Course report 2019

Subject	Politics
Level	Higher

This report provides information on candidates' performance. Teachers, lecturers and assessors may find it useful when preparing candidates for future assessment. The report is intended to be constructive and informative and to promote better understanding. It would be helpful to read this report in conjunction with the published assessment documents and marking instructions.

The statistics used in this report have been compiled before the completion of any post-results services.

Section 1: comments on the assessment

Question paper 1

This question paper was positively received. It was noted by the marking team that there were a small number of candidates who were unable to address either of the two questions in the 'Political parties and elections' section of the question paper. This may be due to candidates attempting to 'question spot'. Centres are reminded that the question paper samples from all aspects of the course content and candidates should avoid attempting to identify patterns based on previous question papers.

Question paper 2

There were no adverse comments received regarding this new question paper. It was noted by the marking team that there were some candidates who did not appear to fully complete their responses in the allocated time. Centres are reminded that the content for the sources need not come from within the mandatory course content, as outlined in the course specification documentation.

Assignment

Overall performance in the assignment was on par with that of previous years. Feedback from the marking team indicated that there were a few candidates who had chosen topics that were not specifically politics related. There were also some candidates who had poorly-constructed titles for their assignments. This resulted in descriptive assignments that lacked analysis and provided limited conclusions. Centres should ensure candidates are aware of the success criteria for the assignment, as outlined in the relevant marking grid which indicates the distribution of marks.

Although less common than in previous years, there were still some assignments that appeared to be following guidance for other social subjects. Centres are advised to ensure they are aware of the guidance and criteria for the Higher Politics assignment as these are not the same as for other subjects, such as Modern Studies or History.

A wide range of issues were covered by candidates in their submissions. Populism, various aspects of Brexit, and factors affecting voting behaviour were particularly popular topics. Where candidates covered topics linked directly to course content, performance tended to be poorer than for those who appeared to have a personal interest in the topics they had chosen. The assignment remains an opportunity for personalisation and choice for candidates. Where candidates appeared restricted to a limited range of topics, markers noted that this seemed to have had a detrimental impact on the quality of responses generated.

Section 2: comments on candidate performance

Areas that candidates performed well in

Question paper 1

Question 1(a): many candidates produced highly-structured answers, providing detailed descriptions of power and showing an understanding of Lukes' three faces of power. Most candidates provided detailed exemplification and/or explanations. Many candidates provided analytical comments related to each of the three faces of power. The scope of analytical comments appeared wider than in previous years with a greater range of analytical comments which tended to focus on either the relevance and relative importance of each face; the links between each face and other related concepts such as democracy; or the implications or consequences of the different faces.

Question 1(b): candidate responses were generally good with structured responses that provided detailed exemplification and/or explanations. Most candidates provided references to appropriate theorists as indicated in the question. Analytical comments tended to focus on comparisons that identified similarities or differences with direct forms of democracy, or the consequences or implications of the key features chosen.

Question 2(a): almost all candidates chose the UK/USA as the contexts for their responses. Most candidates provided detailed exemplification and/or explanations. Many candidates provided very well-structured responses which compared throughout the constitutional arrangements in the two political systems.

Question 2(b): almost all candidates also chose the UK/USA as the contexts for their responses. Many candidates provided structured responses which compared the ability of the legislature to scrutinise the executive in the two political systems. Many candidates provided detailed and highly relevant exemplification.

Question 3(a): high-scoring candidates tended to address each of the three mandatory models (sociological, rational choice and party identification) and provide an analysis on the relevance of each. Their answers were structured around each of these three aspects and addressed the issue related to the question directly in their conclusion. These candidates also addressed issues such as class de-alignment and partisan de-alignment directly.

Question 3(b): candidates who performed well compared the impact of new technology with traditional grassroots campaigning, often with detailed descriptions and exemplification. Many candidates provided strong responses particularly in relation to the use of new technology. Candidates who provided insightful conclusions often linked the effective integration of new technology with grassroots campaigning.

Question paper 2

Question 1: candidate responses for this question were strong. High-achieving candidates identified three relevant points of comparison with supporting analytical comment. They also provided a detailed conclusion, which tended to concentrate on the degree of agreement or difference between the positions of Hobbes and Locke (for example they both agree on the need for a state but disagree on the proper role of the state).

Question 2: some candidates provided highly-structured responses which assisted them in displaying the skills of interpreting and synthesising information from the sources provided in order to provide a justified evaluation of the relevant aspects of the viewpoint. Candidates who performed strongly were able relate electoral data from elections for the Presidency, Senate and House of Representatives to the first part of the viewpoint. These candidates were also able to interpret and synthesise data from the 2012 and 2016 US elections that compared the performance of individual presidential candidates. Most candidates were able to access the full range of marks for the first component of the second part of the viewpoint. Candidates also performed particularly strongly when interpreting information on the presidential elections comparing the performance of the parties in 2008 and 2012 (second component of the first part of the viewpoint). Many candidates also addressed all aspects of data when comparing the performance of Barack Obama and Mitt Romney in 2012.

