



GENERAL COMMENTS

This was the final Political Studies examination, as the new National Politics course and examination commence in January 2006. It was pleasing to note that most students were able to demonstrate very good political knowledge and a sound understanding of political concepts. As with previous Political Studies examinations, the 2005 examination reinforced the need for students to carefully read the questions and to consider their responses. Less successful students clearly misinterpreted some questions, resulting in low marks being awarded.

Students should use the 15 minutes of reading time to maximum effect to plan their answers to questions. If possible, students are advised to read over their work so as to avoid careless spelling or expression errors.

SPECIFIC INFORMATION

Section A – Short-answer questions

First Question Chosen	1	2
%	63	37

a.

Marks	0	1	2	Average
%	4	4	92	1.9

b.

Marks	0	1	2	3	Average
%	10	20	29	41	2.0

c.

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	Average
%	12	8	12	24	27	17	3.0

Second Question Chosen	2	3
%	55	45

a.

Marks	0	1	2	Average
%	8	15	77	1.7

b.

Marks	0	1	2	3	Average
%	5	9	24	62	2.4

c.

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	Average
%	6	6	15	31	27	15	3.1

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Third Question Chosen	3	4
%	46	54

a.

Marks	0	1	2	Average
%	9	18	73	1.7

b.

Marks	0	1	2	3	Average
%	4	11	26	59	2.4

c.

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	Average
%	4	6	13	30	27	19	3.3

Fourth Question Chosen	4	5
%	20	80

a.

Marks	0	1	2	Average
%	9	11	79	1.7

b.

Marks	0	1	2	3	Average
%	2	9	29	60	2.5

c.

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	Average
%	2	4	10	31	31	21	3.5

The short-answer questions in Section A were generally well answered, although it was evident that many students found some questions challenging. Students are advised to consider the following when attempting Section A of the examination.

- Part a. of each question required students to define a political term. Responses needed to be precise. Better students were able to do this, and their responses often contained accurate examples that reinforced the definition. Some less successful students gave vague responses, and some included incorrect examples.
- Part b. of each question required students to 'briefly describe' three aspects relating to a section of the Political Studies course. Students are advised to number or use dot points to define each separate and distinct aspect. Better students were able to accurately describe aspects in one to two lines, and it was pleasing to note that students did not write unnecessarily long responses. Less successful students listed rather than described each aspect, or were unable to cite three responses.
- Part c. of each question required students to evaluate an argument. Better students were able to clearly identify arguments and evaluate them in detail by exploring counter arguments, often using relevant and accurate examples to reinforce their comments. Better students also included a brief, one to three line summary at the end of their response. There was a tendency for students to write more than was required in these responses. Less successful students struggled to evaluate, gave little or no consideration to counter arguments in their response and used few, if any, relevant examples to reinforce their comments. Students should not use lists or dot points in these answers.

Students were expected to answer only four of the five sets of questions in Section A, yet it was disappointing to note that an increased number of students attempted to answer all of the questions. Teachers are advised to mirror the format of Section A in their school-assessed coursework throughout the year. This should help students to practise the skills needed to accurately answer the questions and manage their time in the examination.

Question 1 – The Australian Constitution

a. What is meant by the term concurrent powers?

Concurrent powers are specific powers given in the Constitution to the Commonwealth or federal government which are also exercisable by the states. These powers are listed in Section 51. Some of the concurrent powers listed in Section 51 are made exclusive to the Commonwealth by other sections of the Constitution.



Very few students had any problems with this question.

b. Briefly describe three successful referendum proposals.

This was a very difficult question that saw many capable students struggle to accurately cite three examples of successful referendums. Better students included three of the following in their responses.

- 1906 Senate elections – to enable elections for both Houses to be held concurrently.
- 1910 State debts – to give the Commonwealth unrestricted power to take over state debts.
- 1928 State debts – to end the system of per capita payments that had been made by the Commonwealth to the states since 1910, and to restrict the right of each state to borrow for its own development by subjecting that borrowing to control by a loan council.
- 1946 Social services – to give the Commonwealth power to legislate on a wide range of social services. Provides the Commonwealth with power to legislate on pensions other than invalid and aged pensions, such as maternity, unemployment benefits and child endowment.
- 1967 Aborigines – to recognise the Aboriginal people as Australian citizens, making it possible for the Commonwealth Parliament to make laws relating to Aboriginal people and to include Aboriginal people in the census.
- 1977 Senate casual vacancies – to ensure, as far as practicable, that a casual vacancy in the Senate is filled by a person of the same political party as the Senator chosen by the people, and that the person shall hold the seat for the balance of the term.
- 1977 Referendums – to allow electors in territories, as well as in the states, to vote in constitutional referendums.
- 1977 Retirement of judges – to provide for retiring ages (70 years of age) for judges of federal courts, including the High Court.

