

2018 VCE Australian Politics examination report

General comments

The 2018 examination reflected the revised study design for Australian Politics 2018–2022 and VCAA advice outlining the revised examination specifications.

Section A consisted of 11 questions, some with multiple parts. Students were required to answer all questions, worth a total of 60 marks. These questions covered all parts of the study, drawing on each Area of Study.

Section B consisted of four essay questions, and students were required to answer one, worth 20 marks.

The highest-scoring responses demonstrated a very good level of understanding and awareness of important political events in Australia throughout 2018 and in the last 10 years, and many students were able to draw upon these events to offer relevant examples and case studies. Lower-scoring responses often did not make use of evidence and some students wrote answers that were too general. A number of students did not respond to some questions. Students are reminded that they should respond to all questions.

In their examination preparation, students should take note of the range of task words that might be used in the examination. Task words such as ‘outline’, ‘explain’ and ‘define’ require a different type of answer to questions using higher-order terms such as ‘critically compare’, ‘discuss’ or ‘analyse’, each of which appeared on the 2018 examination. Further attention should be paid to these task words during the year and practice tasks completed with them clearly in mind. Reference should be made to the current study design for the key knowledge and key skills.

For example, several questions in Section A asked students to discuss various factors or points. Discussion questions require something more than questions that ask students to describe or explain. A discussion might involve looking at both sides of an argument or offering a number of interconnected examples. Question 3, for example, asked students to discuss the impact of the Senate voting system on the composition of the Australian Parliament; this discussion could have included both positive and negative impacts, and the reasons for the different types of impact linked to the proportional representation voting system.

Some questions on the 2018 examination required students to do more than one thing in their response or make a choice as to which information they should include. For example, Question 2 asked students to explain one strength **or** weakness of Australian federalism. Many students wrote about both strengths and weaknesses when this was not required.

Question 7c. asked for an explanation of the role of Cabinet in the formulation and/or implementation of domestic policy. Students could have selected either and written a more detailed response; however, many students attempted to describe both formulation and implementation without including sufficient detail.

Students are reminded of the importance of reading examination questions very carefully. Effective use of reading time is crucial to determining exactly what is being asked. Students should undertake practice examinations during their preparation, including reading time. If a question gives students a choice, students should make their choice clear in their response.

Some students misinterpreted the wording of some questions. Question 11, for example, asked for an analysis of the influence of the public service on the formulation and/or implementation of Australian foreign policy, but many students responded in terms of domestic policy. Students are reminded to practise reading questions as part of their examination preparation and devise strategies throughout the year to assist them to do this accurately.

Students mostly wrote answers of an appropriate length in response to the mark allocations given in Section A of the examination, although it should be noted that questions worth 6–7 marks do require a significantly detailed response. Students who need to use the extra writing space at the end of the question and answer book are reminded to indicate this clearly.

The essays in Section B were generally of a good quality. The length and inclusion of relevant examples and case studies in many essays was appropriate. Students are reminded of the essential requirement in an essay to address the topic and avoid irrelevance or pre-prepared responses. Some essays demonstrated an impressive level of knowledge of the relevant Area of Study. The highest scoring of these clearly addressed the topic and made detailed use of evidence and contemporary examples. Low-scoring essays were characterised by generalisations, brevity, a narrow focus and repetition. Students are reminded to allow time during the year and in examination preparation for essay-writing practice. Practice answering different types of questions, including those of varying complexity, will assist students to develop skills in responding to unfamiliar material under examination conditions.

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

Question 1a.

Marks	0	1	Average
%	42	58	0.6

Sovereignty (the will of the people) is ensured in the Australian Constitution by:

- allowing for the provision of the people's choice of representatives for the House and Senate (as outlined in s24 and s7)
- requiring the involvement of citizens in the process of changing the Constitution (s128).

Students should be aware that the Constitution does not explicitly state the right to vote nor does it mention compulsory voting.

Question 1b.

Marks	0	1	2	Average
%	6	18	76	1.7

Students were required to give a description of one way in which the Constitution protects the rights of citizens. Possible answers included:

- the express right to freedom of religion
- the outlining of a clear separation of powers, including an independent judiciary
- the implied right to vote and the implied right to political communication
- the right to choose representatives for the House and the Senate
- the right for citizens to take part in the process of changing the Constitution.

Question 1c.

Marks	0	1	2	Average
%	4	34	62	1.6

This question required a link to be made between democracy and the rule of law, and an explanation of the clear relationship between the two.

