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Pearson Edexcel GCE
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Paper 3A: UK Political issues



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The recent pattern of a strong focus on contemporary events continued from most candidates and on most questions this year. Unlike in previous series no candidates seemed to fall back on pre-Blair content, and candidates tended to abide closely by the specified dates contained explicitly within questions 2, 4, 6 and 8, as well as employing much recent and relevant evidence on the other questions.

One interesting point for this series in particular was that the essays were of almost exactly equal popularity with close to a third of candidates attempting each. The spread of short responses was not quite as even, but each question was still attempted by a reasonable number and there was no one overwhelmingly popular option.

There remains an issue of candidates being caught out by a failure to carefully attend to all of the demands of the question posed, most notably in this series to appreciate the plural 'governments' on question 3, or to give weight to both the 'how and why' elements of questions 2 and 4. Many candidates also disregarded the requirement of Q6 to focus on the extent to which government policies had met the governments' own aims, rather than simply being successful or otherwise in general.

Timing was good overall, with very few candidates failing to find the time to answer the correct number of questions, and most candidates apparently devoting a roughly equal amount of time to each short response, and to Section B as compared with Section A.

Structure was also slightly improved overall, as fewer candidates spent time on an excessively lengthy introduction or conclusion to an essay that repeated points elsewhere. It was also noticeable though that fewer candidates made the mistake of producing a series of underdeveloped points – although there is no 'magic number' most candidates found that three-four points on short responses provided a good balance of quantity and quality.

Balance remained an essential part of achieving Level 3 on essay responses, and on those short responses that required it, and for the most part this was done well, albeit question 8 was more susceptible than the other questions to one sided, occasionally polemical, responses. Candidates also showed a willingness to consider different ways of responding to debates – for example by discussing a variety of counter-approaches on question 7.

In terms of synopticity there was a small but ascertainable improvement from last year, with more candidates explicitly and accurately ascribing different points of view within, between, and outside of political parties, and less falling back on the weaker 'it could be argued that' or 'some say'. As a result, less candidates received a lower score for synopticity than for the other assessment objectives than has sometimes previously been the case.

There were relatively few basic factual errors, although a few candidates strayed outside the specific meaning of the 'benefit cap' on question 3. A small number of policies were also mis-ascribed to the wrong governments, most commonly on question 7. In general though candidates' understanding of key concepts from the specification was sound or better.

Q1

This was the 2nd least attempted of the short responses, but also one of the best.

The difference between this and previous PCC questions was the demand for a focus on *controversial*, which was designed to stop candidates trotting out the same 1 or 2 arguments in favour of and against PCCs. Although a small number of candidates spent a lot of time on arguments in favour, or on the general background to the establishment of PCCs, most did focus on controversy and were able to offer a range of valid points often backed up with accurate statistical information on turnouts.

General criticisms, such as the lack of a requirement for relevant experience, cost, and a lack of accountability, were commonly used and creditable points. Equally, issues that have arisen in practice – such as low turnout or perceived poor job performance - were also very relevant and creditable. Some candidates also offered valid examples of controversies related to specific PCCs, such as Shaun Wright's resignation, and alleged mis-spending by other PCCs.

Level 1 responses were rare – where they did occur they were usually because candidates failed to engage with ‘controversial’.

Level 2 responses tended to lack range, or else the points were valid but lacked sufficient development or evidence to take them into the top level.

Level 3 responses discussed a range of valid controversies, showing clear understanding, and usually referenced specific evidence or examples.

Q2

This was the least popular of the short response questions, it tended to show a good level of policy knowledge. Increased rates of taxation, proposed renationalisation, and greater investment in public services were all popular points, whilst ‘people’s quantitative easing’ was also discussed by a small number of candidates.

The most significant general weakness was in addressing the ‘why’ part of the question. It was perfectly permissible for candidates to address ‘how’ and ‘why’ together or separately, but covering both adequately was key to a good mark. Some candidates offered little on this aspect, or only a general assertion that it was caused by left wingers becoming more prominent within the party. Only the strongest responses gave clear economic whys, linked to Keynesianism or socialist theory.