Less successful students were unable to cite three examples of successful referendums. There was also confusion over the 1967 referendum, with many stating that it was this referendum that granted Aborigines the right to vote, which is incorrect. Aboriginal people became entitled to vote at federal elections and referendums through an Act of Parliament on June 18 1962.

c. Evaluate the argument that the federal government dominates the federal system.

This question caused considerable confusion amongst students. Better students argued that the federal government does indeed dominate the federal system and were able to show that the federal government has increased its power in many areas at the expense of the states. They included relevant and current examples, particularly in the financial area, including taxation, tied grants and the use of Section 96, which have resulted from the need for centralised economic management. They also argued that it is a relationship that is not static, and that while the federal government does dominate in areas such as finance, it is not true to say that it dominates the states across the board. The federal system is a system of power sharing. Better students argued that the states can, and have, resisted the Commonwealth Government; for example, the Victorian Government refused to allow grazing in the Victorian high country in 2005, despite the federal government's desire for this to occur. They were also able to recognise the importance of the states in Australia's federal structure.

Less successful students misinterpreted this question and gave detailed accounts of how the Howard Government dominates federal politics. They discussed the changes to the composition of the Senate from July 2005 and how the Howard Government has been able to pass legislation such as the full sale of Telstra.

Question 2 – Parliament and the Executive

a. What is meant by the term backbencher?

A backbencher is a member of parliament who is not a minister or a shadow minister. The term derives from the convention that ministers and shadow ministers occupy the front seats to the right and left sides of the Speaker.

Most students were able to answer this question accurately, although less successful students spent too much time focusing on the role of a backbencher during question time and neglected to explain what a backbencher actually is.

b. Briefly describe three functions of the Senate.

The Senate can:

- represent the states
- review legislation from the House of Representatives
- suggest amendments to legislation from the Lower House



- debate, discuss and scrutinise proposed legislation
- vote on proposed legislation
- initiate legislation, with the exception of Appropriation Bills
- review the proposals and decisions of the government
- establish specialist review committees for proposed legislation or key issues.

Better students handled this question with ease and were able to cite three of the above in their responses. Less successful students struggled to cite three distinct roles of the Senate and tended to either discuss the composition of the Senate or aspects of the voting system to elect the Senate.

c. Evaluate the argument that federal ministers have limited power.

The following factors may contribute to the degree of power a minister can exert:

- having a cabinet portfolio, which means the minister participates in key policy and decision making
- the nature of the portfolio, whether it is a key portfolio such as Treasury or a portfolio that has current significance such as the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade
- the capability and support of the bureaucracy, including the departmental head
- the expertise and ability of the minister
- the support the minister has from the prime minister and Cabinet
- the support the minister has from the backbench and party factions
- the departmental budgetary allocation
- the potential for the Constitution to limit the power of ministers
- the statutes of the Senate.

This was a challenging question but was generally quite well handled. Better students argued that the power of ministers is dependent upon a number of factors. Some have limited power, but others may exert significant influence on the direction of government policy. Less successful students struggled to discuss limitations on the power of ministers. They failed to understand the complexity of the question and often only looked at one side of the argument, stating a series of limitations on ministers' powers without actually discussing the power that ministers can exert. It was also evident that some students had no idea of what a minister actually is.

Question 3 – Voting and elections

a. What is meant by the term safe seat?

Safe seats occur when a winning candidate receives more than 60 per cent of the vote. Another measurement is the swing needed from the last election; if a swing of more than 10 per cent is needed, it is considered a safe seat.

Most students had a clear understanding of what a safe seat is and often included current examples to reinforce their responses. However, it was evident that there was confusion amongst some students as to the percentage of the vote which would constitute a seat being considered 'safe'.

b. Briefly describe three key characteristics of the proportional voting system used to elect the Australian Senate.

Successful students' responses included three of the following characteristics.

- The system utilises multi-member electorates (states and territories).
- Candidates for the Senate stand for a state or territory. It is a constitutional requirement that each state be equally represented regardless of its population.
- Preferences are allocated using a party list and are distributed at a reduced transfer value.
- A quota is used to determine how many votes are required in order to gain a Senate seat. At a double dissolution the quota required is 7.69 per cent and at half-Senate elections it is 14.28 per cent.
- The principle of this system is that the percentage of seats gained is a reflection of the proportion of votes gained.
- Minor parties with significant support can gain Senate seats.
- It is possible for major parties to gain a majority in the Senate, as is currently the case with the Liberal/National parties.
- Senate ballot papers are divided into two sections to distinguish the two alternative methods of voting for Senators. If a voter chooses to put the number '1' in one of the boxes above the line on the Senate ballot paper, all the preferences will be distributed according to that group's list. Electors may choose to vote below the line according to their own preferences.
- The system can take a long time to count, and final Senate results can potentially take up to five weeks.



This question was well answered by most students. Less successful students struggled to give three distinctly different characteristics of proportional voting and often discussed the quota system in detail, yet with some confusion as to how it is applied.

c. Evaluate the argument that Australia should adopt fixed-term federal elections.