High-performing candidates made very explicit comments that synthesised information from the sources and these consequently provided and supported justifications for their evaluations of the relevant parts of the viewpoint. Most candidates appeared able to identify the different components related to both parts of the viewpoint.

Assignment

Many candidates produced high-quality, detailed and well-structured assignments that indicated familiarity with marking guidance and focused on topics which invited discussion and debate. High-scoring candidates tended to frame their assignment topics in an essay format (for example, 'To what extent…' or a statement followed by 'Discuss'). The framing of the title in this way supported candidates to produce assignments that were able to access a range of analytical marks and then produce detailed and relevant conclusions on their issue. This supported candidates to address the central issue and evaluate different viewpoints in their conclusions.

Candidates who achieved high marks produced well-structured responses and made explicit reference to the resource sheet and the sources they had used. Effective use of the resource sheet enables candidates to develop their knowledge and understanding and therefore provide the basis for then developing analytical comments based on this knowledge and understanding. The highest scoring candidates provided developed analytical points that gave additional justification or evidence. Many candidates produced responses which were highly analytical. Candidates who achieved high marks appeared to be aware of the success criteria for the assignment, and this was clearly reflected in the structure and content of their responses.

A) Identifying and demonstrating factual and theoretical knowledge and understanding of the issue, showing an awareness of different points of view

Most candidates identified the issue, providing background in detail and outlining alternative points of view on their issue. Some candidates reduced their ability to do this due to poorly-chosen titles. High-performing candidates identified the significance of their issue or related it to relevant political concepts. They invariably included these aspects in a structured and extended introduction. A number of candidates structured this in two introductory paragraphs, the first framing the issue and providing detailed background information, and the second explicitly identifying different viewpoints and the significance of the issue or relating the issue to relevant political concepts.

Candidates overall provided detailed and accurate descriptions, with relevant exemplification or explanations on a suitable number of aspects for their assignment. High-scoring candidates made effective use of the resource sheet. These candidates tended to use data, key headings, bullet points or spider diagrams on their resource sheet. This enabled them to expand upon these in their assignment to display the development of their knowledge and understanding.

B) Analysing and synthesising information in a structured manner
High-scoring candidates produced assignments that included both a breadth of analysis and also depth in the form of developed analytical comments. These candidates appeared to be clear on the different types of analysis. As outlined in the marking grid, developed analysis is required for candidates seeking to access the full range of marks. Candidates who scored highly did not record analytical comments on their resource sheet. Candidates who did record analytical comments on their resource sheet, received no marks for these in their assignment.

The wider marking team noted that those candidates who were familiar with the different forms of analysis (as outlined in marking instructions, for example) were more able to provide a wider range of analytical comments and also a greater depth of analysis.

C) Communicating and referring to political sources
Most candidates made explicit reference to at least two sources of information. Many candidates made good use of their resource sheet, however, centres should be clear on the rationale and use of the resource sheet itself. Strong candidates made explicit reference to, and also clearly communicated information gained from, their sources.

D) Drawing detailed and reasoned conclusion(s) about the issue
Many candidates made detailed and well-argued conclusions that addressed the central issue in their assignment. A growing number provided very detailed and insightful conclusions that evaluated the different points of view related to their issue. Strong candidates provided justifications for the side of the issue they had settled on (often providing implications of this) and also outlined why they had rejected the opposing point of view.

Areas that candidates found demanding

Question paper 1

Question 1(a): a limited number of candidates were able to secure the full range of marks. A number of candidates produced good analytical responses for each face of power but were not able to access a fourth mark as they did not develop one of their analytical comments further. Some candidates provided detailed introductions or conclusions which are not essential for the allocation of marks.

Question 1(b): a small number of candidates confused the work of related theorists. Some candidates appeared unsure of the nature of the 12-mark question, and the scope of their responses widened to cover a discussion of the differences between direct and indirect democracy. Although creditable for analysis, these responses may have disadvantaged candidates when attempting to complete the rest of the question paper.

Question 2(a): a number of candidates provided detailed information of constitutional principles such as unitary government and federalism, but these addressed only one aspect of the question. A notable proportion of candidates struggled to address the importance of the constitutional arrangements in different systems as they did not address the varying role of the courts and the implication of the power of judicial review across different systems. This limited their scope to address one of the core issues in their conclusions.

