



GENERAL COMMENTS

Most students completed the 2012 Australian Politics examination successfully. Very few questions in Section A were not answered or incomplete, and the majority of students wrote a full essay for Section B.

The examination required a range of skills. Students needed to know the major elements of democracy and the Australian political system, and several questions required them to analyse and evaluate elements of the Australian system. Some students found these questions challenging as they required more than simple recall of information. In these questions, very careful reading of a passage or extract was required in order to fully appreciate the key element of the question. In some weaker responses, it was evident that students had not read the passage carefully enough, and so missed the point of the question.

Each of the four questions in Section A was based on an extract linked to one of the Areas of Study. Very few students demonstrated major difficulties in understanding the general meaning of these extracts. Most students recognised that the extracts were designed as stimulus material, and not simply as a direct source from which to obtain the answers.

Several questions in Section A asked for an explanation of a key piece of terminology and many students had incomplete or incorrect understandings of these. For example, students could not expect to receive full marks for writing that ‘compulsory voting’ in Australia means that voters are required by law to vote. That merely rephrased the question. Similarly, the term ‘the national interests’ required students to state some specific aspects of these interests. Many students had quite a confused understanding of the term ‘the Coalition’.

Some students wrote excessively long and detailed answers in Section A. These students did not take sufficient note of the key instruction in the question. For example, a question asking students to ‘outline’ an argument did not require as much depth and detail as one that asked students to ‘describe’, ‘discuss’ or ‘evaluate’.

Several questions asked students to present two specific points in their responses. Students who used dot points or numbering as a means of setting out their responses were not penalised for doing so.

Most students were able to cite relevant examples to support their answers in Section A. Students were aware of the contemporary nature of this study and hence had good knowledge of recent Australian political issues, particularly those related to domestic policy. These issues included the introduction of a price on carbon, same-sex marriage and the plain packaging of cigarettes, all of which were prominent public policy issues in Australia in 2012.

Examples cited in relation to foreign policy were generally not as successful. When asked for ‘recent’ evidence in Question 4, some students cited quite dated examples, which indicated a lack of awareness of current developments in Australian foreign policy.

Section B required students to write one essay. The most successful responses displayed good writing skills and a clear structure. They established a primary argument or contention in the first paragraph and presented a series of supporting arguments. In many responses, these distinct arguments were divided into body paragraphs, followed by a short conclusion that drew the response together. Body paragraphs often commenced with a topic sentence and developed more detail as the paragraph progressed.

SPECIFIC INFORMATION

Section A

Australian democracy

Question 1a.

| Marks | 0 | 1 | 2 | Average |
|-------|---|----|----|---------|
| % | 4 | 65 | 31 | 1.3 |

All eligible Australians aged 18 and over are required to enrol to vote (although many do not do so). Once they are on the electoral roll, they are then required to attend a polling place on election days and have their name crossed off the roll. They are then handed ballot papers.

2012 Assessment Report



Many students found it difficult to clearly define this basic Australian political term. Some responses were too simplistic and said little more than that voters are required by law to vote in elections. This was not sufficient to receive full marks for the question. The more successful responses avoided the use of terms such as ‘forced to vote’ or ‘compelled to vote’, but rather stated that the Australian electoral system requires citizens to participate in elections.

The following were successful responses.

Compulsory voting is an Act established in 1924 which compels all eligible voters to make an appearance at a voting booth, get their names marked off and receive their ballot papers. Voters are not compelled to cast a ballot. Compulsory voting usually results in 95+% attendance.

‘Compulsory voting’ as it applies in Australia is the obligation by law for all enfranchised and registered voters to attend an election. It is however not a compulsion to cast a valid ballot as the ‘secret ballot’ preserves the identity of the elector.

Question 1b.

| Marks | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | Average |
|-------|---|---|----|----|----|---------|
| % | 0 | 1 | 22 | 30 | 47 | 3.2 |

The extract refers to a range of ways in which compulsory voting might be considered undemocratic, including that it

- increases the informal vote. People who are legally obliged to attend a polling place may deliberately or accidentally vote incorrectly due to lack of interest or knowledge of voting procedures. Others may simply leave their ballot papers blank
- forces people to vote whose views are ill-informed and so may distort election results. Such voters may cast a ‘donkey vote’ and so provide a small, yet significant advantage to candidates whose names appear at the top of the ballot paper.

Many students explained that compulsory voting can be regarded as quite undemocratic as it denies voters the right not to be involved in the electoral process. Other successful responses referred to the argument from the extract that compulsory voting forces to the polling booth voters whose views are ‘not worth having’.

