

2017 VCE Australian Politics examination report

General comments

Overall, students performed well in the 2017 Australian Politics examination. The highest-scoring responses demonstrated a very high level of understanding and awareness of important political events in Australia throughout 2017, and many students were able to draw upon these events to offer salient examples and evidence. The use of these examples contributed, in many cases, to answers that were detailed, analytical and relevant to the question being answered. Lower-scoring responses did not make use of evidence and/or were too general. Some students did not provide answers to some questions; this should always be avoided.

In Section A of the 2017 examination, students were required to answer four questions in a range of styles and formats. Most students seemed well prepared.

In their examination preparation, students should take note of the range of task words that might be used; they can refer to the key skills of the study design for terms that might appear. Task words such as 'outline', 'explain' and 'define' require a different type of answer to questions using higher-order terms such as 'evaluate', 'discuss' and 'critically compare'. Some attention should be paid to these task words during the year, and practice tasks should be completed with them clearly in mind.

Section B asked students to choose one question and write an essay in response to the question. Generally, the essays were of good quality. The length and inclusion of relevant examples in many essays was appropriate, and some essays demonstrated an impressive level of knowledge of the relevant Area of Study. The highest-scoring essays made a coherent attempt to answer the question as it was asked, making detailed reference to evidence and contemporary examples. Lower-scoring essays were characterised by brevity, a narrow focus and repetition. Students should address the topic and avoid irrelevance and prepared responses. They are reminded to allow time during the year and in examination preparation for essay writing practice.

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 more or less than 100 per cent.

Section A

Australian democracy

Question 1a.

Marks	0	1	2	Average
%	15	21	64	1.5

This question required students to describe one of the major principles of Australian democracy.

Key principles that were described in high-scoring answers included popular sovereignty, rule of law, majority rule and minority rights, protection of rights and freedoms, freedom of speech and government accountability.

Question 1b.

Marks	0	1	2	Average
%	4	23	74	1.7

Students needed to outline two features of a free and fair electoral system. This question was answered well; however, some students repeated their features rather than including two clearly distinct ones.

Features of a free and fair electoral system include universal franchise, use of an independent electoral body such as the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC); regular elections; secret ballot; one vote, one value; and a choice of parties/candidates.

Question 1ci.

Marks	0	1	Average
%	13	87	0.9

Backbenchers are members of parliament without a ministerial or shadow ministerial portfolio. Tony Abbott was a very popular response to this question.

Question 1cii.

Marks	0	1	Average
%	12	88	0.9

Roles of a backbencher include representing their electorate in the parliament, voting on Bills, asking questions in question time and participating in committees.

Question 1d.

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	Average
%	12	14	19	30	25	2.4

Students needed to discuss one of the challenges facing democracy. This was a key aspect of the study design, where a number of such challenges were listed, although it was also possible to raise other challenges if they were discussed and justified in relation to their impact on Australian democracy. Higher-scoring responses identified a challenge and then examined how this challenge had affected democracy in very recent times, with examples from 2017 in particular.

There were many challenges to choose from, such as civic apathy, disillusionment of voters, lack of political understanding, perceived media bias in political coverage, political donations and lack of policy progress.

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

One challenge facing democracy in Australia today is the rise of populist politics, as manifested in the form of Pauline Hanson's One Nation here in Australia and mirrored by Donald Trump in the US. Such a trend may be viewed as threatening the foundations of a liberal democracy such as Australia's by challenging the principle of protecting minorities ...

Question 1e.

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	Average
%	17	15	19	21	20	7	2.4

The principle of individual ministerial responsibility is a key component of the Westminster system. It was notable that many students were not able to clearly explain this principle, which made the evaluation of its effectiveness difficult.

Individual ministerial responsibility is the Westminster convention that a minister is accountable and answerable for the activities and actions of their department; if serious misdeeds or large-scale mistakes are made in the department, the minister is expected to resign.

As the question asked for an evaluation, it was important that students were able to look at both sides – how the principle might be upheld or not upheld in the way it operates – and make an overall judgment.

In Australia in recent years the principle of individual ministerial responsibility has often not been upheld or applied. This is due to a number of factors, including the wish of governments and their leaders not to be seen as fallible or destabilising, the difficulties of ascertaining how much responsibility a minister can actually have for what goes on in their department and a desire to not admit accountability. Sometimes personal mistakes or perceived misdemeanours by ministers in their roles have led to the principle being applied. Examples such as Christian Porter's refusal to stand down as Social Services minister after the Centrelink debt recovery problems and Health Minister Sussan Ley's decision to resign after misuse of ministerial travel funds were used effectively for both sides of the evaluation by some students.

