2023 VCE Australian Politics external assessment report

General comments

The 2023 VCE Australian Politics examination consisted of two sections:

* Section A comprised 14 short-answer and extended-answer questions, drawing on all four areas of study. Students were required to answer all questions; however, some students did not attempt to answer some questions.
* Section B consisted of four essay questions – one for each area of study. Students were required to answer one of these essay questions.

Students generally demonstrated a commendable engagement with contemporary political affairs. As a subject rooted in contemporary studies, VCE Australian Politics requires students to discuss case studies from the past decade. Accordingly, numerous students drew on recent events such as the 2023 Voice referendum, the 2022 federal election, and Australia’s responses to present-day national and international issues.

Many students submitted detailed answers. Frequently, responses included unnecessary content such as the restatement of questions or general statements about things that were implied in the questions. It is important for students to consider the mark allocation for each question and tailor the length of their answers accordingly. There were also students whose responses failed to answer the question being asked. Students are reminded to consult the VCAA glossary of command terms and to ensure their exam preparation includes practising answering questions with varying degrees of difficulty and employing a range of command terms. Students and teachers are also reminded that assessors cannot give credit for responses that they cannot read or understand. Therefore, students must endeavour to write legibly and to express their ideas clearly.

The key terms and concepts listed in the study design underpin the course and must be learnt. A number of student responses showed that they did not understand fundamental ideas such as federalism and collective ministerial responsibility (CMR). Some also displayed narrow and rigid understandings of key democratic principles such as representation.

Specific information

Note: Student responses reproduced in this report have not been corrected for grammar, spelling or factual information.

This report provides sample answers, or an indication of what answers may have included. Unless otherwise stated, these are not intended to be exemplary or complete responses.

The statistics in this report may be subject to rounding, resulting in a total of more or less than 100 per cent.

Section A

Question 1

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Marks | 0 | 1 | 2 | Average |
| % | 2 | 22 | 76 | 1.8 |

Students were required to state two functions of the Australian House of Representatives:

* legislation – initiating, amending, blocking, passing and repealing bills
* representation of the electorate
* formation of government
* scrutiny of government and holding the executive to account.

Most students answered this opening question well. However, some students failed to identify two distinct functions of the House of Representatives, instead presenting two aspects of the legislative function, two types of representation or two tools of accountability. Some responses incorrectly labelled the House of Representatives as the ‘house of review’. Others revealed the misconception that all members of the executive must be members of the House of Representatives.

Question 2

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Marks | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | Average |
| % | 25 | 18 | 14 | 20 | 23 | 2.0 |

This question asked students to explain the importance of the term ‘collective ministerial responsibility’, using a contemporary example. While it was not essential to give a definition of the term, many students found it helpful to state explicitly that it is the Westminster principle that all ministers take responsibility for the decisions of Cabinet and that, by convention, a minister who cannot publicly defend a Cabinet decision must resign from the government.

Explanations of the importance of collective ministerial responsibility include:

* it supports Cabinet confidentiality, solidarity and stability
* it seeks to ensure a government’s unity of purpose
* it assumes government is the collective effort of all ministers and therefore promotes collective accountability
* it reflects the democratic principle that the Parliament, including the Governor-General, maintains confidence in the whole-of-government rather than in individual ministers
* it attempts to conceal maladministration and politically embarrassing matters from the public.

Recent examples cited successfully included the resignations from the Turnbull Cabinet during the Liberal leadership turmoil of August 2018, and the unity of the Albanese Cabinet on the 2023 referendum proposal for a Voice to Parliament and the executive. Some students did not provide a suitable example.

A quarter of students received no marks for this question. Of these, many mistakenly wrote about individual ministerial responsibility.

Question 3

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Marks | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | Average |
| % | 5 | 9 | 23 | 62 | 2.4 |

Students were required to outline two key roles of crossbenchers in the Australian Parliament. The strongest answers provided good descriptive detail, presented two distinct roles, and focused on the roles of crossbenchers within the Parliament and not their activities outside of the Parliament. Moreover, they demonstrated a clear understanding that crossbenchers are those members of the Australian Parliament who belong to neither the government nor the opposition, and who represent views not prioritised or held by the major parties.