Outlining the notion of political and legal equality before the law, as it exists in Australia, was the most common response to this question. Some students made a good attempt to refer to the treatment of those members of parliament struck out by s44 of the Constitution during 2018, indicating that elected representatives are subject to the rule of law as are all citizens.

Many answers required further detail.

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

The rule of law is the principle that everyone is subject to the law, even the government. This is essential to sovereignty of the people as it ensures that laws made by the government that are outside their power can be challenged by the people.

Question 2

Marks	0	1	2	3	Average
%	21	18	34	27	1.7

Many students misread the instruction for this question, which was to explain either a democratic strength **or** a democratic weakness of federalism, not both.

Students also needed to show an understanding of what 'federalism' is – it does not include local government. The glossary for Australian Politics gives this definition for federalism (Australia and USA):

'A system of government in which law making powers and responsibilities are constitutionally divided between a central, national government and a series of state or regional governments...'

- Democratic strengths of federalism: allows for different levels of representation, brings government closer to the people and to the ideal of popular sovereignty, protects minority rights of smaller states and their citizens.
- Democratic weaknesses of federalism: can lead to over-government and its inefficiency can lead to ignoring of rights.

Question 3

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	Average
%	7	11	25	41	16	2.5

This question required students to clearly identify proportional representation as the voting system used to elect members to the Senate. Some students explained the key features of proportional representation but identified it incorrectly as 'preferential voting'. There are aspects of preferential voting now included in proportional representation, where voters can indicate their preferences for parties above the line, but this is not the correct name.

A mention of the quota system and a discussion of the way in which quotas help shape the Senate in either a positive or negative way was required. A discussion of the impact the current Senate has on the government's attempts to pass legislation through the parliament was included by many students, which was important. Students could identify different parties or key individuals elected to the Senate as a result of the voting system that was used in the 2016 election as examples to support their response.

Question 4a.

Marks	0	1	2	3	Average
%	12	31	33	24	1.7

The process of impeachment relating to the US president is outlined in the Constitution. It involves firstly a charge of misconduct being made against the president on the grounds of 'treason, bribery, other high crimes or misdemeanours'. The charges are voted on in the House of Representatives, in which a simple majority is required for the president to be impeached. A trial is then held in the Senate where if a two-thirds majority of Senators vote in favour, the president is removed from office.

Students should note that the US Supreme Court is not involved in this process.

Question 4b.

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	Average
%	3	3	10	17	26	26	15	4

'Critically compare' requires students to do more than just list or broadly discuss differences or similarities. An attempt to make a judgment as to the democratic success or otherwise of the separation of powers as it operates in both the US and Australia was a key part of high-scoring answers to this question.

Students needed to briefly outline the concept of the separation of powers and to explain its operation in each system. It was acceptable to explain the US system and the Australian system and then make an evaluation or to do this concurrently throughout the answer. Not every aspect of the separation of powers was required to be mentioned; however, a somewhat detailed discussion was needed and use of examples from each system was rewarded.

The following is example of a high-scoring response.

While both systems operate under a separation of powers, the more clear cut and separate system of the US renders its separation of powers superior to that of Australia. The Australian Executive and Legislative branches are not truly separate, with the PM and Cabinet being drawn from the legislature and proliferating the idea of one party exerting 'executive domination' across multiple branches of the Australian government. The operation of the legislature cannot be truly removed from the control of the Executive under parliamentary standing orders set by Cabinet. The complete separation of the Executive branch from the legislature in the United

States make for a more effective governmental system, with the President and Cabinet within the Executive able to influence activity without exerting explicit control. The incoming Democratic House majority will also allow for the starker separation of powers to be an enhanced check and balance, as the party uses powers of Congressional oversight to maintain accountability, a privilege that the weaker Australian separation of powers and its blurred lines between branches would not afford.

Question 5

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	Average
%	20	13	18	28	22	2.2

This question required students to consider the ways in which the American Constitution might not be so effective in protecting the democratic rights and freedoms of its citizens. The US Constitution is often seen as advantageous in rights protection due to the inclusion of its Bill of Rights, whereas Australia does not have a Bill of Rights. This question required thoughtful consideration by students in addressing one example of how the Constitution is ineffective.

Both this question and Question 6 also required detailed knowledge of specific aspects of the US system as outlined by the study design. Students should be aware of this and be able to respond to not only comparative questions with Australia, but stand-alone questions on the US system as well.

