Course report 2026

Higher Politics, SCQF level 6

We've written this report for teachers and lecturers. We recommend you read this with the published course assessment documents and marking instructions.

Note: we've made changes to the course assessment from session 2026–27. Check your subject page for more information.

The report:

- provides a summary of how each course component performed
- highlights areas of the question papers and coursework where candidates performed well and areas where they did not perform well
- has advice you might find useful when preparing candidates for assessment

We collect and prepare the statistics in course reports before we complete the appeals process.

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Statistical and grade boundary information

Course entries

Number of resulted entries in 2025: 2,104

Number of resulted entries in 2026: 2,382

Distribution of course awards (including minimum mark to achieve each grade)

Course award	Number of candidates	Percentage	Cumulative percentage	Minimum mark required
A	468	19.6	19.6	75
B	573	24.1	43.7	63
C	572	24.0	67.7	51
D	376	15.8	83.5	39
No award	393	16.5	100	Not applicable

We've not applied rounding to these statistics.

In this report:

- 'Most' means greater than or equal to 70%.
- 'Many' means 50% to 69%.
- 'Some' means 25% to 49%.
- 'Few' or 'a few' means less than 25%.

You can find statistical reports on our website.

General commentary on grade boundaries

Our main aim when setting grade boundaries is to be fair to candidates across all subjects and levels, and to maintain comparable standards across the years, even as arrangements evolve and change.

For most National Courses, we aim to set examinations and other external assessments and create marking instructions that allow:

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

It's very challenging to get the standard on target every year, in every subject, at every level. Therefore, we hold a grade boundary meeting for each course to bring together all the information available (statistical and qualitative) and make final decisions on grade boundaries based on this information. Senior Qualifications Scotland staff normally chair these meetings.

Principal assessors use their subject expertise to evaluate the performance of the assessment and propose suitable grade boundaries based on the full range of evidence. We can adjust the grade boundaries as a result of the discussion at these meetings. This allows the pass rate to be unaffected in circumstances where there is evidence that the question paper or other assessment has been more, or less, difficult than usual.

- We can adjust the grade boundaries downwards if there's evidence that the question paper or other assessment has been more difficult than usual.
- We can adjust the grade boundaries upwards if there's evidence that the question paper or other assessment has been less difficult than usual.
- If levels of difficulty are comparable to previous years, we maintain similar grade boundaries.

Every year, we evaluate the performance of our assessments in a fair way, while ensuring standards are maintained so that our qualifications remain credible. To do

this, we measure evidence of candidates' knowledge and skills against the national standard.

For full details of the approach, please refer to the Awarding and Grading for National Courses Policy.

How the course assessment performed

Question paper 1

Overall, this question paper was positively received.

Candidates answered a range of questions, with questions 1(b), 2(a) and 3(b) being the most popular choices.

Some candidates did not address all parts of the questions, particularly in section 2: political systems.

Question paper 2

This question paper was more demanding than anticipated and we adjusted the grade boundaries to reflect this.

Assignment

Candidates covered a wide range of issues, with most candidates focusing on appropriate political topics. Candidates chose a selection of national and international topics from a range of historical time periods. Popular topics included the US political system, ideologies, constitutional arrangements, voting behaviour, conflicts and international executive comparisons. Many of these had a comparative element to them. In the assignment, candidates have opportunities for personalisation and choice, and this was evident in most candidates' responses. Candidates who completed assignments on topics outside the mandatory course content tended to achieve higher marks.

A few candidates selected political issues that would also have been acceptable choices in the Higher History coursework assessment task. This can be acceptable if candidates follow the marking guidance for the Higher Politics assignment.

A few candidates chose topics that were not specifically political in nature, including social and/or economic factors, and topics that focused on morality. This is acceptable, however, the main focus of the assignment should be a political issue that invites discussion and debate.

