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Examiner's Report Principal Examiner Feedback

Summer 2018

Pearson Edexcel GCE
Government & Politics (6GP03)
Paper 3C: Processes in the USA



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Publications Code 6GP03_3C_1806_ER

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Principal Examiner Report 2018 Series 6GPO3 3C

This was ninth and final set of summer examinations to test the A2 specifications introduced in 2008. The 3C paper was as usual a mixture of the familiar and less familiar: the 45 mark questions all came into the second category, although in fact nearly every candidate would have known enough to answer them. As is always the case in any exam, the key skill for candidates is to use what they know to put together an answer to the question in front of them, and any good mark scheme rewards those who do this.

Certain patterns have developed over the nine years of the specification, which will be familiar to readers of these reports and which were repeated this year. The pressure group 45 mark question was again the most popular but, in this series as in many, not always answered particularly well. The parties question is often the least popular – though not actually this year – but is almost always the most successfully done.

It is tempting sometimes to wonder how many readers these reports do actually have, when candidates keep repeating the mistakes that have been highlighted year after year. Introductions to 15 mark answers, for example, where the candidate summarises the points they are about to make, are, as has been frequently pointed out, a complete waste of the candidate's time but they continue to appear.

One of the strengths of the format of 3C and 4C has been the 15 mark questions which have allowed sub-topics like initiatives to be tested which otherwise could not be. The downside is that, with the best will in the world, it is almost impossible sometimes to avoid some sort of overlap between 15 and 45 mark questions on the same topic, and it was noticeable this series that the same material was appearing in answers to both the pressure group questions.

Q1

Popular democracy via initiatives and propositions is the sort of topic (rather like the vice-presidency in 4C) that lends itself very well to a short answer of 15 minutes, and many candidates seemed to welcome its appearance in this series. Nearly all understood what the question was about, although one or two answers misunderstood and discussed, for example, presidential initiatives, citing examples such as the Affordable Care Act. Much as they do with Supreme Court cases, some candidates evidently enjoy accumulating details of initiatives to deploy in their answers and some showed an impressive range of knowledge. Florida Amendment 1 on solar panels from 2016, for example, was used to illustrate the problems that the wording of initiatives can sometimes create. Admittedly, most answers restricted themselves to the same few examples and California Proposition 8 featured in many, if not most. Most candidates identified three or four criticisms such as the undermining of representative democracy, the inability of the public to make informed decisions on complex technical issues and the potential for a 'tyranny of the majority'. Slightly curiously, quite a few answers cited marijuana legalisation as an issue which 'the people' were not well placed to decide on, when it is tempting to think that in fact many people have had some sort of experience of marijuana and might well have sufficient knowledge to make a judgment. At the bottom end, there was a certain amount of barrel scraping, and it was hard to give too much credit to criticisms such as the lack of federal initiatives, or differences in rules from state to state.

Q2

Some candidates were not quite sure how to tackle this question, but a successful route adopted by many was to identify an issue, then explain its particular relevance to minority voters and how they have reacted to the policies and policy proposals of the two major parties. The best answers made clear that minority groups are not a homogenous whole and that, for example, different generations of Cuban Americans may have different attitudes towards the Castro regime. Candidates would have been aware that the question was based on the 'Racial and Ethnic Politics' section of the specification, and most were prepared on two or three different racial or ethnic groups, such as African-Americans, Latinos and Jews. A small number of candidates wrote in impressive detail on issues affecting Native Americans. LGBT issues were rewardable but, perhaps through desperation, some chose to write about 'minorities' such as the elderly or prisoners, and these could only be given minimal reward. The same applied, for the most obvious reason, to issues affecting women, such as abortion rights. The question did refer to 'voters', so the concerns of illegal immigrants could only be rewarded in terms of how they related to those registered to vote.

Q3

This was a predictably popular question and only a very few answers failed to make it into Level 2. The distinguishing characteristics of a Level 3 answer was the amount of detail in the evidence and its engagement with the 'assess' element of the question, i.e. how far it attempted to evaluate the significance of any given factor to pressure group power. This didn't have to be particularly sophisticated, and it was perfectly adequate just to point out, for example, that despite all the benefits of insider status, AIPAC had failed to win the day on the Obama administration's nuclear agreement with Iran. The factors most frequently seen were wealth and membership numbers. Weaker answers simply listed factors, without making the answer relevant to the US, or giving specific evidence and examples, and some made methods, such as marches and demonstrations, the focus of their answer. These could obviously be made relevant but, as always, focus on the actual wording of the question was the key to a good answer.