Question 1c.

| Marks | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | Average |
|-------|---|---|----|----|----|---------|
| % | 0 | 2 | 16 | 33 | 49 | 3.3 |

Arguments in favour of compulsory voting include that it

- increases the turnout in Australian elections, which increases the legitimacy of the government and grants it a stronger mandate. The turnout in federal elections is generally around 94 per cent of enrolled voters. Other similar representative democracies such as the US and UK have voluntary voting and record far lower turnouts than Australia
- is a relatively minor responsibility of being an Australian citizen in terms of time, effort and cost. All citizens face a range of obligations, such as jury duty, paying tax and school attendance. As it involves a small time commitment every few years, it does not seem overly demanding. Australia offers a range of alternative voting methods for those unable or unwilling to attend a polling place on election days
- encourages voters to become more involved in and informed about their political system
- voting becomes a habit and so the political system becomes more accessible to all voters
- allows the government to claim a stronger and more legitimate mandate to govern
- allows parties and candidates to concentrate on policies and issues, rather than convincing voters to vote.

The following response contained two relevant arguments.

Compulsory voting in Australia greatly improved the voter turnout by over 40%. Current voter turnout in Australia averages 95%, the highest turnout in the world for a democratic system. A second argument in favour of compulsory voting is that political parties do not have to waste finances on advertisements that encourage voters to vote, instead they can actually help inform voters of their policy platform.

Question 1d.

| Marks | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Average |
|-------|---|---|----|----|----|----|---------|
| % | 0 | 3 | 13 | 35 | 33 | 16 | 3.5 |

A democratic government should be legitimate in the eyes of the people it governs and represents. That is, the people should believe the government was elected fairly and genuinely reflects the views of the people who put it to office.



This sense of legitimacy can be strengthened by means of a high level of political participation. As the majority of Australian adults vote in elections, the government can claim to have been granted a legitimate mandate by the people it governs. This can be compared with the US presidential election, in which the turnout is often below 60 per cent. Given that many of those voters would not have voted for the winning candidate, in many elections, less than 30 per cent of US adults may have voted for their president. This is likely to reduce the president's legitimacy in the eyes of many Americans.

The following excerpt demonstrates a good understanding of the core requirement of the question.

By contrast, a low voter turnout may lead to the public questioning the legitimacy of the government and whether they have a solid mandate on which to legislate, based on the low representation of the public reflected in the turnout. For example, the legitimacy of a government elected by low voter turnout . . . may experience challenges in passing legislation and maintaining the confidence of the public and the parliament – eg. in a minority government.

Australian democracy in perspective

Question 2a.

| Marks | 0 | 1 | 2 | Average |
|-------|---|----|----|------------|
| % | 3 | 10 | 87 | 1.9 |

Kilcullen claims that the relationship between the prime minister, parliament and electorate is democratic, while he feels that the continued role of the monarchy in the Australian system, bicameralism and federalism are undemocratic.

Few students encountered any difficulties with this question, which required students to state two of Kilcullen's key points. No further explanation was needed.

Question 2b.

| Marks | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | Average |
|-------|----|----|----|----|------------|
| % | 17 | 28 | 32 | 24 | 1.6 |

Kilcullen argues that the simple notion of democracy as 'majority rule' is not an absolute political value. He argues that the will of the majority can ignore the views and interests of individuals and minority groups in society. He also argues that it can lead to poor policy decisions that are not in the best, long-term interests of the nation involved. His point reflects the fears of the 'tyranny of the majority'.

In order to successfully respond to this question, students needed to read the extract very carefully to derive Kilcullen's meaning. The crucial point was contained in brackets, and it was clear that many students ignored or skipped over it. This was a reminder that this examination requires more than simple recall of information. Too many students suggested that Kilcullen was arguing that democracy was not a perfect system. They overlooked Kilcullen's key idea: that democracy as 'deciding by majority vote' may not produce 'just or wise' decisions.

The following excerpts from successful responses captured Kilcullen's meaning.

Democratic nations must be cautious in distinguishing between good policy and populist policy.

Just because the majority approve does not make it 'right'.

The following complete answer expressed Kilcullen's core idea.

Kilcullen claims that democracy in the sense of deciding by a majority vote will not produce a just sense of representation. This is primarily due to a lack of representation for minorities, racial, linguistic or religious as their views will always be dominated in a democracy by that of the majority. This therefore restricts the democratic value of protection of minority views.

