



A-level **Politics**

7152/2 Government and politics of the USA and comparative politics

Report on the Examination

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General comments

In general students were able to access the entirety of the question paper and question 3 (the comparative theory question) proved to be more accessible than in previous years. Those who scored well across the paper managed their time effectively and were aware of the assessment objectives. Most students did not seem to experience any significant time management issues and it was common for some students to answer either section B or C questions before the 9-mark questions.

As in previous years question 04 (the extract question) proved to be a challenge for some students. It is important to stress that the extracts should be seen as a 'springboard' for students to evaluate and analyse. Level 2 responses were common because students did little more than identify an element in the extracts and describe or restate the point. Question 04 provided the widest range of responses with some students having little or no understanding of initiatives and direct democracy in the US. Some students appeared not to be fully aware of the assessment criteria in terms of using the extracts and provenance. Many responses were often descriptive, restating what the extract said with very little added. The best responses used a 'pair and compare' approach, taking quotes from each extract and using this as the basis of analysis.

Section C has an optional element and question 06 (executives) proved to be more popular than 05 (political parties). The best responses focused clearly on the questions set and were based on well-structured and coherent answers with up-to-date information, evidence, and examples. As section C essays are comparative students must engage with the US and UK when answering these questions, otherwise level 3 and above marks are unlikely to be awarded. When answering the essay question, as with previous years, the most successful students were able to offer a sophisticated answer in terms of synopticity.

Section A

Question 01

This question was generally well answered and was accessible for most students as it gave them a range of options in terms of which direction they could take their response. High level 2 and level 3 response were based on the 'three factors, three paragraphs' model. Weaker responses tended to be descriptive. The best answers did provide three clear points that were analysed with a range of examples. Very common points tended to relate to the role of the media, candidates, incumbency and money. Some level 3 responses also discussed the impact of independent candidates and the electoral college (and how it can work against a candidate who doesn't win 270 electoral votes but wins the popular vote as in 2000 or 2016), while some students made references to campaigning in swing states (with examples such as Georgia and Michigan). It was also common for responses to focus on how issues and events can impact the outcome of elections such as the response to 9/11 in 2004, the economic crash in 2008 and Covid in 2020. Weaker responses drifted away from the focus of the question into discussing primaries and national nominating conventions or by focusing only on different types of voting demographics.

Question 02

As with question 01 most students were able to access this question and able to identify three functions of Congress. The common approach to this question was to focus on law-making (with examples of successful pieces of legislation such as civil rights legislation, the Affordable Care Act, and the more

recent CARES act), oversight (including the power of the purse) and representation. Students who analysed the advice and consent function of the Senate were rewarded as were students who focused on impeachment. However, students who did focus on one or both of these themes often made factual errors such as stating Nixon was impeached (he resigned). Some students also focused on Congress and declaring war, but this again often featured historical inaccuracies relating to the Vietnam war or the war on terror post 9/11. There were some top-level responses that provided nuanced analysis of the functions of Congress for example in terms how unproductive Congress has become in regard to passing legislation and how it can be describe as the “broken” branch of US government. However, it was common for level 2 responses to drift into focusing on the powers of Congress rather than functions or were descriptive with little to no analysis.

Question 03

Pleasingly (as was the case last year), the comparative theory question was more accessible than in previous years. However, some students are still leaving the question until the end of the exam and wrote incomplete answers. Teachers are advised to make sure students have a secure definition of each of the comparative theories which can then be applied at the start of their response to question 03. As stated in previous reports, students do not need to name, or list academics associated with the comparative theories in their responses. It is important also to stress that students need to refer to both the US and UK when answering the comparative theory question to get into level 3.

The best responses gave a definition of structural theory and how it could be used to study the how civil liberties and rights are protected in the US and UK. The common approach to the question was to focus on constitutions, judiciaries and legislatures. Some responses focused on the role played by pressure groups, but this was not always well done, as some students struggled to provide relevant UK examples.

However, common errors were that structural theory was not defined or mentioned at all and that points made were generalised about the constitutions (codified vs uncoded) or that pressure groups protect rights with no examples of groups or indeed how. Also, some responses focused on Federalism and Devolution as a third point however this was rarely successful as the discussion tended to focus mostly on the US without being clear how devolution has resulted a protection of rights in the UK. As in previous years weaker responses struggled to provide balance and tended to focus on one country and ignore the other.