How candidates performed

Areas where candidates performed well

Question paper 1

Question 1(a)

Most candidates addressed the three aspects of this question (power, authority and legitimacy) and provided detailed and varied exemplification. Most candidates referenced the appropriate political theorists. Candidates who achieved high marks correctly related their analysis to the relevance of each aspect of the question, and made links between and within aspects.

Question 1(b)

Most candidates addressed the two types of democracy required for this question (direct and representative) and provided detailed and varied exemplification. Many candidates mentioned the works of relevant political theorists such as Plato and Schumpeter. Candidates who achieved high marks made accurate comparisons between the two forms of democracy.

Question 2(a)

Most candidates who responded to this question chose the UK and the USA as the context for their responses. A few candidates chose Scotland and the USA. Good responses focused on the issue outlined in the question (similarities in passage of legislation) and gave well-structured comparative responses. This approach helped candidates provide relevant analytical comments. Many candidates gave relevant and accurate explanations and exemplification of the stages of legislation within two systems. These examples came from both contemporary and historical eras.

Question 2(b)

Most candidates who responded to this question chose the UK and the USA as the context for their responses. Good responses focused on the issue outlined in the question (policy making function) and gave well-structured comparative responses. This approach helped candidates to provide relevant analytical comments. Some

candidates gave relevant and accurate explanations and exemplification of the role of the executive within policy making. A few candidates accurately compared the Scottish legislative system with the US or UK system.

Question 3(a)

Almost all candidates who responded to this question focused on the Conservative Party, the Labour Party or the Scottish National Party. Some candidates gave detailed descriptions on three or more aspects of the question (dominant ideas associated with their chosen political party) along with relevant explanation or exemplification. These candidates provided relevant analytical comments on the impact of the dominant ideas on their chosen party's electoral performance. Candidates who scored highly provided detail of the impact on specific voter groups such as social class, or other specific aspects of electoral performance.

Question 3(b)

Most candidates covered at least one aspect of the focus of the question (media strategies). Good responses were supported with detailed exemplification and analytical comments that examined the relative importance and/or effectiveness of media strategies. Many candidates used high-quality examples from contemporary times. Many candidates provided highly analytical comments that identified the interrelationship between the uses of different campaign management strategies.

Question paper 2

Question 1

Many candidates accurately identified three points of comparison between sources A and B, with many candidates providing some supporting analytical comments based on the identified comparisons.

Many candidates provided well-structured responses with three comparisons, an analytical comment based on each comparison, and then an overall conclusion.

Most candidates provided an overall conclusion, with many candidates providing a detailed overall conclusion. These often focused on a specific area, for example, a

conclusion about the changes in key influences on voting behaviour between the 2019 and 2024 UK general elections.

Question 2

Most candidates identified each of the components of the viewpoint, with many candidates providing highly structured responses that addressed all components of the viewpoint.

Many candidates evaluated the viewpoint as they examined each of the components of the viewpoint in turn. These candidates often addressed all relevant aspects of the viewpoint.

Some candidates synthesised aspects either as an independent statement or combined with their evaluation. Both approaches are valid and creditworthy.

Assignment

Many candidates produced high-quality, detailed and well-structured assignments, and focused on topics that invited discussion and debate. High-achieving candidates tended to frame their assignment topics in an essay format (for example, ‘To what extent…’ or a statement followed by ‘Discuss’), which meant they could access a range of analytical marks and produce detailed and relevant conclusions on their issue. This also enabled candidates to address the central issue and evaluate different viewpoints in their introductions and/or conclusions.

Candidates who achieved high marks produced well-structured responses and made explicit reference to the resource sheet and the political resources they used. Effective use of the resource sheet enabled candidates to develop their knowledge and understanding, providing the basis for them to develop analytical comments based on this knowledge and understanding.