Question 2c.

| Marks | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | Average |
|-------|---|---|----|----|----|------------|
| % | 2 | 3 | 19 | 31 | 44 | 3.1 |

The US political system protects democratic rights and freedoms because

- the US has a formal Bill of Rights entrenched into its Constitution. This provides legally enforceable protection of a range of rights and freedoms, including freedom of speech, the press and religion



- the formal separation of powers and the extensive checks and balances built into the US system of government ensure that no single arm of the US government can become too powerful and so abuse the democratic rights of US citizens
- a powerful judicial branch led by the US Supreme Court has a strong record of protecting democratic rights and freedoms in a series of landmark cases
- an elected head of state gives citizens the right to determine their political leader
- Americans have the opportunity to vote on many specific issues as well as selecting representatives (ballot propositions)
- Americans have direct input into the selection of candidates via the primaries/caucuses.

Most students were well prepared for this question. Weaker responses tended to be too general; for instance, stating that the US has regular elections did not earn full marks unless that point was then linked in a relevant way to the rights and freedoms of US citizens.

Question 2d.

| Marks | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | Average |
|-------|---|---|---|----|----|----|----|------------|
| % | 2 | 2 | 9 | 21 | 29 | 23 | 14 | 4.0 |

Students could select one of many aspects in their response to this question. However, a significant proportion of students evaluated the use of US-style primary elections as a method of selecting candidates for Australian elections.

Arguments in favour of the use of primary elections included that

- it is more democratic, as the current system allows the parties too much influence, particularly in safe electorates where the party's selected candidate is assured victory, making the actual election somewhat irrelevant
- it allows citizens greater participation in the political process and hence may increase citizens' understanding of the electoral system.

Arguments against the use of primary elections include that

- Australia has developed a strong democracy (arguably stronger than the US) without the use of primaries
- if few people bother to vote in primaries, it may allow organised groups to 'rig' primaries and so pre-select their preferred candidate
- it might see a further 'Americanisation' of the Australian system, with more negative, 'attack' advertisements, etc.

Many students showed good knowledge of the way primary elections, or 'primaries', operate. They compared primaries favourably with the Australian system, in which political parties preselect candidates with little or no public input. Most of these responses concluded that Australian democracy would be strengthened by the use of primaries. Stronger responses mentioned that several political parties have conducted limited experiments with primary elections. However, comparatively few responses evaluated the use of primaries by looking at some of the possible disadvantages of them. While it was quite acceptable to argue strongly in favour of an aspect that Australia might adopt to improve its democracy, a complete response required acknowledgment of a counter-argument. Many responses missed out on marks for neglecting this part of the argument.

Other aspects that students used in successful responses included

- an elected head of state
- a more formal separation of government powers
- greater use of direct democracy, such as US-style ballot propositions
- the appointment of non-elected cabinet members
- adopting a US-style constitutional Bill of Rights or a UK-style Charter of Rights and Freedoms
- greater use of elections to appoint public officials; for example, judges and senior public servants.

Domestic policy

Question 3a.

| Marks | 0 | 1 | 2 | Average |
|-------|----|----|----|------------|
| % | 28 | 12 | 60 | 1.3 |

2012 Assessment Report



When used in Australian politics, ‘the Coalition’ refers to the arrangement under which the Liberal Party and the National Party agree to combine the numbers of their elected members of parliament with the aim of forming a majority in the lower house, and therefore forming government.

It was disappointing that some students had a poor understanding of one of the most widely used terms in contemporary Australian politics. Some students ignored the upper case C, which designates a particular arrangement between two specific political parties, and not any such arrangement. Hence, ‘the agreement formed between the Australian Labor Party and the Australian Greens following the 2010 federal election’ was not an acceptable answer. Other poor responses neglected to mention the National Party, while others stated that the Coalition is synonymous with the opposition. While the Coalition was in opposition at the time of the 2012 examination, on other occasions, the Coalition forms the Australian Government.

Some students suggested incorrectly that the Coalition involved a formal union of the Liberal and National Parties to form a single party. This has occurred in Queensland with the formation the Liberal National Party. However, this is no longer regarded as a coalition.

Question 3b.

| Marks | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | Average |
|-------|---|----|----|----|---------|
| % | 7 | 20 | 25 | 48 | 2.2 |

The Greens’ votes in the Senate were crucial in the passage of the legislation referred to in the question. The carbon tax legislation was proposed by the Gillard Labor Government. As the Labor Party lacked a majority of Senators in its own right, it relied on the support of other Senators in order to have this legislation passed. Given that the Coalition was totally opposed to the legislation, the government then looked to the nine Greens Senators for their support. If the government had failed to gain that support, the legislation would have failed to pass the Senate, and the government would therefore have failed in its policy to introduce a price on carbon in 2012.