Q4

This was probably the least successfully attempted question and many candidates simply couldn't find enough material to write convincingly for 15 minutes. Many answers focused on the Senate and cited factors such as the cost of state-wide campaigns, the difficulty for minorities in achieving state-wide name recognition and the fact that every state is still majority white (whereas many US cities are majority-minority and there are plenty of minority mayors). Broader societal explanations were also rewardable, and there was a lot of discussion of the consequences of the failure of affirmative action to achieve equality between the races. Most candidates took this question to be about minority numbers in US political institutions, which was obviously rewardable, but quite a few also discussed the under-representation of minority interests. This led, for example, to a discussion of the electoral strategy of candidates such as Donald Trump: if they could succeed through appealing to disaffected white voters, then it was unsurprising if minority interests were neglected. The distinction between minority numbers and minority interests was also made relevant in some discussions of racial gerrymandering, such as majority-minority districts: it was argued that, while racial gerrymandering may have led to an increase in minority representation in institutions such as the US House of Representatives, to the point where African American representatives are pretty much proportional to the population, the concentration of overwhelmingly Democratic votes in a few districts has led to reduced Democratic representation overall, with negative consequences for minority interests. Weaker answers focused mainly or even exclusively on the statistics of minority representation in different institutions which, of course, is the evidence to be explained rather than the explanation itself.

Q5

This question illustrated again the importance for candidates of paying close attention to the wording of the question. It was asking about the impact of minor party candidates in presidential elections, not the reasons for that impact, but unfortunately it was not uncommon to read 4-5 paragraphs on ballot access restrictions, campaign finance problems etc, sometimes without reference to a single named candidate. Stronger answers generally had three sections, looking at the 'spoiler' effect, the 'co-optation' effect and an overview of the limited impact minor party candidates have had in recent elections. Some candidates were rewardably inventive in their answers and argued, for example, that one impact of the failure of minor party candidates was to increase cynicism towards politics. The relatively narrow focus meant that to do well candidates needed a lot of quite specific knowledge and only a few knew, for example, accurate figures for the minor party candidates in 2016. Almost every candidate who discussed the spoiler effect seemed to think that the role of Nader and Perot in bringing about the defeat of Gore and Bush was an unquestioned truth, whereas in fact both are the subject of considerable debate. A few did know that Bernie Sanders received a significant number of 'write-in' votes, sufficient in Vermont to make him the best-performing minor party candidate; this is the sort of quirk that makes US politics so interesting, though again sadly these votes had little impact.

Q6

Once again, the pressure group question proved to be the default option for many candidates, although it did not play to the strengths of all of them. A good number drifted off into their favourite pressure group answer, usually on pressure groups' methods or their effect on democracy, and lost sight of the question they were supposed to be answering. Stronger candidates realised that a lot of the material they might have used in a party decline/renewal answer, on parties' roles in government, elections and representation for example, was usable here, since in many cases it precisely concerned the extent to which pressure groups have taken over these roles. Many candidates will probably not have specifically prepared for this question and consequently quite a few of the arguments deployed were not completely convincing. Nevertheless, they were given credit,

wherever possible. Examiners felt that generally candidates were stronger on the case that pressure groups have supplanted parties rather than the converse, although in some instances this was through ascribing functions to parties that are not usually recognised as belonging to them.

Q7

There was an interesting range of approaches to this question: some candidates gave a historical overview beginning with the New Deal, some dealt mostly with the Obama presidency and others concentrated, in sometimes impressive detail, on developments post-2016. Several answers in the last category discussed, for example, the significance for the Democratic Party's direction of Tom Perez's election as DNC chair last year over Keith Ellison. Hillary Clinton's 2016 primary victory was variously seen as a triumph for the establishment or for centrism or for liberalism, and there is evidence to support all three interpretations. Those who dealt mainly with Obama found evidence for his centrism in foreign rather than domestic policy. As has been the case in every series of this specification since it began, the parties 45 mark question was the best answered on the paper, and the strongest answers were a real credit to the candidates and their teachers. Candidates generally had a secure idea of the terrain they operating on: they had a fairly clear idea of what sort of policies and values centrism would represent and the Affordable Care Act was usually seen as a liberal rather than a centrist policy, for example. Most candidates used a centrist/liberal scale to assess the Democrats' current state, although some made centrist/conservative comparisons. Again typically, there were very few weak answers to this question.

Q8

Nothing exactly like question 8 had been set as a 45 mark answer before, and it required candidates to think on their feet to put together an answer. Those who were successful realised that answers to several short questions set in previous series – for example, on low voter turnout, uncompetitive congressional elections and the failure of campaign finance reform – could be used to form at least a significant part of a decent answer. The use of 'especially' in the premise of the question offered candidates another angle to argue around, and many came to the conclusion that congressional elections were actually no worse than presidential in the extent to which they hold politicians to account. Weaker answers focused almost entirely on arguments for and against the Electoral College, which they found difficult to link convincingly to the question.