This was a challenging question, yet one that is very relevant, and many successful students were able to demonstrate a good understanding of both sides of the argument. In their evaluation they raised points such as that under Australia's electoral system, the Prime Minister can ask the Governor General to call an election at any time within three years of the last election (the average time between Australian federal elections is 2.3 years). They argued that:

- fixed term elections (where governments are in power for a fixed term and elections are held on a predetermined date, as is done for US presidential and Congressional elections) would make Australia's electoral system more democratic and efficient
- fixed term elections would mean that governments could not manipulate election dates to gain an electoral advantage and thwart the planning processes of the opposition and minor parties
- the current system gives the government an unfair planning advantage
- there are cost advantages to fixed-term elections; for example, the Australian Electoral Commission would be better able to plan and prepare
- the system of fixed terms works well in many other countries and works at the state level in Victoria.

It is more difficult to argue against the proposition, and more successful students concluded that there are few good arguments to support the current system. Arguments against fixed-term elections included:

- if a government was frustrated by the Senate there would need to be a mechanism for calling an early election, which may mean changes to the double dissolution clauses of the Constitution and could be difficult to achieve
- there would need to be a mechanism to deal with a situation where the government lost its majority in the House of Representatives; for example, would the opposition and minor parties be able to form coalition to form government or would there be an early election?

Less successful students showed little understanding of the complexities of the issue and generally only looked at one side of the argument. Some had no idea of what fixed-term elections actually are and also seemed unaware that the fixed-term election debate has been very much on the political agenda throughout 2005.

Question 4 – Political parties and pressure groups

a. What is meant by the term lobbyist?

A lobbyist is a person hired by an interest group to convey policy demands from the group to decision makers in the government. A lobbyist is located outside the institutionalised policy making process. Lobbyists sell their services to interest groups on the basis that they can give interest groups access to ministers and bureaucrats. Lobbyists tend to be former politicians, party secretaries, members of the party organisation or former journalists.

Most students answered this question very well, with only a small percentage unsure of the role of a lobbyist.

b. Briefly describe three functions performed by pressure groups.

Most students had little trouble citing three functions of pressure groups, including:

- communicating policy demands to government
- providing a link between citizens and the institutions of government
- seeking to influence government policy decisions
- seeking to oppose government positions on policy
- seeking to influence government indirectly by influencing public opinion
- monitoring policy and reporting back to government
- assisting government in the implementation of policy.

Less successful students gave examples that were far too similar, such as 'influencing the government' and 'attempting to make the government change its policy'. They also concentrated on characteristics and tactics of pressure groups, rather than their functions.

c. Evaluate the argument that minor parties exert little influence on the Australian political system.

This question saw more successful students challenge the proposition and raise the following points in their evaluation.



- The impact that minor parties have on the political system depends on how they interact with the electoral system. The preferential voting system marginalises minor parties (with the exception of the National Party) and their role in preferential voting tends to be confined to making preference deals with the major parties.
- Minor parties with concentrated support have the power to gain seats and so bargain for coalitions with government; for example, the National Party.
- The influence of minor parties is more pronounced in the Senate. Assessment of minor parties' influence depends on the ability of such parties to win representation to the Senate (a minor party that wins seats in the Senate will be more influential than a minor party that does not have a parliamentary presence).
- Minor parties' influence in the Senate is also dependent on whether or not the minor party, in conjunction with other non-government parties, has a Senate majority, and if the minor party has the 'balance of power'.
- Minor party influence in Australian politics is always severely mitigated by the dominance of the Liberal and Labor parties. The National Party exerts influence because it operates in coalition with the Liberals. The Democrats only exerted influence in the Senate when the Labor opposition in the Senate joined the Democrats in opposing government legislation.

The recent influence of National Party Senator Barnaby Joyce was cited by many students as an example of a member of a minor party exercising considerable influence on the Australian political system.

Those students who also studied 'Voting and Elections' as an Area of Study were more able to answer this question. Less successful students merely agreed with the proposition that minor parties exert little influence on the political system, but were unable to explain why or offer sufficient evaluation. They made generalised comments such as 'The Democrats have never had any real power,' and concluded that all power is held by the Liberal and Labor Parties, with all other minor parties effectively having no influence.

Question 5 – Foreign policy

a. What is meant by the term free trade?

Free trade is when the trade of goods and services between nations is free of restrictions such as quotas, taxes and duties. Free trade is the key objective of the World Trade Organisations. This question was very well answered by most students.

b. Briefly describe three functions of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

More successful students were able to cite and briefly describe three role of DFAT, including:

- providing the government with foreign policy and trade advice
- advising the Minister for Foreign Affairs and the Minister for Trade
- managing treaties, alliances and diplomatic agreements
- assessing security risks and working to enhance Australia's security
- providing diplomatic missions
- gathering intelligence
- promoting trade and economic growth
- assisting Australian travellers and Australians overseas, including the provision of Australian passports
- projecting a positive image of Australia internationally
- developing and managing aid programs.