A secondary weakness was to wander away from the economic focus of the ‘how’, and to talk about Labour policies that have a weaker link to intervention – abolishing tuition fees for example was discussed by a number of candidates but not well tied into the question’s focus. More pleasingly few candidates made the mistake of devoting much time to the economic policies of other parties, or of pre-Corbyn Labour, except for the purpose of contrast.

Level 1 responses offered only a general explanation of a ‘shift to the left’ with very little focus on economic policy.

Level 2 responses were almost invariably stronger on ‘how’ than ‘why’ – offering reasonable understanding of policy changes but less or sometimes no understanding of the reasons behind them.

Level 3 responses gave both clear policy examples related to economic intervention (how) and explained the reasons behind the changes (why) – they did not necessarily give equal weight to these aspects, but covered both sufficiently.

Q3

This was the second most popular of the short response questions and, unlike some benefits questions in the past (where for example the universal credit has been confused with universal benefits in general), the vast majority of candidates did accurately understand the meaning of the benefits cap. A good number of candidates were also able to give accurate specific figures.

Conversely there was still a minority of candidates who inaccurately considered the limits to child benefit for 3rd children or high earners, or indeed the removal of housing benefits to under-25s, to be part of the cap policy. This was sometimes done in addition to, rather than instead of, focusing on more germane material: such candidates were still credited for their relevant material but cost the candidates time which could have been better spent addressing the specific question asked.

More commonly many candidates focused on arguments that could reasonably apply to *any* cuts to benefits – such as dependency culture, cost, impact on poverty etc. These were all perfectly creditable, but it was pleasing when some candidates addressed more benefits cap specific issues such as the setting of the cap figures, the impact of different areas of the country etc.

Balance was essential to reaching level 3, and most candidates did make a reasonable attempt at this.

Level 1 responses failed to understand what was meant by the benefits cap, or offered only limited arguments on one side of the debate.

Level 2 responses outlined accurate points, often on both sides of the debate, but did not develop them to the extent required for level 3. In a few cases the development was strong enough but the range of points was insufficient.

Level 3 responses possessed a clear focus on the benefit cap specifically and a good mixture of depth and breadth, often showing detailed knowledge of both theoretical arguments and practical impact.

Q4

This question was middling in popularity amongst the short responses, and was also the short response question with the most errors in exam technique.

Firstly, in common with question 2, the 'how' received more attention than the why, but this was an even bigger issue on this question – a lot of candidates gave no reasons at all as to why youth crime was a particular priority and instead only addressed 'how'; the reverse issue was much less common. Where candidates did engage with both elements it was again perfectly permissible to tackle them either separately or jointly within individual paragraphs.

Another common issue was candidates who failed to consider the plural of 'governments'. This could be any two or more of either Labour government, the Coalition, or either Conservative government, but many selected all of their policy examples from Blair's governments, which precluded them from achieving level 3. This was often coupled with a further weakness of giving more attention to slogans than to actual policy – 'tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime' and 'hug a hoodie' may provide a useful one-line summary of the policy direction but do not by themselves explain 'how'.

The final common issue was to not address the 'youth' and to talk instead about the reasons and policies for tackling crime in general. Having said this, many candidates did take this point on board and selected specific policies such as ASBOs and the focus on knife crime accordingly. It was also perfectly creditable for candidates to address relevant 'causes of crime' policies such as Sure Start, (re)education, and social justice measures, as long as the link to tackling youth crime was clearly made.

Where candidates avoided the above issues they tended to do well, since the continuing salience of the issue of law and order offered many points for discussion. Very few candidates attempted to go before 1997, which meant little or no falling back on the Michael Howard slogan which has been much used, and over-used, in previous series.

Level 1 responses tended to entirely neglect 'why' and showed a lack of detail on their 'how' examples which were generally sloganistic and simplistic.

Level 2 responses were commonly strong on 'how' but brief and a little vague on 'why'. In some cases they covered both elements but only considered the Blair governments.

Level 3 responses showed clear specific understanding of both policy and the driving forces behind it, and considered more than one government – most commonly Blair's government and the coalition.