Students are reminded of the importance of ensuring key terms are used correctly in an examination; for example, the term 'minister' means something quite different to 'member' in politics. It is also worth noting that the crisis relating to s44 of the Constitution and the eligibility of dual citizens to sit in parliament does not relate to individual ministerial responsibility, despite many students referring to this.

Australian democracy in perspective

Question 2a.

Marks	0	1	Average
%	28	72	0.7

Universal franchise refers to the right given to adult citizens to vote in elections regardless of gender, race or religion.

A number of students appeared to not have any knowledge of this most basic democratic concept. Students must learn fundamental democratic ideas such as this.

Question 2b.

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	Average
%	2	5	18	28	48	3.2

All students responded to this question regarding key differences between the electoral systems used in Australia and another political system by using examples from the USA. A clear statement of a difference and an example was required. Students need to read questions carefully. This question related to electoral systems only, not political systems overall.

Key differences include:

- compulsory versus voluntary voting
- Australia's use of the AEC versus no similar body in the USA and a range of methods from state to state
- party pre-selection of candidates versus use of primary elections
- voting exclusively for representatives on ballots versus inclusion of ballot propositions in the USA
- use of preferential voting to determine the prime minister as head of government (via party with majority leadership) versus use of electoral college to determine the president as head of government.

Question 2c.

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	Average
%	8	7	16	29	40	2.9

Overall, this was a well-answered question. Students seemed aware of a range of ways in which the powers of the US President (as the system other than Australia studied by students) could be constrained. Relevant recent examples were given in many responses. When responding to a question requiring two or more factors, constraints or points, students are again reminded to ensure that they discuss two key and clear factors/constraints/points independent of each other.

Constraints on the powers of the US President that could have been used include:

- the separation of powers
- specific checks and balances within the system (for example, the rejection of the attempted Bill to repeal Obamacare by President Trump)
- the ability to serve only two terms (for example, the end of President Obama's second term as a 'lame duck' president)
- the process of impeachment (although students are reminded that this is a very rare and difficult process)
- the Bill of Rights
- the president's party not holding a majority in Congress (for example, Obama's second term ending in 2016)
- fixed election dates
- Congressional committees and their powers.

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

One constraint on the US President is the legislative Congress. This is because policy suggested by the President is heavily scrutinised in both houses before approval. Because the President is independent to the Congress, the Congress majorities may sometimes be held by the opposing party of the President. This makes the President a lame duck President as they may struggle to pass policy. This was the case in Obama's 2014-16 term.

Question 2d.

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	Average
%	8	8	12	14	29	15	14	3.5

This question asked students to examine one method of accountability used by the legislative branch in the Australian political system to hold the executive responsible and then ‘critically compare’ this with a method of accountability used by the Congress in the USA to hold the executive responsible (as the other system studied).

‘Critically compare’ invited the students to analyse and evaluate similarities and differences in the methods of accountability in the Australian political system and in comparison with the other selected political system. It was not necessary to use the same process for both political systems.

Questions such as this require careful reading by students, as well as a clear attempt to address all parts of the question in their response. Many students found this a difficult task and did not write detailed, specific answers.

The highest-scoring answers were those that were structured in two clear sections to make comparisons and that referred to specific examples.

Possible aspects of legislative accountability that could have been compared include:

- the role of the Senate (both USA and Australia)
- the process of impeachment via Congress (USA)
- the procedure of question time in parliament (Australia)
- the role of legislative committees (both USA and Australia)
- the relative strength of party discipline (both USA and Australia).

Domestic policy

All questions in the Domestic Policy section of the examination required students to draw upon current political policy examples in their answers, but many responses in all parts of Question 3 made no reference to recent policy examples. The Domestic Policy Area of Study should include a discussion and analysis of a range of policy examples that can be drawn upon in the examination, including the case study area that has been studied by all students.

Question 3a.

Marks	0	1	2	Average
%	7	33	60	1.6

A minor party is a political party that is likely to have members elected to parliament but does not have the ability to form government in its own right, for example, the Greens, the Nick Xenophon Team (NXT) and One Nation.

Question 3b.

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	Average
%	5	15	26	25	29	2.6

The phrase ‘the extent to which’ in the question directed students to make an overall statement about how influential or not the media might be in the process of formulating domestic policy – in a negative or positive manner – by referring to two specific and distinct examples; responses should not have been just a general discussion of the role of the media in politics.