Less successful students were more inclined to discuss the roles of the Foreign Affairs Minister, or offer responses that were too similar to each other.

c. Evaluate the argument that the Prime Minister plays a key role in the formulation of Australian foreign policy.

This was a challenging question, but was answered very well by a large number of students. Successful responses demonstrated an understanding of the formulation of foreign policy; for example, there is often bipartisanship, and most foreign policy decisions do not have to be approved by parliament, hence the prime minister and foreign minister have considerable power in this area. They also showed an understanding of the role of the foreign minister and the prime minister in foreign policy formulation.

Better students argued that the extent to which the prime minister plays a key role in foreign policy formulation, especially as compared with the foreign minister, depends on a number of factors. They concluded that inevitably the prime minister plays an important role in the formulation of Australian foreign policy, but the extent to which the role is



'key' depends on the international climate, the expertise of the foreign minister and the nature and interests of the prime minister.

Many prime ministers have helped shape foreign policy: Keating gave priority to Australia's relations with Asia, Fraser's interest in moving southern Africa towards black majority rule placed him at odds with the British government, and Howard has taken an active role in foreign policy, especially since the events of 11 September 2001 and the subsequent US 'war on terror'.

Foreign policy has, over the past decade, become an increasingly important area of government policy and electioneering. Inevitably, the role of the prime minister is significant. John Howard's relationship with leaders such as Bush and Blair has been strengthened by Australia's involvement in the war in Iraq. This has allowed Howard to play a greater role on the world stage and be seen as a key player in Australian foreign policy formulation. Other Australian involvements such as East Timor have also raised the Prime Minister's foreign policy profile.

Less successful students struggled to show an understanding the complexities of foreign policy and the role of key players such as the prime minister in the formulation process. Few examples of times when the prime minister has or has not played a key role were cited. Furthermore, little discussion of the role of other factors, such as the role of the foreign affairs minister or the role of public opinion was offered.

Section B – Essay questions

Essay Chosen	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
%	17	3	12	3	17	7	5	8	11	17

Marks	2	4	6	8	10	12	14	16	18	20	22	24	26	28	30	32	34	36	38	40	Average
%	0	1	1	1	2	2	2	4	3	5	7	8	11	13	14	11	7	5	2	3	26.1

The standard of essays has continued to improve, although time management was again crucial in this aspect of the examination. Students should devote one hour of the total examination time to the essay. Better students wrote long essays that directly and thoroughly addressed all aspects of the question. They were able to include comprehensive examples to illustrate the points being made. Less successful students wrote short essays (less than three pages) which only looked at one aspect of the question, or lengthy pre-prepared essays that paid little, if any, consideration to what the question was actually asking. There was also a tendency for students to write lengthy plans but very short essays.

The Australian Constitution

Question 1

'The Australian Constitution encourages conflict between State and Federal governments.' To what extent do you agree?

This question was well answered by a number of students. More successful students discussed that conflict is a factor in any power sharing arrangement, which is inevitable and is not necessarily an unhealthy thing. They also directly addressed whether or not the Constitution actually encourages conflict. That is, whether the conflict can actually be linked to the Australian Constitution.

The Constitution ensures that both state and federal governments have sovereign power in their specified areas of authority. Some disputes between the state and federal governments have resulted in action in the High Court. High Court decisions have generally favoured the Commonwealth and this has been a source of tension; for example, the Uniform Tax Case 1942 and the Franklin Dam Case 1983. Many successful responses argued that the Constitution does encourage this type of conflict because it is vague and inflexible and needs to be interpreted by the High Court.

The states have certainly lost some of their financial independence. The federal government is the dominant financial partner, yet the states have very expensive responsibilities such as health and education—this is a perennial source of conflict. Some states have been happy to give some power to the Commonwealth Government: in 1986 New South Wales, Tasmania, South Australia and Victoria gave power over ex-nuptial children to the Commonwealth.

There are also areas where the Commonwealth has had to seek the support of the state governments; for example, gun control and terrorism. These instances provide examples of cooperation rather than conflict. The recent debate about Brendan Nelson's educational standards and nation wide testing has seen Victoria resist the Howard Government's proposals.



Conflict between Commonwealth and state governments can also arise because of other factors, such as party policy differences, electoral demands, regional needs and budgetary constraints. Such conflicts are encouraged by factors other than the Constitution.

More successful students argued in support of the proposition in the question, refuted it, or discussed an 'it depends' option. They were clear in the extent to which the Constitution actually does or does not encourage conflict and gave relevant examples to support their argument. Less successful students appeared to write pre-prepared essays that gave an account of the strengths and weaknesses of federalism, yet failed to directly address the question.

Question 2

'The major weakness of the Australian Constitution is that it fails to mention key political institutions such as Cabinet and the Prime Minister.' To what extent do you agree?