Candidates who achieved the highest marks provided developed analytical points that gave additional justification or evidence. Many candidates produced responses that were highly analytical. The success criteria for the assignment were clearly reflected in the structure and content of responses that achieved high marks

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

Overall, candidates provided detailed and accurate descriptions, with relevant exemplification or explanations on a suitable number of aspects for their assignment. Most candidates identified the issue and provided background information in detail. Many candidates outlined 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 such as representation, conflict, democracy and authority. Candidates who achieved high marks included these aspects in a structured and extended introduction. A few 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. A few candidates structured their response with a detailed introduction and referred to different viewpoints and related the topic to a relevant political concept throughout the main body of the assignment. All these approaches are creditworthy.

High-achieving candidates made effective use of the resource sheet. They tended to use tabular data, key headings, quotes from politicians and limited statistical data on their resource sheet. This enabled them to expand on these in their assignment to demonstrate the development of their knowledge and understanding.

B Analysing information in a structured manner

High-achieving candidates produced assignments that included a breadth of analysis and depth in the form of developed analytical comments. As outlined in the marking grid, candidates must produce developed analysis to access the full range of marks.

Candidates who achieved high marks did not record analytical comments on their resource sheet. Candidates who did record analytical comments on their resource sheet received 0 marks for these in their assignment.

Candidates who demonstrated familiarity with the different forms of analysis (as outlined in the Higher Politics coursework assessment task document on our subject page) provided a wider range of analytical comments and a greater depth of analysis. Some candidates received all their analytical marks from using the same form of analysis, such as consequences, repeatedly.

C Communicating information from, and referring to, political sources

Many candidates made explicit reference to at least two political sources of information. Many candidates made good use of their resource sheet. Strong candidates made explicit reference to, and clearly communicated information gained from, their political sources. This included referring to the sources, such as the House of Commons library, in the main body of their response.

D Drawing a detailed and reasoned conclusion(s) about the issue

Many candidates made detailed and well-argued conclusions that addressed the central issue in their assignment. Many candidates 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 (displaying an understanding of underlying order or structure) and outlined why they had rejected the opposing point of view. The highest attaining candidates achieved the conclusion marks at the end of their assignment.

Areas where candidates did not perform well

Question paper 1

Question 1(a)

A few candidates did not cover the mandatory content for this question, usually by only making a comparison between two of the three content areas — mostly power and authority. Some candidates made limited reference to legitimacy. A few candidates only focused on one area given in the question (mostly power), with no reference to the other areas in the mandatory content in the course specification and given in the question. Although some candidates provided detailed exemplification for the different aspects, a few candidates provided descriptions and explanations that

were weak and lacked detail. Some candidates referred to examples that were not relevant or were not linked to the 21st century, and as this was specified in the question, these candidates did not gain knowledge marks for these examples. Some candidates did not provide a developed and well-argued conclusion with justifications that directly address and evaluate the central issue(s) in the question. Some candidates only referenced one or two aspects and did not reference all the central issues in the question. This limited the conclusion marks available to them.

Question 1(b)

A few candidates did not address both direct and representative democracy in adequate detail. A few candidates referred to political theorists but did not make adequate reference to the works of relevant theorists. Mentioning the name of a theorist without some reference to their works capped the marks available to 13 out of 20, as specified in the marking instructions. These candidates therefore could not access the full range of marks available for this question, even though their descriptions, explanations and exemplifications were of a high standard.

Question 2(a)

Some candidates did not focus on the passage of legislation across different political systems. They linked passage of legislation to constitutional barriers. While this may have been creditworthy, it was only awarded as one aspect of the question, limiting the number of marks available overall. A few candidates focused on one political system or made limited reference to another. This section requires candidates to take a comparative approach that reaches conclusions about the passage of legislation being similar across two political systems. For full marks in the conclusion, candidates must give a developed and well-argued conclusion with justifications that directly address and evaluate the central issues of the question. Some candidates did not reference both systems in the conclusion. This limited the number of marks available.