Section B

Question 04

Question 04 proved to be a challenge for students. As stated earlier it is important to stress that the extracts should be a ‘springboard’ for students to evaluate and analyse. It is important to remind teachers and students that question 04 is not a traditional essay style question. Level 1 and level 2 responses tended to be more descriptive than analytical. These responses saw students merely paraphrasing from the extract and added very little of their own knowledge. Common issues were that the extracts were largely re-written with little or no reference to wider own knowledge (citing and analysing examples of initiatives not referenced in the extracts), confusion over what and how initiatives are state based not national examples of direct democracy. It is also important to advise students and teachers there is no

requirement for a comparative focus when answering question 04, some responses were undermined by too much drift into discussing the UK and the 2016 referendum.

It is important to stress that the students who were awarded level 4 and 5 marks were able to apply their own knowledge to evaluate the assertions of the extracts regarding the extent to which initiatives enhance US democracy. Level 3 and above responses did understand the need to discuss the provenance of the extracts, and the vast majority understood that they needed to use the extracts as prompts for further discussion, which hasn't always been the case in previous years. These responses did engage with the extracts and were able to reach a conclusion and they used initiatives relating to the legalisation of cannabis, same sex marriage and abortion. However, the overall level of knowledge of initiatives and direct democracy in the US was weak.

Section C

Question 05

This question was the less popular of the two optional questions, and it produced the clearest distinctions between strong and weak responses. The main problem was the failure to answer the question as set, some students did not get into level 3 and above because of very generalised responses particularly in terms of how the main parties seek to manage members of Congress and Parliament via whips, patronage and party leaders.

Level 4 and 5 responses had a clear structure either discussing party unity in the UK and then the US or taking a thematic approach discussing differences and similarities within paragraphs. These responses featured a balanced (UK and US) approach and focused on themes such as party structures, candidate selection and primaries as well as up to date examples of party unity and disunity by focusing on factions such as the Freedom Caucus in the US or the One Nation group in the UK. There were some impressive responses that challenged the focus of the question citing evidence of greater polarisation (such as the decline in split ticket voting) in the US in recent decades to suggest that statement was not fully accurate. These responses also used divisions over immigration and the last conservative government to disagree with the argument that UK parties are less internally united. A minority of answers drifted into a focus on the two-party system in the US and UK.

Question 06

This was the most popular essay question. Generally, there was a sound understanding of the how each executive is structured and the roles of the president and prime minister within their respective executives, with often well deployed political vocabulary. The best responses used a theoretical approach to answer the questions such as evaluating the imperial and imperilled presidency debate and arguments about presidentialism in the UK citing Blair and “sofa government,” and the ideas of George Jones and Micheal Foley. Level 4 and 5 responses were focused on the demands of the question “within the executive” and analysed the relationships between the heads of the executives and their cabinets and other institutional resources such as EXOP and the Cabinet Office. These responses recognised that executive power ebbs and flows, with relevant examples of presidents and prime ministers such as Carter, Trump, Biden, Thatcher, Blair and recent conservative prime ministers.

However, weaker responses offered either a generalised discussion of presidential and prime ministerial power or they often focused solely on executive legislative relations.

Some weaker responses attempted to analyse ideas of cabinet government and the UK prime minister being *primus inter pares* but students often seemed confused about how prime ministers might “share” power. Some responses argued prime ministers shared power with Parliament (which made them unable to dominate) or argued that the UK prime minister shares significant power with the monarch and or the devolved assemblies. Equally, when focusing on the US some responses drifted into a general discussion of constitutional checks and balances in relation to presidential power such as impeachment or a discussion of the Supreme Court checking presidential power.

There were a minority of responses when answering question 6 which referred to the comparative theories. As stated in previous reports it is important to remind teachers and students that when answering section C comparative essays there is no requirement to apply any of the three comparatives theories needed for question 03.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

Grade boundaries and cumulative percentage grades are available on the [Results Statistics](#) page of the AQA Website.