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GCE Government and Politics 6GP03/3A

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New GCE 6GP03 3A - UK Political Issues

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

Explain the strategies adopted by governments since 1997 to reduce unemployment.

This question required candidates demonstrate an awareness that the following initiatives, designed to help those without work, that have been introduced since 1997:

- The New Deal, aimed specifically at the long-term unemployed
- Working families tax credits to ensure that people returning to work will not suffer a loss of income
- Reforms of the eligibility criteria for the Disability Living Allowance to ensure that it is not being used as an alternative form of long-term unemployment benefit
- The national childcare strategy to ease the return of mothers into the workforce

Each should have been supported with a brief explanation.

More recent policies, to address unemployment stemming from the economic recession of 2008-10, have included stimulus packages and retraining schemes.

More general educational policies (that promote employability) are not specifically tailored to address the needs of those without work and were therefore worthy of only limited credit in respect of this question.

Weaker responses tended to concentrate on policies to make people employable while not examining policies to support those without work.

Stronger candidates were able to *either* cover a range of policies designed to help the unemployed with limited analysis *or* provide effective analysis a limited range of strategies used by the government.

The strongest candidates recognised that policies tended to be focussed on the long-term unemployed when the economy was growing and switched focus during the recession, with concise analysis of each approach.

Question 2

How has the UK government attempted to meet its targets under the Kyoto Protocol on climate change, and how successful has it been?

This question was answered by a small proportion of the candidates. They tended to be very well-informed on environmental issues and, on average, provide strong responses.

Among the strategies adopted by the government to meet its climate change targets have were:

- Initially, integrating environmental policy through the establishing of a 'super-ministry', the DETR (demerged in 2001).
- A requirement (inherited from the Conservative government) that all ministries report on their environmental performance.
- Establishing the House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee to hold the government to account
- Using tax as an instrument to punish/discourage emissions and to encourage/reward environmental responsibility

- Participation in the Europe-wide cap and trade scheme to use market forces to encourage industry to reduce carbon emissions

Some candidates analysed other strategies and were well rewarded for their knowledge and understanding.

The UK met its Kyoto target on greenhouse gasses (although not CO₂) until 2002, with increases thereafter. There is some debate, however, as to whether the government deserves credit for meeting the targets:

- The 'dash for gas' by the privatised power firms, abandoning polluting coal, is widely credited with helping the UK meet its Kyoto targets
- Also, increases in the world price of oil has contributed to reductions of car usage
- Many of the most significant regulations governing greenhouse gasses have been generated and monitored by the EU

A few weaker candidates simply lacked the knowledge and understanding to address the question

Stronger candidates demonstrated good knowledge and understanding of the strategies used to meet the Kyoto targets but were less effective at analysing their success.

Strongest candidates demonstrated both good knowledge and the ability to thoughtfully analyse their effectiveness.

Question 3

How, and to what extent, has the Conservative Party's approach to law and order changed in recent years?

This was the most popular short-answer question and, on average, the most effectively answered. It required candidates to demonstrate an awareness that there have been significant shifts in Conservative policy over the past decade.

Some of the themes of Conservative policy on law and order have remained largely unchanged, including:

- Strengthening police powers, especially in terms of stop and search
- The commitment to make "punishment fit the crime" that suggests more offenders going to prison and longer sentences
- The commitment to build sufficient prison places to keep as many people locked up for as long as necessary

However, there have also been new themes in Conservative policy in this area, similar to those traditionally associated with the political left, including:

- Addressing the causes of crime, by putting justice policy in the context of strengthening communities and families – such as improving schools and skills
- Monitoring the use of police surveillance to ensure that civil liberties are not infringed
- Increasing local accountability of the police through direct election of senior officers

With an election approaching, there are signs of the Conservatives returning to their traditional position on crime – calling for more police (and less red tape) stiffer sentences and the building of many more prisons.

Weakest candidates recognised that there have been changes in Conservative Party policies on law and order but could only cover them in very broad or vague terms.

Stronger candidates tended to concentrate on the policies adopted by the Conservatives after David Cameron became leader, with only limited references to traditional approaches (as if they did not need explanation) or the more recent changes in tone.

Strongest candidates outlined traditional approaches to law and order (sometimes providing an ideological context), how and why David Cameron adopted new policies and, in some cases, the hardening tone ahead of the general election.

Question 4

How and why has the NHS introduced rationing into health care provision?

Although popular, this question was not done well on average. This was because too many responses did not directly address the question, with a significant number of candidates treating all reforms of the NHS as forms of rationing.

Candidates were expected to demonstrate an awareness that the nature of rationing over time, including:

- Charges for some medical provision, such as eye tests, dental care, prescriptions & nursing care outside of hospitals
- Waiting lists for hospital beds and operations when hospitals have lacked necessary resources
- More recently, debate has centred on the provision of discretionary medical procedures, such as IVF
- Most recently, debate has centred on a new generation of extremely expensive prescription drugs and if/how they should be funded

Weakest candidates tended to describe all healthcare reforms that they could remember, often not even attempting to explain why they could be seen as forms of rationing.