High-scoring responses demonstrated specific knowledge of the roles crossbenchers fulfil within the legislative, representative and/or accountability functions of Parliament. Some showed an awareness of roles that exist when the crossbench holds the balance of power in either house, such as negotiating and bargaining on legislation.

The following is an excerpt from a high-scoring response.

*Crossbenchers may hold the balance of power. When neither major party holds enough seats in either House to pass legislation in their own right, crossbenchers have significant leverage over the passage of legislation. Recently, the Greens used the balance of power in the Senate to add an extra $2 billion in social and affordable Housing to the Housing Australia Future Fund.*

Question 4

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Marks | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | Average |
| % | 6 | 8 | 11 | 13 | 28 | 24 | 11 | 3.6 |

This question asked students to analyse how political advertising and campaign techniques may influence the operation of the Australian electoral system. Students needed to analyse more than one campaign technique or type of political advertising. There was broad scope to discuss advertising in any form of contemporary media (television, radio, print, billboard, digital social platforms etc.). Techniques discussed included pork barrelling, scare campaigns, robocalls and door knocking.

Importantly, students needed to make a clear link between the techniques and advertising discussed and the positive or negative impacts that they can have on how the Australian electoral system works. Strong responses included specific examples from the 2019 and 2022 federal election campaigns. Student analysis of influence included:

* persuading or dissuading voters to vote for certain parties or candidates
* promoting debate about policies and leadership
* promoting or undermining participation in the electoral process.

Numerous students wrongly considered political donations to be a campaign technique; donations are listed separately in the study design. Another error that many students made was to discuss electoral education advertisements run by the Australian Electoral Commission. Several responses focused on misinformation in political campaigning but these were largely unsupported by contemporary evidence and failed to focus on the requirements of the question.

The following are excerpts from a high-scoring response.

Political advertising and campaigning allow political parties and interest groups to increase public support and education on key issues.

How-to-vote cards, like ones handed out in the 2022 federal election, while biased towards the political party that produces them, inform voters on how to cast a formal vote while preferencing their own candidates and allies.

Question 5

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Marks | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | Average |
| % | 27 | 13 | 13 | 9 | 10 | 15 | 14 | 2.6 |

This challenging question required students, using contemporary evidence, to discuss two ways in which the United States of America’s federal system of government can impact on democratic rights and freedoms. A clearly demonstrated understanding of federalism was crucial to a successful response. Many students presented generic responses about the protection of rights and freedoms in the US and failed to note that the question sought an examination of how the division of political power and responsibility between the national and state governments affects rights and freedoms. Moreover, many students confused the federal system of government with the separation of powers.

Strong responses noted how rights and freedoms vary from state to state across the USA because the US Constitution reserves to the states those powers not expressly delegated to the federal Congress. Therefore, in areas where states retain the right to legislate, such as abortion and gun control, laws vary from state to state. Many students cited Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization (2022), which overturned the Roe v. Wade (1973) decision to recognise abortion as a constitutionally protected right; however, citing this case was effective only when noting that the decision returned to the states the power to make abortion laws. The variance in voting laws between states and the states’ role in conducting elections were frequently cited to positive effect, especially regarding accessibility of the franchise. Some students correctly observed that the requirement for both federal and state governments to be involved to change the constitution serves as a protection of democratic rights and freedoms.

Question 6

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Marks | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | Average |
| % | 0 | 2 | 8 | 15 | 21 | 25 | 21 | 8 | 4.5 |

The causes and effects of low voter turnout in the United States of America’s electoral system needed to be analysed for this question. Given the question contained two plurals, students needed to examine at least two causes and two effects. The strongest responses showed an understanding of the linkages between causes and effects and used contemporary evidence to support their analyses. Most students were able to identify the underlying causes of low turnout such as voluntary voting and voter apathy. Many were less successful in analysing the effects of low voter turnout, but those who focused on key democratic values and principles such as legitimacy, popular mandate and representation generally presented effective analyses.

The following is an excerpt from a high-scoring response.

The effects of low voter turnout may firstly be a lack of adequate representation in the congress, as there is little to no representation of minority views or opinions. This may leave certain marginalised groups feeling ignored and not reflected in the Congress. Furthermore, this low voter turnout limits the electoral mandate of both the legislature and executive. If not all citizens are voting, and turnout is low, especially in mid term elections when turnout can be a minute 30%, it may be argued that congress and the president do not in fact have a mandate to introduce policy and legislation, as these actions may not reflect the true values of citizens. In this way, low turnout inhibits both the representation and mandate of government.