This question allowed students to explore the strengths and weaknesses of the Australian Constitution. Some students agreed with the proposition and argued that yes, the major weakness is the failure to mention key political institutions such as the prime minister and Cabinet. Others argued that while this is an undoubted weakness, it is not the major one, and cited several other weaknesses. Alternatively, some successful essays argued that the Australian Constitution has no major weaknesses and is a sound, stable and positive document that has served the nation well.

There is no mention of the prime minister or the Cabinet in the Australian Constitution. These are both key political institutions and are central to our system of Westminster government. Successful students argued that mention needs to be made of these institutions in order to ensure that they do not abuse their power. Key political institutions such as these deserve mention in the Constitution and students concluded that the current Constitution is grossly inaccurate, yet conceded that these are conventions of the Westminster system and are well understood.

Successful students cited a variety of other weaknesses of the Constitution. These included:

- other key institutions, such as the electoral system, are also not mentioned
- the Constitution is difficult to change, which has resulted in an outdated and inflexible document that has had only eight changes since 1901
- the legalistic wording and 19th century language
- its remoteness from the Australian people, who are largely unaware of its contents
- the Constitution does not reflect the political realities of the day; for example, it gives enormous power to the Governor General
- there is no mention of crucial conventions of the Westminster System, such as representative and responsible government
- there is no mention of electoral systems and nothing to ensure that the system will operate according to democratic values
- there is over reliance on unwritten conventions
- the constitutional Head of State is the reigning British monarch
- there is no recognition of Australia's prior occupation by indigenous people
- it does not guarantee key democratic rights
- there is no Bill of Rights.

Less successful students struggled to discuss the implications of Australia having a Constitution that does not mention the prime minister and Cabinet. They gave longwinded accounts of the problems of the Australian Constitution that appeared to be pre-prepared.

Parliament and the Executive

Question 3

'A strong opposition is crucial to effective functioning of the Federal Parliament.' To what extent do you agree?

This was the more popular of the two Parliament and the Executive essay questions. More successful students looked at both sides of the proposition. Those who argued in favour of the opposition made the following points.

- The community wants a robust debate to occur in the parliament, and this can only occur with a strong and functional opposition.
- A strong and functional opposition can work effectively to hold the government accountable for its actions, especially through the use of question time and the use of the inquisitorial potential present in the parliamentary (and especially Senate) standing committee system.
- A government that is faced by an opposition that provides a viable alternative for voters will inevitably perform at a higher level than a government that is faced by an ineffective opposition.



- An opposition that is functional and effective will concentrate on the policy debate whereas a poorly performing opposition will concentrate on matters such as its own leadership problems, thereby denying the community any real sense of the opposition being a viable alternative to the government.

Those students who challenged the proposition made the following points

- Effective governance does not necessarily depend on a functioning opposition at all. The arrival of disciplined party politics has undermined many of the answerability and accountability functions of the Westminster system of parliament.
- Our Westminster system has a 'winner takes all' theme and, once an election is over and the Cabinet is in place, the performance of the opposition is not really very important.
- Effective governments have more to fear from a lack of cohesion and disfunctionalism within their own party or parties than from anything that the opposition can do.

The idea of the strength of the opposition might also have been debated. If a strong opposition is one that has strategic strength (that is, has numbers in the Senate), good government may be undermined by a form of paralysis brought about by fear of losing crucial votes or even (as in the 1975 double dissolution) losing power altogether. Similarly, recent events indicate that the most effective opposition to governments tends to come from within the governing parties themselves rather than from the opposition. Examples of this include the debate over privatisation that pitted left against right in the Labor governments of the 1980s, or the examples of opposition to aspects of the Howard Government's refugee policy from within the Liberal Party itself.

Less successful students were unable to explain why a strong opposition is important to the functioning of parliament. They were more inclined to discuss the roles of key players in parliament with little reference to the role of the opposition.

Question 4

'The main factor determining the power of Australian prime ministers is their leadership style.' To what extent do you agree?

This was not a popular question. More successful students compared several prime ministers and made a connection between successful prime ministers and a strong and/or authoritative leadership style. Successful students considered the following points.

- The power of the prime minister is by no means unqualified. Two important constraints need to be recognised: the will of the electorate as expressed in elections, and the support given to the prime minister by his political party.
- A key factor in determining prime ministerial power is the willingness of the prime minister's parliamentary colleagues to support his leadership.
- The way in which prime ministers discharge their responsibilities.
- The political process places considerable influence on party leaders.
- Prime ministers are able to use party discipline to ensure that members of parliament comply with Cabinet.
- The prime minister can use Cabinet solidarity to ensure compliance within Cabinet decisions.
- Prime ministers can use their ability to dispense patronage to ensure support, to reward loyalty, or to dispense discipline.
- Prime ministers can use the resources of the public service (and especially the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet) to exercise control over, or leadership on, policy matters.
- Prime ministers tend to be the focal point of media perceptions of politics. This may give prime ministers greater influence in their dealings with their parties.