Question 2(b)

Many candidates focused largely on the powers of the executives. The question directly references the policy making function of executives. Some candidates made no or limited reference to policy making and focused mainly on the powers of the

executive. Some candidates had limited exemplification for one or both political systems. Some candidates' conclusions focused on the powers of the executive instead of on the policy making function, which limited the marks they could gain.

Question 3(a)

Some candidates gave details on two political parties. This question was a 12-mark response, which means candidates should only focus on one political party. Some candidates provided a narrative description of the policies for a chosen political party. These candidates either did not identify the party's dominant ideas, or did not link them to the impact on the party's electoral performance. Some candidates provided answers that included aspects such as leadership or the party's record in government, which were not within the scope of the question. Where analysis was weak, candidates made general comments on a party's overall performance, with very limited links to the impact of a specific dominant idea on the party's electoral performance.

Question 3(b)

A few candidates addressed wider issues from the course specification documents, such as traditional campaign methods and new technological campaign management strategies, for which they could gain no knowledge marks. However, where appropriate, these candidates received analysis marks within their responses. Some candidates did not give analytical points that were extended and/or justified, or exemplified. This limited the number of marks they could gain. Some candidates gave factors that would not be considered media strategies, such as canvassing door to door. These did not gain knowledge marks.

Question paper 2

Question 1

A few candidates made inaccurate comparisons that linked unrelated information from the sources or inaccurately interpreted the sources.

A few candidates did not provide an analytical comment related to their comparisons or did not address three areas for comparison.

A few candidates provided conclusions that repeated each of the comparisons rather than identifying a conclusion based on the information, while a few did not give an overall conclusion.

A few candidates referenced information that was not contained in the sources, for example, why the Labour Party won or lost in constituencies. Candidates cannot gain any marks for referencing information that is not contained within the sources.

Question 2

Although most candidates provided well-structured responses, many candidates did not refer fully to the different sources and aspects of data. As a result, they did not access a second mark for interpreting the information from each source.

A few candidates did not identify the five components and split the statement into more than five components.

Some candidates used an incorrect source to justify their answer, which resulted in no marks.

Some candidates did not identify relevant terms in the viewpoint that may or may not have been supported in the evidence, such as ‘continuous improvements’ and ‘constant increase’. This affected their ability to gain marks for evaluation.

Some candidates did not synthesise information across or within sources. They either stated what each of the sources showed in isolation, or linked information without outlining how this information might have linked, supported or opposed other data from the sources. Where this occurred, candidates did not fully evaluate the viewpoint with justification.

Some candidates provided evaluations for elements of the viewpoint, but did not provide justifications for these evaluations, so could not access marks.

Assignment

Overall, candidate performance was weaker than expected.

Some candidates were constrained by poorly chosen titles that limited their ability to access marks for analysis or conclusions. A few candidates limited their ability to gain marks by narrowing their topics in the title; for example, by mentioning domestic policy in the title but focusing on international policy in the assignment. A few candidates chose a topic that would not be considered political in nature, which limited the marks they could gain.

Where candidates chose titles that had similarities to some previous extended-response questions, they tended to perform less well than candidates who did not. This may be because they did not satisfy the criteria for the assignment, which has different mark distribution to a 20-mark extended-response question, including a significantly higher mark allocation for analysis.

Some candidates did not make full or adequate use of the resource sheet. Some candidates used the resource sheet as a plan that they copied large parts from, or included analytical comments, which achieved 0 marks. A few candidates did not submit a resource sheet, which meant they received a penalty of 6 marks deducted.

A few candidates included information across two pages, despite guidance that the resource sheet should be one page only. Some candidates provided resource sheets that did not appear to support their assignment write-up — for example, lists of URLs.

Some candidates did not gain the marks available for clear and accurate communication of, and reference to, at least two political sources. This was because they did not have political sources on their resource sheet, did not make explicit reference to the sources, or referred to the political sources by naming them alphabetically or numerically, for example, ‘Source A’ or ‘Source 1’.