Some ways in which the US Constitution could be seen to be ineffective in protecting democratic rights and freedoms include:

- through the Constitution's inflexibility and resistance to change, which takes place if at all without the direct vote of citizens, meaning outdated and no longer acceptable rights can limit the democratic rights of others – for example, the right to bear arms/gun control
- the rights included can promote excessive individualism and deny an understanding of the obligations of citizens to each other
- through the fact that citizens still have to appeal to the courts for the rights included to be upheld.

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

Whilst the US Constitution allows adequate protection of civil liberties through its provision of expressed rights, it is arguably ineffective in protecting democratic rights by not allowing a mechanism for the citizens of the United States to amend their own Constitution, as the Australian constitution provides in Section 128 specifying the process of constitutional referenda...

Question 6

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	Average
%	11	12	18	20	28	10	2.8

This question required an understanding of the roles and purpose of committees in the US Congress and proved challenging for many students. An analysis of the committees' role required a discussion of the different functions of committees and their relative influence or importance in the operation of the Congress.

In general, the roles of congressional committees fall into legislative (standing) and investigative (select) areas.

Legislative committees can be very powerful and all proposed Bills must be referred to a relevant committee for a decision on whether they will be sponsored and continue through the legislative process. The House Committee on Ways and Means was mentioned by some students and is

recognised as powerful in its own right, with a seat on the committee coveted by many members of the House. These legislative committees therefore have a great deal of power and influence over the passage of Bills through Congress.

Investigative committees (select committees) can be convened to look into particular matters and have a large degree of power to call people before them. Senate judicial committees such as the one that examined the appointment of Brett Kavanaugh to the Supreme Court in 2018 were an example used by some students.

Question 7a.

Marks	0	1	2	Average
%	5	46	49	1.5

Opinion polls can influence Australian domestic policy by conveying to the government the extent of public approval/disapproval for a particular decision or piece of legislation, leading to either the continuation of the domestic policy or its rejection.

Examples that were used included:

- same-sex marriage postal survey/opinion poll
- support/opposition for the Adani coal mine
- protests at the treatment of asylum seekers on Nauru.

Question 7b.

Marks	0	1	2	3	Average
%	9	19	39	33	2

The Australian judiciary may influence the implementation of Australian domestic policy generally when a case comes before the High Court, challenging the nature of a policy. The ruling of the court will determine how the policy may or may not be put into practice following the case. Not all policies implemented by the government come before the Court; the role of the judiciary is not automatic.

Specific examples, such as the Malaysia Solution case of 2011 or the High Court ruling on the legality of the government running the same-sex marriage postal survey in 2017, may have been used as examples or case studies in responses to this question.

Question 7c.

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	Average
%	3	15	25	38	19	2.6

This question gave students the opportunity to write about the role of Cabinet in domestic policy formulation and/or implementation.

Clearly specifying whether their response would be focused on formulation or implementation or both at the outset helped some students structure their answer more effectively. However, many students attempted to discuss both aspects of formulation and implementation and this was also appropriate.

Students were expected to have clear knowledge and understanding of the role of Cabinet in domestic policy and be able to draw upon relevant examples from their studies and could have named key Cabinet members in their explanations. Therefore, a statement about what Cabinet is and the role that it plays in domestic policy was needed.

A discussion of a policy example of formulation or implementation and the ministers involved was also required. Students are encouraged to ensure they include such relevant examples and evidence in their answers.

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

The Cabinet's role in the formulation of domestic policy is largely as a means for senior ministers to hear submissions from the bureaucrats of government departments and the ministers themselves in order to debate various positions to eventually reach a uniform government policy position, as they did with the 2017 adoption of the Marriage Equality postal survey policy. The Cabinet must also oversee the implementation of policy, liaising with the public service to hear updates and critical feedback on the policy details whilst also having the power to pull or amend various aspects of policy after implantation, seen in the collective November 2018 decision to extend the My Health Record opt-out period to January 2019.

Question 8

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	Average
%	5	4	12	20	25	24	9	3.7

This question asked students to do several things but many students missed the opportunity to show the depth of their knowledge of domestic policy case studies from the last 10 years. Students are encouraged to ensure that their domestic policy case study examples and others studied during the year can be used in a range of ways in an examination and also ensure that they collect a range of policy examples of both formulation and implementation in addition to their case study.

