strongest candidates were able to effectively analyse both strengths and weaknesses of the Electoral College.

Question 6

‘Racial equality in the USA remains a distant dream.’ Discuss.

This was the most popular of the essay questions. It required candidates recognise to a substantial proportion of Americans would strongly endorse this statement, although they may differ on how this ‘dream’ can be realised. The two main themes who adopt this view are:

- Despite some advances and improvements, the legacy of racist policies has not been erased and that, collectively, those groups that suffered long-term systematic discrimination in the past continue to be at a disadvantage both socially and economically and that this situation will only be redressed through substantial government intervention, including affirmative action
- The US political system was built on racist foundations that have influenced politics and society in the past and continue to do so. Thus, not only has the legacy of past discrimination not been resolved but in less overt ways racism continues to be a problem in today’s America and that this situation will only be redressed if the terms of the debate are shifted to collective responsibility and reparations for the damage inflicted on the African American community over the past two centuries and more

Candidates were also expected to demonstrate an awareness that a substantial proportion of Americans would strongly disagree with this statement, although they may differ on how to respond the arguments in favour of government intervention to bridge the racial divide. The two main themes who adopt this view are:

- There is no longer a problem of racial inequality in the USA as demonstrated by a black president and racial minorities enjoying great success and even being national role models, such as Oprah Winfrey and Jennifer Lopez, and that insofar as there are wider issues of inequality that disproportionately affect visible minorities they should be dealt with on the basis of income rather than race
- While there may be stark inequalities in US society, they do not stem from race but from the competitive nature of the society, with winners and loser among all of America’s racial and ethnic groups

Although there is clear overlap between this question and previous questions on affirmative action, students needed to place race relations in a wider context.

Weakest candidates tried to turn it into a question exclusively about Affirmative Action. Also, some students at this level had memorised a range of facts and figures and neglected the structure of their essays – demonstrating that knowledge is of less value than thought. Some weaker students failed to recognise the synoptic nature of the question and presented only the perspective that they sympathised with.

Stronger answers tended to either lack depth or, despite a recognition that synoptic skills were needed, could not handle both sides of the debate effectively.

Strongest candidates were able to provide detailed analysis of at least two academic viewpoints on the prospects for race relations in the USA.

Question 7

***'The differences between the Democratic and Republican Parties are far greater than the differences within them.'* Discuss.**

As has been the case in the past, this essay on political parties was the least popular. It required candidates to should demonstrate an understanding of the main strands of opinion in each party to be able to provide and evaluation of whether the range of views within each party is wider than the gulf between the parties. This meant assessing:

- The ideologies and policies of the main factions within the Democratic Party, offering an assessment of the party's cohesion
- The ideologies and policies of the main factions within the Republican Party, offering an assessment of the party's cohesion
- The extent to which the main policies of the two main parties overlap or have similarities and whether these are less distinct than the ideological differences within the parties

Weakest candidates tended to provide dated responses, arguing that US political parties have no real ideological focus and therefore there is little to choose between them.

Stronger candidates tended to focus on the main policies associated with the two main parties without recognising that the question cannot be adequately answered without discussion of whether the balance of power within each party is towards the centre or the more extreme fringes.

Strongest candidates were able to discuss in detail the principal policy positions of at least two of the main factions within each party and weigh up how influential each group is within the party. The best candidates drew on recent developments, such as the success of each faction.

Question 8

Does pressure group activity benefit the wealthy at the expense of the more needy?

This was a straightforward question and was popular but it attracted a lot of rather weak answers.

Candidates were expected to be aware that many Americans (particularly those on the political right) believe pressure groups promote vigorous debate between rival viewpoints, resulting in policies that are likely to be in the best interests of society. Moreover, the range of access points means that all groups, including those which appear marginalised have the opportunity to influence policy, as demonstrated

by *Brown v Board* in 1954. Pressure groups also serve to engage people in the democratic process on a continuing basis, not just at elections, which is healthy in a democracy.

The counter view, mainly on the left, is that large, well-funded, groups tend to serve the interests of wealthier sections of society that have the resources to set up effective organisations, pay for them to have well-equipped offices, well-qualified staff and, above all, to employ people who have worked in government and have detailed knowledge of its workings and extensive contacts among their former colleagues (the revolving door syndrome).

With all these advantages, the left believes that these groups:

- Are far more likely to influence what legislation is introduced, its provisions and the resources it allocates than disadvantaged, unorganised groups such as the homeless whose needs may be much greater
- Have proved effective at evading the regulations designed to limit their influence which is why lobbying and campaign finance rules seem always in need of strengthening.
- Play too large a role in elections, funding the candidates who support their cause and doing their best to ensure that the issues that matter most to them are the focus of election campaigns. As these issues are often divisive (referred to as "wedge" issues) pressure groups are perceived to divide, rather than unite, Americans. For the left, therefore, the concerns of the founding fathers were legitimate and they tend to be critical of the role played by pressure groups in modern America.

Weakest candidates tended to provide a descriptive account of the role of pressure groups in US politics, with very limited analysis

Stronger candidates tended to produce lopsided responses which, while synoptic, analysed one view in much greater detail and depth than the other.

Strongest candidates recognised that there are two distinct schools of thought on the role of pressure groups in US politics and provided an analysis of their strengths and weaknesses, reaching an informed, thoughtful, conclusion.

Statistics

Overall Subject Grade Boundaries

Grade	A	B	C	D	E
Overall subject grade boundaries	50	45	40	36	32
Uniform Mark	80	70	60	50	40

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