Stronger candidates addressed traditional forms of rationing, such as waiting lists and medical charges, but overlooked more recent developments such as the role of NICE in licensing expensive new drugs.

Strongest candidates provided a comprehensive coverage of the different forms of rationing, including recent developments.

Question 5

Explain the arguments for and against airport expansion in the UK.

As with question 2, this question was answered by a small proportion of the candidates who tended to be very well-informed on environmental issues.

Candidates were expected to consider a range of arguments, mainly environmental, against airport expansion including:

- Emissions from aircraft, while a small percentage of overall emissions, are rising rapidly and are more damaging because they are emitted high in the atmosphere
- Many flights, especially short-haul, are unnecessary and can easily be replaced by other types of journey including high speed rail

- Airport expansion blights the lives of many communities that are affected by additional flights and new flight paths and destroys whole communities that have to be relocated

Candidates are also expected to consider a range of arguments, mainly economic, in favour of airport expansion including:

- The damage to the tourist industry, with the consequent loss of jobs, if the number of flights is restricted
- The cost of building alternative transport provision, such as high-speed rail, is prohibitive
- There will not be fewer flights, just the diversion of flights from the UK to competitor airports on the near continent such as Paris and Amsterdam

Weakest candidates tended to have an awareness only of one side of this debate.

Stronger candidates outlined both sides of the argument, but provided a range of points with limited analysis.

Strongest candidates were able to effectively analyse both sides of the argument.

Question 6

***'The introduction of target-setting in health and education has failed to improve standards.'* Discuss.**

Candidates were expected to recognise that target-setting, as a primary strategy for improving public services, is strongly supported by some (notably New Labour) while forcefully rejected by others including (to the left of Labour) trade unions in health and education and recently (on the right) the Conservatives.

Supporters of target-setting in key public services offer a range of arguments, including:

- They provide a means of assessing whether value for money is being provided by the services
- They can be used to hold service-providers to account and to promote best practice
- They provide information to the users of the services that enables them to make choices about which service-providers to use

Opponents' arguments include:

- Targets can only measure tangible outcomes, such as exam results, but cannot measure crucial intangibles such as the quality of classroom experiences
- Target-setting distorts priorities, encouraging institutions to neglect/deter those who will damage their statistics (eg it makes most sense, for the purposes of targets, to treat patients who are likely to make a full recovery)
- Target setting generates bureaucracy and elevates bureaucrats at the expense of front-line services and teachers/nurses/doctors

Weakest candidates simply outlined their own views on the use of targets, thus providing a response that did not provide evidence of academic study and, of course, this approach cannot be synoptic.

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 (an often more than two) on the use of target to improve services.

Question 7

To what extent have government policies since 1997 contributed to the recent economic recession?

Candidates were expected to demonstrate an awareness that there are a range of views on this question, often closely aligned with the official positions of the main political parties, including:

- The arguments being advanced by the Conservatives that the world recession has had a particularly severe impact on the UK because of profligacy during the boom years.
- The arguments being advanced by the government that the recession was 'made in America' and that the UK led the way in stimulating the economy to address the downturn
- The Vince Cable critique that a stimulus was needed but that it took forms, such as the reduction of VAT, that have been ineffective.

Weakest candidates simply outlined their own views on the government's performance in managing the economy, thus providing a response that did not provide evidence of academic study and, of course, this approach cannot be synoptic.

Stronger candidates tended to focus on the debate between the main parties and lack depth.

Strongest candidates were able to discuss in detail the positions of at least two of the main parties weigh up the strengths and weaknesses of each viewpoint.

Question 8

'Government policies since 1997 have been very successful in reducing crime.' ***Discuss.***

This was the most popular of the essay questions and the standard of responses was, on average, higher than for the other two essays.

Candidates were expected to demonstrate an understanding of that there are at least three viewpoints on the extent to which crime has been reduced and the extent to which the government can take credit:

- One viewpoint is that crime has fallen over the past two decades, but that this is not primarily due to government initiatives but to other factors such as improved security of cars and homes (industry and families taking the credit) and to demographic trends with fewer young men aged 15-25 who are responsible for committing the majority of crimes
- Another viewpoint is that government initiatives have had a substantial effect, particularly the substantially increased resources for police forces and the vast expansion of the use of CCTV.
- A third view is that there has been no reduction of crime, with crime statistics being used to obscure the fact that the UK has become more dangerous and that its people have become progressively more insecure

Weakest candidates tended to focus almost exclusively on the debate on whether crime has been reduced and whether crime statistics conceal continuing rises in crime or, alternatively, outlined their personal views.

Stronger candidates tended to produce lopsided responses which, while synoptic, addressed either defences of the government's performance or criticisms of it in much greater detail and depth than the other.

Strongest candidates recognised that there are at least two perspectives on the government's crime policies 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	56	50	45	40	35
Uniform Mark	80	70	60	50	40

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