Question 2(b): although there were many high-quality responses, there were a number of candidates who did not stick to the focus of the question regarding the role of the legislature in scrutinising the actions of government. These candidates either ended up addressing differences in the passage of legislation or external factors linked to scrutiny of the executive, such as the role of the media.

Question 3(a): a number of responses were poorly structured or did not address the full range of models of voting behaviour as outlined in the mandatory course content. A minority of candidates addressed the relevance of the party identification model. Conversely there were some candidates who addressed the dominant ideology model which is no longer part of the mandatory course content.

Question 3(b): a number of candidates did not stick to the scope of the question and addressed issues linked to media strategies, such as party election broadcasts and the leaders' debates.

Question paper 2

Question 1: a small number of candidates attempted to compare unrelated information from the two sources, which gained no marks. A small number of candidates failed to provide an analytical comment related to their comparisons or did not address three areas for comparison.

Question 2: some candidates provided poorly-structured responses which attempted to link each source sequentially with each of the parts of the viewpoint. A small number of candidates did not address key terms from the viewpoint such as 'convincingly defeated' or 'every area'. This limited their scope to evaluate the extent to which the viewpoint was supported by the sources. A number of candidates did not make full use of the sources and

did not address all aspects of data. This limited their ability to access the second mark for interpreting data. A very small number of candidates did not interpret the data correctly or did not attempt to synthesise the data. This often meant they could not provide justifications for any evaluations of the viewpoint.

Assignment

Some candidates were constrained by poorly-chosen titles that limited their ability to access marks for analysis or conclusions. Centres should be clear on the nature of the politics assignment and guidance on choice of topics (that is, any political issue that invites discussion or debate). Some candidates produced responses which appeared to show all candidates from a centre choosing the same topic. The quality of these responses appeared to be poorer than those where candidates opted for a range of titles. The assignment remains one of the key ways to offer candidates the benefits of personalisation and choice and this can have a positive impact on the level of candidate engagement with the assignment. Where candidates opted for titles that had similarities to some previous essay question, they tended to perform poorer in comparison to candidates who did not. This may be because they did not satisfy the criteria for the assignment which has a different mark distribution than a 20-mark essay, with a significantly higher mark allocation for analysis.

A number of candidates did not make full or adequate use of the resource sheet. Some candidates used the resource sheet as a plan which they copied large parts from or included analytical comments, which achieved no marks. In addition, some candidates appeared to have created their own codes which limited the ability of markers to adequately identify if sources were being used and communicated effectively.

A limited number of candidates included information across two pages despite clear guidance that the resource sheet should be one page only. Some candidates provided resource sheets which did not appear to support their assignment write-up, for example lists of URLs. Centres are strongly advised that they should be familiar with the guidance on the use of the resource sheet and also on what does and does not constitute acceptable support and guidance for candidates. The resource sheet should support candidates and provides them with an opportunity to show what evidence they have collected that can then be expanded upon in their assignment. This enables candidates to display their knowledge and understanding by developing information from their resource sheets with additional description, exemplification and explanation. Candidates should not copy large sections of text from their resource sheet and should not have analytical comments on their resource sheet.

The Higher Politics assignment is different in significant ways to other subjects such as Modern Studies. Some centres (fewer than previously) may have provided guidance to candidates that applied to the Modern Studies assignment. For instance, there is no need for candidates to evaluate the reliability of sources for the Higher Politics assignment.

Candidates should be made aware of the marking grid for the Higher Politics assignment as it provides an outline of the success criteria.

A) Identifying and demonstrating factual and theoretical knowledge and understanding of the issue, showing an awareness of different points of view
A limited number of candidates chose poorly-worded titles for their assignment which limited their ability to analyse an issue and come to relevant conclusions. Some candidates chose titles such as 'What are the factors…...', and these tended to result in descriptive responses that lacked analysis. A number of candidates also appeared to lack understanding of the mark allocation for knowledge and understanding, and as a result failed to address the significance of their issue or link it to political concepts. A very small number of candidates, often as a result of poorly-worded titles, failed to clearly identify the issue in their assignment.

B) Analysing and synthesising information in a structured manner
Although many candidates produced highly-analytical responses, there were candidates who produced descriptive assignments. This again was often linked to poor choices of titles. A limited number of candidates were able access more than 10 marks for analysis. To do so candidates are required to provide at least two developed analytical comments.

C) Communicating and referring to political sources
A number of candidates did not make satisfactory use of the resource sheet. A small number of candidates copied large sections of text from their resource sheet and were therefore unable to show that they had developed their knowledge and understanding of their issue. Some candidates, as a result of using the resource sheet as a plan, copied analytical comments from their sheet which could not be awarded marks.