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

Some candidates chose titles such as ‘What are the main factors…’, and these tended to result in descriptive responses that lacked analysis. A few candidates also

had vague topics such as ‘Democracy’ or ‘Independence’, or their title limited their ability to gain knowledge and understanding marks by focusing on one factor.

A few candidates appeared to lack understanding of the mark allocation for knowledge and understanding, and as a result, did not address the significance of their issue or link it to political concepts. Many candidates did not clearly identify a minimum of two points of view on the topic.

B Analysing information in a structured manner

Although many candidates produced highly analytical responses, there were candidates who produced descriptive assignments. Some candidates did not demonstrate a good understanding of analysis. Many candidates did not have access to more than 10 marks for analysis as they did not provide at least two developed analytical comments.

C Communicating information from, and referring to, political sources

Some candidates did not make satisfactory use of the resource sheet.

Some candidates did not refer to political sources contained on their resource sheet. A few candidates copied large sections of text from their resource sheet and therefore could not 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 achieve marks. Many candidates had resources listed on their resource sheet that would not be considered political sources. Marks are awarded for referring to political sources and some candidates did not explicitly refer to the sources listed on the resource sheet or mentioned, for example, ‘Source A’ without referencing what the source was.

D Drawing a detailed and reasoned conclusion(s) about the issue

Many candidates restated points without linking them to the wider issues in their assignment.

Some candidates produced insightful conclusions with detailed reference to the evidence, but limited this to only one side of the issue in their assignment.

A few candidates did not have a conclusion at the end of the assignment and attempted to make conclusions throughout the assignment. While this is possible, the marking criteria for full mark conclusions requires detailed reference to evidence and evaluating different viewpoints.

Preparing candidates for assessment

Question papers

You should be clear about the allocation of marks for the course assessment and ensure candidates understand it. This applies particularly to the 12-mark extended-response questions in question paper 1. If the question asks about one factor from the mandatory course content, this should be the main focus of the response. Other factors will not gain knowledge and understanding marks.

Higher Politics is independent from other courses and, as a result, the national standard and marking of the course assessment is different from other subject areas. You should not apply marking guidance from other areas to the Higher Politics course.

Question papers can sample from all aspects of the course content. You should avoid identifying patterns or making assumptions based on previous question papers. You should discourage candidates from using pre-prepared answers, as they would not meet the requirements for full marks if the question changes focus.

Markers this year identified that some responses lacked detailed analytical comments. Markers also noted that some responses lacked detailed description in the knowledge and understanding scope category and basic analysis. You can find examples of detailed and basic analysis, with candidate evidence and commentaries, on the Understanding Standards website.

Question paper 1

You should:

- Make it clear to candidates that their responses for section 1 must refer to the works of relevant political theorists. If no theorist is mentioned in the question, they may refer to any suitable political theorists. Mentioning the name of relevant theorists without reference to their works or ideas is not enough to meet the criteria in the detailed marking instructions.
- Remind candidates that section 2: political systems requires them to cover two political systems. Candidates study two of the following five political systems: the

UK political system, the Scottish political system, the political system of the United States of America, the European Union political system or the political system of the People's Republic of China. Candidates are required to take a comparative approach that reaches conclusions about the sources of power within two political systems. Candidates should be able to deal with both of their chosen political systems in similar depth.

- Ensure that for the political systems section, candidates can give detailed responses for both political systems. This is a comparative section that requires a comparison of the political systems throughout the response. This is regardless of whether the question is 12 marks or 20 marks.
- Ensure that candidates are aware of the coverage expected for the questions in section 3. You should particularly focus on the requirement for all course content to be covered in the impact of political campaign management strategies, theories of voting behaviour, and the dominant ideas within or between political parties. Candidates should be prepared to compare the electoral impact of two different sets of dominant ideas. These can either be from within one political party or between two different political parties. Candidates should be aware of the dominant idea of the political party being referenced. To gain analysis marks in this section, candidates must refer to the electoral success or failure of the political party.
- Make candidates aware that for section 3, they must use relevant case studies and examples from Scotland, the United Kingdom, or both Scotland and the United Kingdom. Examples from other nations will not achieve knowledge and understanding marks. Analysis marks are available for any response that meets the criteria for analysis.