Successful students referred to specific examples of recent prime ministers, such as the following.

- Malcolm Fraser was known to be a strict controller of the policy debate and used the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet to regulate Cabinet's deliberations on policies.
- Bob Hawke's prime ministership was famous for its consensus style and Hawke's willingness to devolve responsibility for creating policy to his Cabinet colleagues.
- Paul Keating showed how important prime ministerial support for policy issues can be. Matters such as republicanism and indigenous reconciliation were pursued because they were important to Keating, while the environment languished because it was less important to the prime minister.
- Howard's prime ministership depends on the strong support he has in the party room as a result of his election victories. Also, Howard has been remarkably tolerant of internal dissent and debate over key policy issues.



Less successful students appeared unprepared for this question and made rash generalisations about different Australian prime ministers with little evidence to back up their comments.

Voting and elections

Question 5

'The Australian federal electoral system delivers democratic outcomes.' To what extent do you agree?

This was a very popular question. Elections determine government, provide a mandate for government to carry out policies and are the foremost mechanism for political participation, therefore they must, as best as possible, uphold critical democratic values such as broad participation, majority rule, minority representation, one vote one value, freedom of speech and candidacy and equality of opportunity for candidates and parties.

More successful students argued that to a significant extent the Australian electoral system does deliver democratic outcomes. In addition to delivering majority rule, equality of opportunity and freedom of speech, a number of other democratic values are upheld, including universal suffrage, secret ballot, an independent electoral authority, frequent elections, accessible polling places and choice of candidate. However, critical values such as majority rule, one vote one value, minority representation, equality and the freedom to contest are not always upheld and so a democratic outcome is not guaranteed.

Successful students also argued that it is difficult to have a perfect electoral system and that compared to many electoral systems, the Australian system delivers democratic outcomes in many key areas.

Students who argued that values are upheld and democratic outcomes are delivered mentioned the following points.

- Elections are managed by an independent authority, the Australian Electoral Commission.
- Elections offer a choice of candidates.
- Elections are frequent (perhaps too frequent).
- There is a secret ballot.
- There is universal suffrage (with the exception of those serving a jail term of more than five years and those of unsound mind).
- Freedom of speech and assembly, although not constitutionally guaranteed, have to a significant extent been protected through High Court interpretation.
- Voting is accessible through pre-polling, postal voting, mobile polling booths and absentee voting.
- The most preferred candidate wins in each of the 150 House of Representatives electorates.
- The party(s) with the most votes nationally generally forms government.
- Minor parties can play a significant role in the distribution of preferences and can win seats in the House of Representatives.
- Minor parties and Independents can play a significant role in the Senate.

Students who argued that values are not upheld and democratic outcomes are not delivered mentioned the following points.

- Majority rule, which delivers a mandate to implement policy promises, is not always upheld. Five elections since 1945 have delivered governments that, on the House of Representatives two party preferred vote, have not represented the majority of voters. In 1998, the ALP gained over 51 per cent of the House of Representatives vote and yet lost the election; in 1990 the Liberal–Nation coalition gained 50.4 per cent of the House of Representatives vote and lost the election. This is a result of two factors: malapportionment and vote wastage.
- The preferential system and proportional representation do not always deliver one vote one value. Malapportionment is a feature of the Senate system as electorates (states and territories) do not have approximately the same number of voters but each state gets the same number of Senators (six) as does each territory (two). Therefore, because of the difference in population, a Tasmanian Senate vote is worth 12 times that of a NSW vote. There is little justification for this as the Senate does not act as a states' House. Tasmanian voters are further advantaged as the Constitution guarantees Tasmania five House of Representatives seats no matter what the state's population is. A Tasmanian House of Representatives vote is more valuable than a mainland vote as all five seats have electoral populations in the bottom range of the 10 per cent variation. Also, votes in marginal seats have more value than votes in safe seats and about 25 per cent of electorates are marginal. Election campaigns focus on these electorates, as they determine election results, which means that some voters are given more attention than others.



- Representation is not always reflective of electoral support because exaggerated majorities can occur in the House of Representatives. If a party wins many seats by small margins, the number of seats that they gain will be out of proportion to the number of votes they received.
- Minority representation is limited in the House of Representatives as independents and minor parties without concentrated support have difficulty winning seats. In addition, up to 50 per cent of each electorate is unrepresented as only one candidate is elected. This problem is overcome with the multi-member Senate system, where representation is in proportion to votes gained.
- The House of Representatives and Senate electoral systems do not deliver equal outcomes and opportunities for all parties and candidates. In the preferential system, the National Party has the advantage of a concentrated majority. The National Party gains between five and 10 per cent of the House of Representatives votes and wins at least 12 seats, yet the Democrats gain about five per cent of the vote and do not win any seats. In the last election, Family First gained just under two per cent of the primary vote and won a Senate seat. The Senate ballot paper can disadvantage independents who do not form a group. The House of Representatives ballot paper gives one to two per cent of the votes to the candidate on the top of the ballot paper.
- Equality is not always achieved as the government determines the election date and sets the closing date for candidate nominations. This gives an unfair planning advantage to the government. In addition, the Senate quota can create an incentive for minor parties to force a double dissolution.
- The required deposit of \$350 for the House of Representatives and \$700 for the Senate is a barrier for some candidates and impinges on freedom to stand. Anyone 'earning profit under the Crown' cannot be a candidate, so all public servants (even those on leave) cannot stand unless they quit their jobs. Also, those with dual nationality and bankrupts cannot be candidates
- It has been suggested that compulsory voting is an infringement of freedom of choice; however, there is no compulsion to vote but rather the compulsion is to register and attend the polling booth.