Taking one element from the list of formulation factors given in the question, explaining its role in the formulation of a specific domestic policy example and discussing how that role may not have been democratic was the approach required, followed by another element from the list with a similar discussion.

The following are extracts from high-scoring responses.

Example 1

Interest groups have the potential to over rule the voice of citizens. For instance corporate tax cuts had a low approval...yet, the Government pushed on, partly driven by the Business Council of Australia – a peak body of big business - which was pushing for cuts. Their influence undermines majority rule by having a small group of individuals offered more say in the decision making process.

Example 2

International influences can have a significant impact on public policy, however this can contradict principles such as the participation of citizens as it doesn't involve Australian citizens doing something. For example, the Turnbull government did have a policy to give tax cuts to big businesses (drop it to around 25%), which may have been influenced by Trump's recent cuts (to 21%) and by Britain's rate of 18%. However this influence didn't involve the participation of citizens at all.

Question 9

Marks	0	1	2	3	Average
%	5	21	37	37	2.1

The national interest, in terms of Australian foreign policy, is the overall peace and prosperity of Australia. Australia's national interest areas include our economic prosperity, our defence and security and our reputation as a good global citizen. Students needed to select one specific Australian foreign policy action, decision or strategy and show how it linked to any one of these aspects of the national interest.

For example, Australia's membership of the 'Five Eyes' intelligence agreement assists our peace and security by allowing us to access intelligence information with key allies that will help keep Australia safe from a potential terror attack.

Another example is Australia's free trade agreement with China, which helps Australia's economy grow in strength as our most important two-way trading partner, valued at over \$180 billion in 2018 and accounting for 24 per cent of our total trade. This provides jobs and growth in the Australian economy.

Question 10

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	Average
%	4	8	19	28	26	16	3.1

Students were required in the initial part of this answer to demonstrate an understanding of what it means to be 'a good global citizen', that is, for Australia to live up to the obligations and expectations of being a member of the international community.

Students then needed to describe an agreement, treaty or alliance of which Australia is a member and analyse how it allows or does not allow good global citizenship to be demonstrated.

Many students selected ANZUS as an example of a treaty, but were unable to analyse this in terms of good global citizenship.

Higher-scoring answers discussed such agreements or memberships of the United Nations, the ASEAN Regional Forum, G20 or the UN Convention on Refugees.

Many high-scoring answers identified the Paris Climate Change Agreement (2015) and analysed how Australian domestic politics impacted on Australia's failure to live up to the targets of that agreement, which the international community had acknowledged was a significant way of approaching the global issue of climate change.

Question 11

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Average
%	3	10	16	16	22	16	11	6	3.7

This question required a clear understanding of the role of the public service in foreign policy formulation and/or implementation, as an independent body in the Westminster system formed to give frank and fearless advice to elected ministers. However, many students addressed this question in terms of domestic policy. Given the focus of the question was foreign policy, it was very important to include a discussion of the role of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) as an example of the dominant relevant public service area. The Australian Department of Home Affairs and others could also have been mentioned. Additional public service/government agencies such as ASIO or bodies such as embassies and consulates could also have been discussed.

The public service may not have the key role in foreign policy formulation – although depending on the situation it may be a lead body – but it clearly has a role in implementation and this needed to be addressed. Liaison with Cabinet members such as the Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs could also have been canvassed. Many responses were too brief to be rewarded highly. Students are reminded to use the mark allocation and answer space provided on the examination as a guide to the length of the response required.

Section B – Essay

Question chosen	none	1	2	3	4
%	0	25	30	22	23

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	2	1	1	0	1	2	3	3	4	6	8	14	16	11	9	7	7	4	1	13.4

Question 1

Many students could demonstrate their knowledge of the operation of the current Australian Parliament. Some students were, however, too general in their approach and did not refer to enough specific examples of how political parties and the executive had hindered or had a negative impact on the democratic role of the parliament in recent times.

It was essential that students outlined their understanding of what political parties are and what their role is within parliament. Distinguishing between major and minor/micro parties was also important and if done accurately allowed for a very specific discussion of parties such as One Nation and the Greens. An outline of the role of the executive within the parliament was also required.

A discussion of tactics available to both the executive (government) and parties to call upon in the course of daily parliamentary procedures helped some students demonstrate how the role of Parliament as a legislator specifically can be hampered by such events. The hijacking of question time by the opposition party focusing on political rather than legislative questioning would be one such example. Furthermore, the behind the scenes deals done on legislation by some minor/micro parties with the government in the Senate in particular provided more examples of how party tactics can undermine democratic processes in the parliament.