Q5

This was the most popular of the short response questions and, along with question 1, the best answered. This was no doubt aided by the very timely government announcement of the go ahead for Heathrow's third runway. This did naturally mean that most candidates focused specifically on Heathrow rather than on other possible expansion, but this did not tend to harm them since many of the issues apply to airport expansion more generally. Furthermore, some candidates effectively highlighted where issues would not apply more widely, for example when discussing the specific flightpath issues at Heathrow in comparison to some alternatives.

The biggest discriminating feature between candidates was the extent to which common points were developed and evidenced. Balance was essential to reaching level 3 but was well done by the vast majority of candidates; it did not necessarily need to be equal, but often was: very few candidates only offered points on one side, and most were able to make a range of relevant arguments.

It was quite common to see an 'economic reasons for, environmental reasons against' approach, but this did not preclude candidates from achieving level 3. The strongest responses however tended to appreciate that not only are there several different economic arguments in favour (employment, improved air freight, competitiveness with other European airports etc.) there are also economic arguments against, such as cost. Similarly there are a number of environmental arguments against (emissions, habitat, communities destroyed) but also some in favour. The latter include for example the promised mitigation measures that might make Heathrow less environmentally damaging than alternative air transport hubs, or the disadvantages of alternative transport schemes like HS2.

There were very few Level 1 responses, generally occurring only when the candidate had run out of time for their third short response and was only able to write a few lines.

Level 2 responses tended to show balance and range but did not sufficiently develop their points, or else relied too much on assertion over evidence.

Level 3 responses were accurate, developed and balanced, and often referred to those who make the different arguments as well as to the arguments themselves.

Q6

This was, very marginally, the least popular of the essay questions, but was still attempted by a little over 30% of candidates.

The biggest discriminating factors here were firstly the extent to which candidates noted and responded to 'successful in meeting its aims'. Candidates did not need to specifically distinguish between the governments of May and Cameron – although they could, and were credited for doing so – but they did need to be aware of what the governments' aims were. Some candidates missed this focus by adopting a more 'for and against' approach that often gave more attention to criticisms of those aims, or of side impacts of the policy (such as social injustice), rather than the extent to which the aims themselves had been met. Other candidates did focus more on the specific demands of the question but considered a relatively narrow range of aims – in some cases giving almost their entire attention to cutting the deficit. Stronger candidates considered other aims such as low unemployment, low inflation, steady economic growth, and regaining the Triple A rating. Candidates who gave a brief summary of the government aims to start their essay, which was not an essential requirement, tended to remain better focused throughout.

A second discriminating factor was the degree of balance, and it was pleasing to see that there were few one sided or polemic responses - most candidates recognised both the government's successes and failures on their own terms. Equally it was perfectly acceptable for candidates to take a particular line of argument and to reach a definite conclusion, provided they reasonably considered both points of view.

The third factor, common to all of the essay questions, was the degree of evidence and specifics over assertion and vagueness. Many candidates were able to deploy some supporting statistical information such as those illustrating reduced unemployment figures, poor growth or reduction of deficit, although some were more accurate in their figures than others. Synopticity on this question could come from changing views between administrations (Hammond vs Osborne etc) or from different parties' views, but could also come from non-party sources, such as economics commentators, charities, the media, the Bank of England etc. Again though this had to be filtered not through disputing the government's aims, but rather discussing whether or not it had met them.

The weakest candidates either missed the point of the question or gave brief and underdeveloped answers with little supporting evidence.

Middling responses generally showed balance and some focus on success, but a little unsuccessful in discussing the more general desirability of government economic, and sometimes non-economic, policy.

The strongest responses recognised the importance of a continuing tight focus on the question with a range of supporting evidence on both sides. Synopticity was more explicit in terms of both proponents and critics of the results of government economic policy.

Q7

This essay was of middling popularity, albeit close to both the other essay questions. A similar question had not been asked for some time, and this was partly intended to move away from the more common successful / unsuccessful or consensus / disagreement questions on this topic.

The requirements of the 'pro' side of the question were fairly clear, but it was pleasing to see how many candidates went into an appropriate level of detail about both the different treaties and the role and specific policies of the EU.

The 'con' side was more diverse, in that some candidates embraced the idea that *something* had driven UK environmental policy, but disputed what that was (for example many credited UK pressure groups, or shifting voters priorities). Others questioned whether environmental policy had made much overall headway, arguing therefore that nothing had significantly driven it forwards. A few others also chose to directly question the significance of specific treaties or EU policies.