Less successful students were unable to relate the two federal voting systems to the values that underpin elections in Australia. It was again apparent that students were more inclined to offer lengthy descriptions of how the voting systems operate rather than the extent to which they uphold democratic values.

Question 6

'In the last 10 years, economic issues have been the key influence on voter behaviour in Australian federal elections.' To what extent do you agree?

More successful students recognised that elections are fought on a range of issues, such as the economy, taxation, leadership and foreign policy. Nevertheless, it is difficult for governments to win elections if economic conditions are poor (for example, if there is high unemployment or high interest rates). Successful students also discussed factors that determine voting behaviour and identified two major schools of thought:

- the 'stability' school, which sees a close correlation between socioeconomic status and voter alignment with the major parties, and that the majority of voters will vote for the party they identify with regardless of how the party performs in government or opposition
- the 'change' school, which sees a decline in the class correlation in voting behaviour and believes that voters are becoming increasingly market-oriented in their election choices. The evidence for this is seen in the increased votes for independents and minor party candidates and a decline in voting for the major parties.

Other students argued that voting behaviour is a combination of long-term (sociocultural) and short-term (party performance, leadership, state of the economy) considerations.

Students who preferred to argue the long-term 'stability' case viewed 'economic issues' as integral to the way partisan voters view the political debate. In other words, Labor partisans might see economic issues as those involving the role of unions, the defence of wages and conditions, and the provision of the social wage. Liberal partisans may understand the economic debate as one that necessitates the reduction of the state, the deregulation of the economy and the reduction of taxes.

Students also considered the importance of marginal and rural seats (where economic issues have a significant impact), the importance of leadership and that the government is advantaged if economic indicators are strong. Students concluded that, despite the critical position of economic factors, these must be seen in the context of other factors including:

- leadership
- party image
- campaigns

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- minor parties
- opposition performance
- other issues, including the environment, indigenous issues and foreign policy.

Less successful students were unable to draw on information from more than one election, and as such were unable to draw comparisons between elections.

Political parties and pressure groups

Question 7

‘There are significant differences between the Australian Labor Party and the Liberal Party at the federal level in terms of philosophy, policies and leadership.’ To what extent do you agree?

This was not a popular question. More successful students argued that differences do exist between the major parties, or that the two parties are subject to a degree of convergence. It was reasonable to argue that the parties portray a greater sense of difference in philosophy and organisation than in leadership and policy. Successful students addressed the following points.

- Historically, Labor has been philosophically committed to a collectivist approach to politics, whereas the Liberal party venerates individualism. However, Australian politics does not tend to be very ideological so these differences are not always evident. The very different attitude both parties take to the role of trade unions in the Australian economy is one area in which differences are evident.
- Labor’s organisational arrangements are oriented towards decentralising power, with the aim of making the parliamentary wing answerable to the party’s rank and file. The Liberal party’s organisation denies external interest groups a role and seeks to empower the parliamentary leadership.
- Labor has a more disciplined approach to organisation than the Liberal party. The Liberal party, in theory, allows members of parliament to vote according to their conscience and does not seek to immediately discipline those who cross the floor.
- Party organisations operate differently in practice. The Labor parliamentary leader has a position of authority not dissimilar to the Liberal leader. Liberal members of parliament are mindful of the need for party discipline and it is rare for Liberal members to cross the floor.
- Labor might be described as having stronger commitments to state intervention in the economy and society than the Liberal party. Labor is stronger in its defence of the welfare state than the Liberals. However, the parties have converged on these and many other policy issues, and both have similar views on foreign policy, security, taxation and economic policy.
- Both parties require their leader to have the support of their party rooms. Labor leadership might be seen as different from Liberal leadership in regards to managing internal dynamics because of Labor’s formal and rigidly disciplined factional system. The Labor leader is technically subordinate to Labor’s formal ‘Caucus’ system, whereas no such rule applies for the Liberal leader. Yet both leaders seek to manage internal problems with a view to diffusing any potential source of dissent or division.

Less successful students did not give adequate attention to each aspect of the question. Furthermore, many essays were very descriptive and gave detailed accounts of the history of each party.

Question 8

Interest groups use a variety of tactics to influence government policy; most of these tactics are ineffective.’ To what extent do you agree?