Question 7

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Marks | 0 | 1 | 2 | Average |
| % | 15 | 26 | 58 | 1.5 |

This question required students to describe the composition of the Congress of the United States of America. Most students correctly identified that Congress is bicameral, comprising a House of Representatives with 435 members and a Senate of 100 members, two from each of the 50 states. Different interpretations of the question were also accepted to the extent that they were accurate. For example, some students described the dominance of both houses of Congress by major parties – the Democrats and the Republicans. Others still described the composition in terms of race, gender or other diversity factors.

Question 8

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Marks | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | Average |
| % | 28 | 20 | 21 | 31 | 1.5 |

Using an example, students needed to describe one role of the ministry in implementing a contemporary domestic policy. An understanding of two key terms was essential: the ministry and policy implementation. Numerous students focused on the role of the department rather than the individual minister as a member of the broader body of ministers that make up executive government. Many answers also revealed a lack of clarity on the differences between policy formulation and implementation.

Successful responses described roles such as:

* the adherence to the principle of collective ministerial responsibility for a policy’s success or failure
* ministerial oversight of public service departments
* monitoring of policy success or problems
* the key advocacy role of individual ministers in the Parliament, and to stakeholders and the broader public.

Domestic policies that were discussed effectively included Robodebt, climate emissions reduction targets, and budgetary policies such as income tax cuts.

The following is an example of a high-scoring response.

One role of the ministry in implementing contemporary domestic policy is to continue to scrutinise it and ensure that it is achieving its goals. This can be achieved by ministers working with public servants to ensure that policies are working effectively. For example, after implementing physical distancing requirements as part of Covid-19 policy, the prime minister Scott Morrison and health minister Greg Hunt liaised with Chief Medical Officer Brendan Murphy to ensure the implementation was effective.

Question 9

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Marks | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Average |
| % | 7 | 9 | 16 | 35 | 22 | 11 | 2.9 |

This question asked for a discussion of how international influences have impacted on Australian domestic policy formulation and/or implementation. The plural in the question necessitated consideration of at least two international influences. The words ‘have impacted’ indicated that students needed actual evidence of international influence having had an effect. Responses that described international pressures (e.g. climate activism or the COVID-19 pandemic) without demonstrating a specific impact on Australian domestic policy received no credit.

Examples discussed included:

* the war in Ukraine causing increased energy prices, which in turn influenced the government to grant a temporary reduction in fuel excise
* policy changes overseas influencing similar policy change in Australia, e.g. the Obergefell v. Hodges decision in the United States and Ireland’s referendum on same-sex marriage increased pressure on the Australian government to address the issue
* overseas policy instruments informing policy formulation in Australia, e.g. foreign wage subsidy schemes were examined in developing JobKeeper, Singaporean technology was used in designing Australia’s COVID-Safe App.

Question 10

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Marks | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | Average |
| % | 1 | 3 | 11 | 11 | 18 | 18 | 24 | 14 | 4.7 |

Students were asked to analyse the significance of elections in formulating domestic policy, and there was considerable variation in the quality of responses to this question. Some presented strong discussions about party platforms, electoral mandates and policies presented during campaigns becoming part of government policy after an election. Several students noted that a change of government at an election can bring about substantial changes in domestic policy.

A small number of responses examined the limiting influence of Australia’s short electoral cycle on the formulation of domestic policy. Some students presented a valid argument that when governments seek to address issues that arise after elections, such as natural disasters or COVID-19, elections may have no significance in formulating policy responses.

Overall, there were two weaknesses commonly evident in students’ responses: firstly, that they did not clearly address the importance of elections to domestic policy formulation, and secondly, that they did not present evidence of recent elections and domestic policy to support their contentions. Many students focused on the Voice, but this example was generally unhelpful in answering the question. Too frequently, broad arguments about elections being an expression of ‘the will of the people’ or affecting the composition of both houses of parliament were not linked to specific domestic policies.

Question 11

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Marks | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | Average |
| % | 0 | 5 | 34 | 60 | 2.5 |

A high number of students presented a clear demonstration of distinctions between domestic policy and foreign policy and illustrated those differences with a contemporary example of each type of policy. Some students missed out on marks by making broad general comments about policy without highlighting key points of difference between foreign and domestic policy. Some answers did not provide more than one example as required by the question.