One very sophisticated approach, adopted only by some of the strongest candidates, was to recognise the complex interplay between international and domestic factors. Some argued for example that the global prominence given to Kyoto and Paris might have driven the growing domestic interest in environmental policy, or indeed that UK pressure groups might have been significant in causing the EU to lend environmental issues such prominence.

There was no specific cut-off date and Kyoto was still as acceptable as Copenhagen, Paris and a variety of EU agreements. Similarly, candidates did not need to specifically reference particular governments, or a particular number of governments, but this still could be and was a discriminating factor in terms of the overall mark.

Synopticity here often involved the views of pressure groups and of the international bodies involved, as well as those of political parties. Again, views that were accurately and specifically ascribed scored more highly than 'some say' or 'it could be argued that'.

The weakest responses occasionally, but fairly rarely, entirely disregarded the need to consider international agreements and EU policy, or more commonly displayed at least two of the traits of one-sidedness, excessive brevity, and an over-reliance on assertion.

Middling responses sometimes showed one of the traits described above, but did make clear reference to relevant policy with reasonable attempts at balance. The link from international agreements to change within the UK was not always completely clear, and the evidence of impact varied in quality.

The strongest responses displayed strong balance throughout, with clear and detailed links between argued causes and practical environmental impacts. They often showed nuance in their consideration of different counter-approaches to the premise of the question, as well as of different perspectives.

Q8

This was, marginally, the most popular of the essay questions – although specific NHS essay questions have not been asked in recent years, it does remain a high priority issue for the public and this perhaps drove this question's popularity with candidates.

Like question 6 this essay question specifically concentrated on the period post-2010, in order to encourage a contemporary focus, and approached the topic from the point of view of the government's own stated aims. Discussions of pre-2010 governments were therefore not relevant except by way of contrast, and relatively few candidates wasted time and energy by discussing irrelevant pre-Cameron policy.

This was however the only essay question where significant, albeit still relatively small, numbers of candidates adopted a one-sided approach – almost always by arguing contrary to the premise of the quote. It is quite reasonable for candidates to conclude that in their own opinion Cameron's governments failed to protect the NHS but it is not reasonable to entirely disregard any evidence or arguments that might be advanced on the other side of the debate.

A major discriminating factor between responses, aside from balance, was the use of both specific policy and factual evidence of impact. Many candidates recognised the significance of the 2012 Health and Social Care Act for example, whilst others also discussed such issues as Junior Doctor's contracts, weekend opening, and ring-fencing – often showing sophisticated awareness of such issues as absolute vs real terms funding.

Synopticity again came from parties and politicians, but also from journalists and commentators, and pressure groups including the relevant unions and patient groups

The weakest responses tended to be very one-sided and lacked evidence and/or awareness of specific policies.

Middling responses tended to be either competent but one sided, or to focus on either outcomes or government policies without fully establishing the link between the two. In some cases they examined one particular area of government policy, often the 2012 Health and Social Care Act, in forensic depth without achieving the breadth required for level 3.

The strongest responses were balanced, synoptic and utilised both argument and evidence to good effect. They were nuanced in their understanding of the pros and cons of a range of government policy and of the different interpretations of impact.

Paper Summery

Based on their performance on this paper, candidates are offered the following advice:

- Read the question carefully and ensure that they are addressing all aspects.
- Give roughly equal weight to the different parts of the question.
- Ensure that they have a robust understanding of all key concepts, and avoid answering questions where they are unsure on any of the concepts included in the question.
- Balance the need to write a sufficiently long and detailed response with the need for that response to be legible so that their content can be understood and credited.
- Avoiding overly lengthy introductions and conclusions, and on short responses give only a brief introduction which sets context and defines key terms with no conclusion.
- Combine specific evidence with analysis of the wider points which the evidence supports, rather than offering evidence without argument, or argument without evidence.
- Maintain and further develop the extent to which they specify the particular groups or individuals offering synoptic arguments over 'some argue that' or similar phrases.
- Ensure that sufficient balance is offered on all essay questions.