Executive dominance or the power of the government to use its majority needed to be addressed with equal weight in this question. A knowledge of the very slim majority held by the current executive and the impact of both that and a hostile Senate on their capacity to govern was shown by some students and this was rewarded, as was knowledge of some of those composing the current Senate.

High-scoring essays were also aware of the key democratic functions of the parliament and linked their discussion clearly to these. In particular, the role of parliament as the key legislative body in our system, its capacity to represent the views and values of the people and the differing but connected bicameral roles of the house and the Senate should have been mentioned.

As the question asked ‘to what extent do you agree?’, it was important for students to take a clear line of argument and attempt to pursue this throughout the essay.

Question 2

This was the most popular question and was completed very well by a number of students.

Similarly to Question 1, it required students to take a point of view in relation to the proposition and to argue that throughout the essay. Many students argued that even though there was a need for some (as opposed to significant) reform in the American electoral system, there were also some democratic strengths evident, and this was an acceptable line to pursue. Students should remember that they do not need to wholly agree or disagree with statements put to them as essay prompts; it is often very probable that a middle line of 'to a certain extent' allows for a full and detailed response to a question. On the other hand, as demonstrated by some students, it was also possible to argue that the American electoral system was in need of substantial and urgent reform in order to enhance its democratic effectiveness.

Many students demonstrated very good knowledge of key aspects of the American electoral system in their essays and were able to substantiate this with relevant and recent examples. Given the mid-term elections had only recently taken place there were many instances from this process that were available for students to draw upon. It was not necessary for students to discuss every element of the American electoral system; a focus on particular elements was acceptable. Low-scoring responses to this question were very general and fell back on a comparison to the Australian electoral system, which was not asked for.

Question 3

Students who were able to draw in detail upon their domestic policy case study and other domestic policy examples from 2018 scored well.

The formulation of domestic policy could be said to be all of the descriptors listed: difficult, lengthy, highly politicised and uncertain (i.e. subject to a great many challenges). This gave students a great deal of scope to discuss each aspect of the question, linking to one or more domestic policies they had studied.

The question asked students to take a point of view; most commonly it was argued that domestic policy formulation (note not implementation) was indeed impacted by many challenges.

High-scoring essays drew upon recent domestic examples such as energy and/or climate change policy, income tax cuts, foreign interference laws and the same-sex marriage debate. Students were able to show how public opinion, the influence of interest groups, the power of the media, changing parliamentary numbers, election timing, the Senate and other factors shaped the formulation process in each area. They used the names of relevant key players, the names of Bills or committees, tactics used by interest groups and opinion poll statistics as evidence.

Low-scoring essays were too general and comprised detailed narrative descriptions of recent policy areas, for example, the history of climate change policy in Australia over the last 10 years. Such responses did not address the topic and therefore were not able to score highly. Students are again reminded to ensure that they are answering the question as asked.

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

The formulation of Australian domestic policy can be very difficult, lengthy, politicised and uncertain as the varying stakeholders of a democracy influence the process of forming policy. For instance, company tax cuts have been in a process of formulation for more than two years. The NBN and My Health Record have proven to be difficult policies due to their technical nature. LGBT student and teacher rights and same-sex marriage has been highly political and energy policy has remained uncertain for years.

Question 4

This question invited students to consider the range of multilateral approaches Australia uses to meet two of the challenges to foreign policy they had studied. The key to this question was a

detailed examination of the two challenges selected. In this discussion a consideration of the multilateral bodies, forums or approaches used by Australia to try to overcome the challenge could have been canvassed. Students were required to demonstrate an understanding of multilateralism and the various strengths that approaches drawing on multiple parties might bring to dealing with challenges such as the threat of global terrorism (for example). To supplement this, the specific names of multilateral bodies or forums that were relevant could have been included and discussed. For example, the UN and UN Security Council may have been used in this instance. Furthermore, to address the 'discuss' aspect of the question, students could also have raised situations or challenges in which bilateral approaches were more successful. Using the global terrorism challenge, the example of the bilateral Australia-Indonesia Defence Cooperation Agreement could have been drawn upon.

As with many foreign policy essays, an acknowledgment that a range of approaches for various reasons relating to the advancement of Australia's national interest may be required would have resulted in a more considered essay response. Some students were able to discuss this reality with effective evidence. Other students discussed the challenges only, not the instruments used by Australia to address them.