Students who referred to 2016 election issues needed to make a link to policies consequentially developed by the government post-election to be awarded marks. Students should avoid using state government policy examples.

Examples that were effective for this question included:

- reports on ABC's *Four Corners* such as the exposé on live cattle export or the coverage of the juvenile justice system in the Northern Territory, both of which led directly to policy formulation by the government in the form of a ban on live exports and the introduction of a Royal Commission respectively
- media coverage of the same-sex marriage/marriage equality debate throughout 2017; it could be argued that some positive media coverage and the use of personalities and forums led to an eventual government policy response to hold the postal survey
- the way in which the Australian media covers terror attacks overseas and incidents within Australia; it could be argued that this helped shape public opinion, which in turn influenced the government to introduce stricter measures in regard to obtaining Australian citizenship and when dealing with terror suspects who have dual citizenship status
- media coverage of the conditions for refugees inside Australian offshore detention centres, such as that in the Guardian newspaper, which has had little to no impact on domestic policy formulation in the area of immigration
- debates and analyses of energy and climate policy in all forms of media in recent times, which has had little effect on government policy in this area; a good example is ongoing government support for the Adani coal mine despite concerted social media campaigns against it.

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

As was the case with the 2011 Four Corners expose on the state of the live cattle trade, such media reports can stir up public debate and interest to the extent that government's policy can be amended or altered completely, viewed in the Gillard government's ban on live cattle exports. This power of the media to influence policy formulation is mirrored by the significant campaign by the mining industry, utilising the media, to campaign against the mining tax that came to dominate the Gillard and later Rudd governments.

Question 3c.

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	Average
%	5	11	24	38	22	2.6

This question required students to make a clear comparison between the roles of the prime minister and the leader of the Opposition in the formulation of domestic policy. Some type of overall judgment about who has the more influential role and some discussion about how both roles work in the area of policy formulation needed to be made. An even discussion on both roles was needed, as was some mention of recent examples or even a mention of the incumbents in these positions.

The prime minister can appoint ministers to portfolios, chair cabinet meetings and determine government priorities, sell policies in public and the media and test public opinion, and shape budgets and domestic policy spending.

The leader of the Opposition can direct their party to block Bills in the parliament (especially in the Senate) if they have the numbers, thereby reshaping legislation in relation to policy through negotiation; use their role in the media to shape public opinion and response to government policy; develop alternative policies to campaign on during elections and therefore influence government decisions; and raise issues in question time to draw attention to flaws in government policy and attempt to reshape them.

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

The Prime Minister, Malcolm Turnbull, plays a large role in policy formulation. This is partly due to the PM's role as head of cabinet meetings, where they choose the agenda to be discussed. The power to choose which policy areas will receive more attention than others directly culminates in the PM formulating policy areas which they personally see as important. Conversely the leader of the opposition Bill Shorten has considerably less influence. This is because the opposition's primary role is to hold the government accountable.

Question 3d.

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	Average
%	9	7	14	23	26	22	3.1

This question allowed students who had prepared detailed material for their domestic policy case study to discuss this knowledge and address its success.

The option to focus on either formulation or implementation allowed students the opportunity to reveal the depth of their knowledge; however, it seemed that many students were under-prepared. It is very important to ensure that examples are well prepared and well utilised in the Domestic Policy section.

Some responses remained unclear as to which option they were discussing, and clearly stating 'formulation' or 'implementation' as the focus would have clarified this. Being given a choice to evaluate a domestic policy that was either formulated or implemented should have allowed students to draw on case studies/examples of domestic policy studied.

The direction to 'evaluate the success' of the domestic policy pointed students towards making a judgment about how well the policy was formed or implemented given its aims. Evaluation requires a discussion of the strengths or what worked well and weaknesses or what did not work well. It also requires an overall assessment. Some students fell into the trap of telling the narrative of a policy formulation without attending to the evaluation.

Foreign policy

Question 4a.

Marks	0	1	2	Average
%	2	27	72	1.7

Domestic policy is formed to achieve particular outcomes within Australia. It is generally proactive, party political, long term and somewhat influenced by public opinion.

Foreign policy is formed to achieve particular outcomes primarily outside Australia in our dealings with other nations. It is often reactive, bipartisan and heavily influenced by elites and experts in the formulation process.

Question 4b.