D) Drawing detailed and reasoned conclusion(s) about the issue
A limited number of candidates merely restated points without linking these to the wider issues in their assignments. Some candidates produced insightful conclusions with detailed reference to the evidence but limited this to only one side of the issue in their assignment.

Section 3: preparing candidates for future assessment

Question paper 1

Candidates should be clear on the differences between the 12-mark, and 20-mark essay-type questions and the allocation of marks for these. Centres should also ensure candidates are familiar with mandatory course content, particularly for the political parties and elections section of the course.

Feedback from centres, the Higher Politics National Qualification Support Team, and via Understanding Standards events, indicated the significance of the Higher Politics marking grids. These are included in the marking instructions and, along with the marking grids for the assignment, should be familiar to candidates so they are aware of the success criteria. Centres may also find it useful to use some of the exemplification on the Understanding Standards website with candidates to support understanding of assessment approaches.

Question paper 2

Candidates should be aware of how marks are allocated for the source-based questions and the specific skills they are required to demonstrate (for example, for the 20-mark question this includes interpreting data for individual aspects as well as across the full range of aspects, synthesising information and providing evaluations with justifications). Some centres may find it useful to revisit advice and guidance on structuring responses to the 20-mark source question. Centres should also not confuse guidance from other social subjects with the requirements for Higher Politics.

Candidates should be clear on the key terms to identify in the viewpoint and the range of aspects of data included in the sources that may relate to the different parts of the viewpoint. It may be useful for candidates to identify the relevant parts of the viewpoint as they proceed to respond to the question. Candidates may find it less time-consuming to provide a series of evaluations as they address each individual part of the viewpoint, rather than providing an extended summative evaluation at the conclusion of their responses.

Assignment

As with the question papers, candidates should be familiar with the success criteria for the assignment. Candidates are advised to frame their assignments as an essay-type question. This approach has been shown to support candidates in producing analytical responses and in encouraging more focused conclusions that address different viewpoints. Candidates should also ensure that their choice of assignment topic invites discussion and debate. This will support analysis and the development of conclusions.

Centres should ensure clarity over the nature and purpose of the politics assignment and the resource sheet. Centres should, in particular, be clear on the use of the resource sheet. It should enable candidates to identify information collected during the research stage of their assignment that can then assist in developing their knowledge and skills in relation to the chosen topic. The resource sheet is not intended as an essay plan, nor conversely is simply recording a number of URLs likely to support a candidate during the write-up of their assignment. Analytical comments copied from the resource sheet are not awarded marks.

Candidates should be clear on the nature of analysis as related to the Higher Politics course. Guidance on the different types of analysis can be found in, for example, marking instructions or in commentaries provided on SQA's Understanding Standards website.

Grade boundary and statistical information:

Statistical information: update on courses

Number of resulted entries in 2018	1214

Number of resulted entries in 2019	1213

Statistical information: performance of candidates

Distribution of course awards including grade boundaries

Distribution of course awards	Percentage	Cumulative %	Number of candidates	Lowest mark
Maximum mark				
A	34.4%	34.4%	417	77
B	29.8%	64.2%	362	66
C	19.5%	83.8%	237	55
D	9.6%	93.3%	116	44
No award	6.7%	-	81	-

General commentary on grade boundaries

SQA's main aim is to be fair to candidates across all subjects and all levels and maintain comparable standards across the years, even as arrangements evolve and change.

SQA aims to set examinations and create marking instructions that allow:

♦ a competent candidate to score a minimum of 50% of the available marks (the notional C boundary)
♦ a well-prepared, very competent candidate to score at least 70% of the available marks (the notional A boundary)

It is very challenging to get the standard on target every year, in every subject at every level.

Therefore, SQA holds a grade boundary meeting every year for each subject at each level to bring together all the information available (statistical and judgemental). The principal assessor and SQA qualifications manager meet with the relevant SQA head of service and statistician to discuss the evidence and make decisions. Members of the SQA management team chair these meetings. SQA can adjust the grade boundaries as a result of the meetings. This allows the pass rate to be unaffected in circumstances where there is evidence that the question paper has been more, or less, challenging than usual.

♦ The grade boundaries can be adjusted downwards if there is evidence that the question paper is more challenging than usual.
♦ The grade boundaries can be adjusted upwards if there is evidence that the exam is less challenging than usual.
♦ Where standards are comparable to previous years, similar grade boundaries are maintained.

Grade boundaries from question papers in the same subject at the same level tend to be marginally different year to year. This is because the particular questions, and the mix of questions, are different. This is also the case for question papers set by centres. If SQA alters a boundary, this does not mean that centres should necessarily alter their boundary in the question papers that they set themselves.