Points of distinction that could have been presented include the following:

* Foreign policy is often reactive whereas domestic policy is largely proactive.
* Foreign policy is usually bipartisan whereas domestic policy is partisan.
* Foreign policy is formulated in secrecy in comparison to domestic policy.
* There is little role for parliament and legislation in foreign policy in comparison to domestic policy.
* Factors such as public opinion, elections and interest groups have less influence on foreign policy than on domestic policy.

Question 12

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Marks | 0 | 1 | 2 | Average |
| % | 29 | 27 | 43 | 1.1 |

Australian delegations overseas seek to represent, protect and promote Australia’s interests in various fields including trade and investment, culture, diplomatic engagement, security and defence. Numerous students confused overseas delegations with embassies and high commissions and were therefore unable to present a relevant example. Delegations mentioned included:

* delegations involving Trade Minister Don Farrell and DFAT officials in Belgium and Japan for negotiations on an Australia–EU free trade agreement
* Taste of Australia’s Big BBQ event with Australian chef Luke Nguyen in Hanoi in August 2023, to promote Australian food, beverages and culture, attended by Foreign Minister Penny Wong
* the cross-party parliamentary delegation to Washington DC led by Barnaby Joyce MP in September 2023 to plead with US decision-makers for the freedom of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange.

Question 13

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Marks | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | Average |
| % | 1 | 2 | 8 | 27 | 60 | 3.5 |

Most students successfully described two key objectives of Australian foreign policy and supported each objective with a relevant contemporary example. Key objectives students could have described included:

* the concept of national interest
* maintaining national security
* promoting Australia’s economic and trade interests
* promoting Australia as a good global citizen.

Some students tried to use the same contemporary example for two separate objectives of foreign policy, or merely identified rather than described objectives of foreign policy.

Question 14

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Marks | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | Average |
| % | 13 | 17 | 16 | 13 | 17 | 14 | 10 | 2.9 |

This was a challenging question for many students. Few students demonstrated a thorough understanding of the nature of foreign policy and therefore the limitations on the degree of influence that interest groups can have. Some exaggerated how influential interest groups are but struggled to identify contexts in which influence may be exercised, let alone provide evidence of specific foreign policy that specific interest groups have influenced. For example, numerous responses argued that climate activist groups and refugee advocacy groups had had a strong influence on foreign policy development but did not present specific evidence of this.

Examples of what could have been raised include the following:

* The secretive and reactive nature of foreign policy limits the influence of interest groups.
* The formulation of foreign policy at an elite level limits the influence of interest groups.
* The government will act in the national interest rather than the interests of interest groups.
* Agricultural and industry interest groups may exercise influence in trade policy.
* The expertise of interest groups such as think tanks may influence foreign policy formulation.

The following is an example of a high-scoring response.

Interest groups have minimal influence over the formulation of foreign policy, however can and have displayed influence. Due to foreign policy’s expert, secret and reactive nature, the greatest influence on foreign policy are the executive, as the National Security Committee and greater cabinet, chaired by the PM, are tasked with such formulation, as they have access to the public service and senior intelligence networks and officials. The public and other groups rarely influence foreign policy formulation, thus interest groups can struggle also. An interest group, being a group of like-minded individuals not seeking election themselves but to influence policy to benefit their organisation or ideology, can influence foreign policy formulation through lobbying. An example of such was the Australian Palestine Advocacy Network (APAN) who made numerous media releases and statements in regards to Australia’s position on labelling Palestinian territories ‘disputed’. APAN influence foreign policy formulation as they lobbied for the territories to be labelled ‘occupied’. After significant pressure from the ALP left faction, the government took APAN’s suggestion and thus labelled Palestine occupied in August 2023, demonstrating the significant but rare influence interest groups can have on foreign policy formulation.