Marks	0	1	2	Average
%	4	39	58	1.6

'Good global citizen' refers to a nation that lives up to the expectations of the international community. For example, Australia acts as a good global citizen by giving foreign aid, assisting our neighbours in humanitarian disasters, accepting refugees and carrying out United Nations directives.

Question 4c.

Marks	0	1	2	3	Average
%	4	13	36	47	2.3

Building and expanding regional and global links is a key objective of Australian foreign policy and it helps achieve Australia's national interest, which is the overall aim of Australian foreign policy.

Students needed to show that they understood that this sub-objective is one part of the overall foreign policy objective for Australian governments.

Expanding on relationships in the Asia-Pacific region with our near neighbours, as well as attending to those relationships that are further afield internationally, helps achieve the other key foreign policy sub-objectives of good security and defence, strengthening Australia's economic development and being a good global citizen.

Students could have given examples of either regional or global links that helped to support Australian foreign policy, for example, Australia's security relationship with the USA or giving aid to Indonesia to help build trust between the two nations.

Question 4d.

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	Average
%	6	12	17	39	27	2.7

This question required students to take a clear position in relation to the topic; they needed to state how much the formulation of foreign policy is influenced by public opinion.

Most students recognised that public opinion has a more limited role in foreign policy formulation than in domestic policy. Foreign policy is often formulated by policy elites and the executive in confidence, due to reasons of national security, reactive timing and the use of policy experts; therefore the public has a limited role. Military decisions such as entering and withdrawing from the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq were made by the government alone, as are many international trade deals such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). On issues regarding refugees and offshore processing, the government pays little attention to public opinion; however, sometimes the government responds to the views of the public in relation to foreign policy, particularly if it relates to jobs, Australian lives are threatened or there is a humanitarian issue sparking an emotive response. For example, Australian decisions on the impact of Japanese whaling reflected public opinion as did the government response to the Indian Ocean tsunami and more recently disasters in the Philippines and Haiti.

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

Public opinion does not cast significant influence over the formulation of Australian foreign policy. This is largely because of foreign policy being deemed 'high policy' and so beyond the opinion of the public. Further foreign policy is often deemed as too complex for public individuals and so public opinion is seldom invited, heard and thus is seldom influential. However, public opinion at times can influence the formulation of Australian foreign policy.

Question 4e.

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	Average
%	4	9	22	28	37	2.9

This question required students to demonstrate a detailed knowledge of one agreement, treaty or alliance that Australia has entered into. To successfully evaluate this agreement, treaty or alliance, students needed to show an understanding of its particular aims and then look at the extent to

which these aims are achieved or not achieved and its strengths or weaknesses for Australia's foreign policy objective and instruments.

To answer this question successfully, more than just a description of the agreement, treaty or alliance itself was needed, and many students seemed to find this difficult.

Examples that were used effectively included the ANZUS treaty, China–Australia Free Trade Agreement, APEC, Australia–USA Free Trade Agreement and the Lombok Treaty with Indonesia.

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

... This agreement (CHAFTA), after significant consultation and deliberation, allows Australia's industry advantage over other competitors when trading with China and directly supports our national industries such as agriculture and the resource industry by reducing tariffs. Indeed this fulfils our foreign policy objectives of supporting Australian industry and encouraging prosperity.

Section B

Question chosen	none	1	2	3	4
%	1	24	21	13	42

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

Question 1

This was a popular choice for many students and allowed those who selected it to discuss a broad range of issues relating to the role of the Senate in Australian democracy.

High-scoring essays were able to acknowledge the intended roles of the Senate and then consider how well the Senate fulfils these functions in relation to some key democratic principles. Because the question asked students to 'evaluate', they needed to look at the relative strengths and weaknesses of the Senate in carrying out its roles, including holding the government to account, passing legislation and representing the states. Such essays used a range of recent examples to illustrate their evaluations. The Senate is a rich source of recent parliamentary evidence and there were many references to this.

Question 2

This essay required an overall comparison between the ways in which both Australia and the other country studied succeed in achieving or delivering key democratic principles and values in their political systems. Most students selected the USA as the other country. Students needed to address whether the US does this more effectively than Australia overall and take a point of view in relation to this.

Students could have chosen a number of democratic values or principles to discuss and ultimately compare. High-scoring essays were structured around these values or principles and included comparisons and examples of how they were evident or had been undermined in the operation of both systems in recent times. In contrast, some essays focused on shared aspects of both systems and discussed democratic values in this context. A clear contention argued consistently throughout the essay was evident in the high-scoring essays.