This was not a popular question, yet was generally answered well. More successful students agreed with the statement, although several also argued that tactics employed must be seen in the context of the power and credibility of the interest group and the extent to which there is government and community support for the issue the interest group is concerned about.

The proposed Industrial Relations legislation, the National Security legislation and changes to refugee legislation made good examples for this question. Successful students pointed out the difference between ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ groups. The former exercise a pre-emptive or proactive influence that is difficult for the public and/or observers to see because of the group’s excellent access to decision-makers, while ‘outsider’ groups rely on their ability to impact on public opinion and, through this, try to pressure governments indirectly. This sort of activity was seen as an expression of how ‘outsider’ groups are relatively less influential than ‘insiders’.

The key methods interest groups might use to influence government include:

- networking with ministers and senior public servants to have issues addressed by policy makers

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- impacting upon public opinion by running publicity campaigns
- seeking to act as the community respondent on matters of policy (such as the RACV talking with government about road policy on behalf of car owners)
- running campaigns during elections to put pressure on the major political parties
- hiring lobbyists
- using whatever oppositional power or protest power is at their disposal to pressure governments by disrupting the public (a favourite tactic of trade unions and professional bodies)
- seeking to act as custodian of important events and/or laws relating to events (such as the RSL's custodianship of ANZAC Day)
- interacting with the press.

Successful students considered some or all of these tactics and discussed the extent to which they can be effective, given the political circumstances and the power of the pressure groups involved. Less successful students were more inclined to generalise their discussion of pressure group tactics, and did not make specific reference to individual groups. There was little discussion of the circumstances under which some tactics may be successful or unsuccessful.

Australian foreign policy

Question 9

'Australian foreign policy is formulated in response to international issues and events.' To what extent do you agree?

This was a popular question. More successful students recognised that international issues inevitably play a significant role in the formulation of foreign policy and that foreign policy is about global interactions. Nevertheless, they recognised that the national interest is a key foreign policy objective and that governments are cognizant of public opinion.

Successful students argued that foreign policy cannot simply be formulated in response to what may be short-term international events and issues—foreign policy formulation must also consider longer term issues so that policy is not merely a series of 'knee jerk' reactions. They also made the point that recent events have made foreign policy a key item on the national agenda and referred to a number of events and issues, discussing the extent to which these have contributed to policy formulation. Such events included:

- East Timor
- September 11
- the war in Afghanistan
- terrorism
- the Bali bombings
- the Iraq Wars
- the tsunami
- refugees
- Australia's relationship with the US and UK
- globalisation and the need to promote Australia's trade.

Successful students discussed the relative importance of these events in shaping the formulation of the policy that is then required. Better responses demonstrated the links between these events and policy formulation and discussed domestic factors that affect the formulation of foreign policy, including:

- the state of the economy
- public opinion
- issues related to other portfolios (for example, immigration and human rights)
- the party in power
- the strength of the opposition and the extent of bipartisanship.

Less successful responses were unable to address the question with the necessary depth and complexity. They tended to discuss external influences without giving sufficient attention to internal influences on foreign policy formulation.

Question 10

'The promotion of economic interests dominates Australia foreign policy.' To what extent do you agree?

This was a very popular question and was well answered by most students. More successful students discussed whether economic interests dominate, are significant or are relatively insignificant. They noted that the extent to which economic interests dominate foreign policy depends on a range of circumstances.

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Successful students considered the concept of the national interest and discussed Australia's national interest in terms of security, economics, trade and being seen as a good global citizen (international humanitarianism). They pointed out that on a number of occasions the promotion of economic interests is put before good global citizenship. The example of Australia's economic relationship with China and other nations with poor human rights records was used.

Economic interests were seen as the dominant focus of the past 20 years, especially regionally. The emphasis on free trade and support for the World Trade Organisation are important benchmarks, and one of the arguments for Australia not signing the Kyoto Treaty was its potential economic impact. Better students indicated the importance of economics from a domestic perspective and also argued that economic considerations are more dominant than humanitarian considerations.

Many successful students made a distinction between the pre- and post-September 11 world. While economic considerations remain important, as evidenced by the rush for Free Trade Agreements and support for the Doha round of talks, the rise in terrorism both regionally and globally has made security a key consideration. Students pointed out the link between a world that has been destabilised by terrorism, war, civil unrest and violence and the impact on domestic economies.

Successful students also argued that while the promotion of Australia's economic and security interests is important and dominant, occasionally human rights do matter. For example, Australia's actions in East Timor were, to a significant extent, based on protecting self-determination for the Timorese people even in the face of potential damage to Australia's economic and political relationship with Indonesia. Another example is Australia's generous financial and humanitarian response to the tsunami and the granting of asylum to a Chinese diplomat.

Less successful students clearly wrote pre-prepared essays that summarised Australia's military, economic and humanitarian foreign policy. These essays lacked specific examples and were generally descriptive in their approach to the question.