Section B

Section B consisted of four questions from which students were required to respond to one. The percentage of students who chose each option is shown in the table below.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Option | Question 1 | Question 2 | Question 3 | Question 4 |
| % | 31 | 14 | 34 | 21 |

The breakdown of percentages of students who achieved each score out of 20 for Section B is as follows.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Marks | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 | 14 | 15 | 16 | 17 | 18 | 19 | 20 | Average |
| % | 0 | 0.9 | 0 | 0 | 0.9 | 0.5 | 0.9 | 3 | 4 | 0.5 | 1 | 7 | 5 | 10 | 13 | 20 | 13 | 8 | 7 | 2 | 3 | 14.0 |

The assessment of the essay in Section B is global, based upon criteria that are applied holistically and reflect the assessors’ appraisal of the whole answer. The assessment criteria, as detailed on the examination paper, are as follows:

* development of a coherent and relevant argument that addresses the specific demands of the essay question
* demonstration of political knowledge that is accurate and appropriate for the essay question
* accurate use of key political terms and concepts
* use of contemporary examples and case studies to support explanations, points of view and arguments.

Question 1

Students were asked to examine the extent to which the institutions and processes of the Australian political system uphold democratic values and principles. Most respondents to this question considered various strengths and weaknesses of the Australian political system and demonstrated clear links between specific democratic values and principles and a range of institutions and processes.

The democratic values and principles to which students could refer are those listed in the study design, namely:

* protection of democratic rights and freedoms
* participation of citizens in the political process
* popular sovereignty, majority rule and respect for minorities
* representation of citizens
* accountability of government
* the rule of law.

Some lower-scoring responses focused entirely on either the Commonwealth Parliament or the Australian electoral system and did not consider other institutions and processes such as the Australian Constitution, the High Court, Westminster values and principles, the separation of powers and Australia’s federal system of government.

The following is the introduction from a high-scoring response.

*The institutions and processes of the Australian political system are designed to uphold democratic values and principles, however, this is not always the case. The Australian political system comes with an electoral system that is run by an independent body, the Australian Electoral Commission, which upholds accountability, representation and participation. The operation of parliament along with its Westminster traditions and values also has the ability to achieve accountability, representation, majority rule and popular sovereignty. In reality, there are limitations on the ability of the electoral system and parliament to always uphold democratic values and principles. Scott Morrison’s secret ministerial appointment scandal is symbolic of a culture where political convenience is prioritised over democratic norms.*

Question 2

This topic, requiring students to discuss the extent to which both the Australian and US legislatures can keep the executive accountable, was not a popular choice. Students needed to show their understanding of the position of the executive in each political system and various accountability mechanisms that are available to each legislative branch to keep the executive in check. While the question did not overtly direct students to make comparisons, there was ample opportunity to compare the effectiveness of a legislature which includes, and is dominated by, the executive, to a system in which the legislative and executive branches are clearly separate. Students’ examination of the effectiveness of accountability mechanisms in both systems needed to be supported by contemporary examples.

Question 3

Students were asked to discuss the extent to which they agreed with the contention that when governments are formulating domestic policy, a range of institutions and groups are equally influential. In their response, students needed to refer to at least two of the public service, the judiciary, opinion polls, the media and independent members of parliament. Some students, in addressing the words ‘equally influential’ in the question, devoted too much focus to weighing up influence at the expense of a thorough examination of how and why policy influence may be achieved. Higher-scoring responses provided detailed and specific examples of policy influence to demonstrate a deep understanding of the interaction between government and other institutions and groups in the formulation of domestic policy. Some less successful responses were highly descriptive about the nature of influence without providing adequate policy context, while others digressed to discussions of domestic policy implementation.

Contemporary policies to which students commonly referred in their essays included the referendum on the Voice, the Housing Australia Future Fund and Robodebt.

Question 4

This essay question required students to evaluate the success of the Australian Government’s use of key instruments of contemporary foreign policy in pursuit of its national interests, with reference to three different foreign policy instruments. Higher-scoring responses assessed the strengths and weaknesses of three foreign policy instruments, each linked to one or more specific national interest, and presented clear judgments about the success of governments’ use of those instruments. Reference to any Australian governments of the past decade was acceptable.

The national interests that students should have addressed are:

* maintaining national security
* promoting Australia’s economic and trade interests
* promoting Australia as a good global citizen.

Key policy instruments, of which students should have referred to three, are:

* bilateral and multilateral doctrines of foreign policy
* foreign aid
* formal agreements, treaties and alliances
* humanitarian and emergency assistance
* peace-keeping operations and military involvement
* overseas delegations.