Question paper 2

You should:

- Ensure candidates know that sources can feature content not included in the 'Skills, knowledge and understanding for the course assessment' section of the course specification.

- Remind candidates that using ellipses will not gain marks. They must write out the text they are referring to in full. This applies to question 1 — the comparison question and question 2 — the electoral data question.
- Ensure candidates know that they should only use content from the sources to respond to questions. They require no additional knowledge to achieve marks.
- Ensure that in question 1, for the 2-mark conclusion, candidates present a detailed overall conclusion about the comparison based on analysis of evidence. This should be a conclusion with evidence and not an overview of points already mentioned.
- Be clear on the mark allocation for question 2, the 20-mark electoral data question. Mark allocations are in the marking grids included in the marking instructions. Candidates may also find these grids helpful.
- For question 2, ensure that candidates know what the second interpretation mark is awarded for. They must be able to evaluate whole components with appropriate supporting justification. Stating that the component is accurate or inaccurate alone will not gain marks.
- Make sure candidates are aware that the components can deal with data from multiple or single sources.
- Make sure candidates are aware that components can contain two, three or four aspects. These components can appear in any order within the statement.

Assignment

You should ensure that candidates:

- Are familiar with the success criteria for the assignment. Guidance is available in the Higher Politics coursework assessment task document on our subject page.
- Frame their assignments in response to an essay-style question; for example, using ‘To what extent…’ or ‘Discuss’. This approach supports them producing analytical responses and encourages more focused conclusions that address a range of different viewpoints.
- Choose a topic that invites discussion and debate, as this will support the development of analysis and well-reasoned conclusions. You should be clear on the nature of the Politics assignment and the guidance on choosing topics — any political issue that invites discussion or debate.

- Do not copy large sections of text from their resource sheet and do not have analytical comments on their resource sheet. Analytical comments copied directly from the resource sheet will not be credited.
- Clearly understand the nature and purpose of the assignment and the resource sheet. The purpose of the resource sheet is to help candidates identify and organise information gathered during the research stage. This information should support the development of their knowledge and analytical skills in relation to their chosen topic.
- Are aware of what constitutes a political source. To access the highest marks, the resource sheet must include a minimum of two political sources. These sources must be explicitly political in nature. For example, surveys of peers on non-political issues would not normally be considered suitable political sources. Making reference to 'Source A' or 'Source 1' is not creditworthy — candidates must name sources; for example, 'A speech by Margaret Thatcher from the Conservative Party Conference'.

You must:

- Be familiar with the guidance on the use of the resource sheet and on what does and does not constitute acceptable support and guidance for candidates. The resource sheet should support candidates and provide them with an opportunity to show what evidence they have collected, which they can then expand on in their assignment. This enables them to display their knowledge and understanding by developing information from their resource sheet with additional description, exemplification and explanation. The resource sheet is not intended to be used as an essay plan, and listing URLs is unlikely to support candidates in their write-up.
- Ensure candidates have a clear understanding of what constitutes analysis in the context of Higher Politics. You can find further guidance on different types of analysis in the marking instructions on our website, or in the commentaries on the Understanding Standards website.

Candidates may draw on knowledge gained from other subjects, such as History; however, they must ensure that any such knowledge is applied within the framework

of the Higher Politics assignment marking criteria. This will ensure that they can access the full range of marks and are not disadvantaged during assessment.

Changes to the course assessment from session 2026–27

- We've increased the duration of question paper 2 by 15 minutes — from 1 hour 15 minutes to 1 hour 30 minutes.
- In the course specification, we've updated the description of content in 'section 3: political parties and elections' to reflect that candidates can choose from any political party with representation in the Scottish or UK Parliament.