Principles that were discussed included accountability, representation, rule of law, minority protections and democratic rights and freedoms. Under these principles, a broad range of

democratic characteristics could be discussed and exemplified. Many students argued that both Australia and the USA were effective in delivering democratic principles and values to similar extents but in different ways.

The following is an extract from a high-scoring introduction to this topic.

The United States of America is able to uphold democratic principles to around the same extent as the Australian system, however both hold their strengths and shortcomings in different areas. During the election of the executive, Australia operates democratically as an independent body, unlike the US. However it is a more direct system in the US. Once in office the Governments operate to differing effectiveness as the US holds a defined separation of powers, yet Australia presents a more diverse range of political views. Citizens rights are better protected in the US due to their entrenched Bill of Rights, however this makes it more difficult to reflect the will of the majority.

Question 3

This question on the formulation of Australian domestic policy proved challenging for many students and was not a popular choice. There was some evidence that students attempted to fit prepared essays on this Area of Study to the topic and therefore failed to address the question as it was asked. This approach is to be avoided.

In writing about domestic policy it is important that students draw upon relevant recent examples in sufficient detail. There is an expectation that students are familiar with at least one domestic policy issue in detail. Evidence from this policy should be included in any domestic policy essay. An essay with little or no specific evidence did not score highly.

In looking at members of parliament as part of the policy formulation process, students could have discussed the impact of a range of members, such as MPs, the prime minister, ministers, senators on both sides, members of the Opposition and parliamentary committees. Evaluating the influence that each of these types of parliamentary members could have on policy formulation in relation to a case study was at the heart of this question. Tying arguments back to the role of members inside the parliament was essential.

Arguments that support members of parliament being the most critical influence included:

- their role in the debate and discussion of policy in parliament and question time, and ultimately their vote on policy bills
- their membership of committees to examine policy ideas in detail
- through strict party discipline, members must support their cabinet leaders in the parliament and so give weight to policy ideas
- members of the Senate crossbench have the power to vote down legislation and influence legislation reshaping and review
- members of Cabinet are also members of parliament and have to carry out their roles in the legislature as well.

Arguments against included:

- the Opposition has little real influence inside the parliament due to its lack of numbers
- Cabinet dominates the policy formulation process
- the media and interest groups have a large role outside the parliament
- party discipline inhibits the true function of MPs
- the public service has a key role in delivering expert advice that MPs may not have access to.

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

Members of Parliament, as part of the Cabinet, backbenchers or crossbenchers, are the most critical influence on the formulation of Australian domestic policy, though their actions are affected by other factors. The Prime Minister as the head of the government chair of Cabinet and member of the House of Representatives, has a large degree of influence on foreign policy. Similarly cabinet as seen in the case of the Enterprise Tax Plan also influence legislation to a large extent.

Backbenchers too can influence legislation, through too a lesser extent as can minor parties in the Senate afforded a large degree of power in the current parliament as the party holds a majority.

Public opinion and elections however largely affect the actions of these members ...

Question 4

To fully address this popular topic, students needed to argue whether global terrorism was the most significant challenge facing Australian foreign policy today or whether there are other challenges posing equal or more important concerns. A range of challenges was available to be discussed and many students did this effectively, using recent examples to support their view.

An initial discussion of what global terrorism actually is and the way in which it is a challenge for the objectives of Australian foreign policy was required. Global terrorism refers to events overseas, such as recent incidents in France, the UK and Afghanistan that fall into the broad realm of politically motivated violence or threats of violence. In some ways these incidents can be seen to have minimal impact on Australian foreign policy, despite their extensive media coverage, because they are rare; on the other hand the implications for our alliances, security spending and sense of national safety in light of such events can be very powerful for the government. Students needed to discuss specific examples of how Australian foreign policy had responded to this challenge in recent times. High-scoring essays followed this discussion with a canvassing of other challenges of equal or more importance to foreign policy.

Other challenges include:

- climate change – the economic and political impact of not living up to global agreements
- refugee or immigration issues – ongoing offshore processing concerns and deals with third-party nations (such as USA or Cambodia) to take refugees for Australia
- trade or economic concerns, such as the USA rejecting the TPP
- humanitarian and natural disasters
- regional conflicts, such as the rising tension between the USA and China.

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

Whilst global terrorism is a significant challenge facing Australia's national security, it constitutes only one element amongst Australia's foreign policy objectives. In regards to our objective of national security, it is global terrorism combined with regional stability and the rise of China and decline of the United States that cumulatively form a major concern.