Students needed to show an understanding of several key ideas. Better students recognised that the significance of the Greens’ votes relates to the fact that the Greens hold the balance of power in the Australian Senate. Hence, students who discussed the role of the one Green member in the House of Representatives missed the core requirement of the question. Similarly, students who explained the Greens’ general philosophical support for a carbon price overlooked the key point, which was the Greens’ voting behaviour in the Senate. The following response demonstrated a good understanding of the concept of the ‘balance of power’ in the Australian Senate.

The nine Greens Senators hold the balance of power. This means that neither of the major parties (ALP or Coalition) have a majority of seats in the Senate. Therefore, the Greens can vote for or against a bill and it is likely to succeed or not succeed depending on which way they voted. This is provided that the two major parties do not vote together. The ALP government therefore has to take into account the Greens’ opinions on legislation as the Greens can block it in the Senate.

Question 3c.

| Marks | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | Average |
|-------|---|---|----|----|----|---------|
| % | 4 | 3 | 17 | 32 | 45 | 3.1 |

In addition to the decisions of parliament, numerous factors may influence the formulation of Australian domestic public policy. These include the influence of

- interest groups
- public opinion
- influential individuals and experts
- international events
- the media
- the bureaucracy
- the judiciary.

Most students answered this question competently. Few had difficulty in nominating two relevant factors and, although not essential for a successful response, many students illustrated the significance of the selected factors with contemporary examples drawn from recent years. For example, in describing the influence of the judiciary, many students referred to the decision of the High Court of Australia in August 2011, when it ruled that the Gillard Government’s so-called ‘Malaysia Solution’ for the processing of asylum seekers breached aspects of the Migration Act. As a result, the government was obliged to rethink its asylum seeker policy.

2012 Assessment Report



Question 3d.

| Marks | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | Average |
|-------|---|---|----|----|----|----|----|---------|
| % | 5 | 7 | 15 | 19 | 26 | 18 | 11 | 3.5 |

Some very strong responses to this question were based on an appropriate contemporary Australian domestic policy issue, such as the carbon tax or the Minerals Resource Rent Tax (MRRT), both of which were formulated in recent years and introduced in 2012.

While it was not essential for students to define the executive, the more successful students made it clear they knew what the term referred to. They demonstrated their understanding of the executive by referring to the role of specific government ministers in the selected policy issue. This is demonstrated in the following excerpt.

... Several members of the executive had a major role in the formulation of the policy. This involved prime minister, Julia Gillard, Wayne Swan, and Greg Combet who alongside the Department of Climate Change and environmental committees formulated the carbon tax policy and implemented it . . . Once introduced, members of the executive had an important role in promoting the policy and highlighting the importance and need for the carbon tax.

Some excellent responses discussed the policy issue of same-sex marriage. These responses displayed high-level knowledge by arguing that the executive had a reduced role in relation to this issue, mainly because the executive, led by Prime Minister Julia Gillard, did not have a united view on the matter and allowed a free or conscience vote when the legislation was presented to parliament. Some responses stated accurately that this legislation was not introduced to parliament by a member of the executive, which is the normal practice, but by a backbench MP as a private member's bill.

Weaker responses had limited knowledge of a contemporary policy issue, and many simply referred to 'the executive' throughout their answer, making it unclear whether these students had real understanding of this key term's meaning.

Foreign policy

Question 4a.

| Marks | 0 | 1 | 2 | Average |
|-------|---|----|----|---------|
| % | 8 | 25 | 67 | 1.6 |

National interests are the main influence on Australia foreign policy. These are seen as overriding the interests of sections of society or groups within the nation. National interests have several dimensions, including maintaining Australia's national security, acting as a good global citizen, building closer links with other nations, especially those closest to Australia, and promoting Australian economic and trade interests.

The following was a successful response.

National interests of Australia refers to the goal of Australia's foreign policy in order to maintain stability of our nation and the region, expand our links with other nations, pursue and strengthen our trade relationships, and be a responsible global citizen.

Question 4b.

| Marks | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | Average |
|-------|---|---|----|----|----|---------|
| % | 6 | 7 | 21 | 26 | 40 | 2.9 |

Successful responses to this question contained two specific instruments of Australian foreign policy and illustrated each with a recent example that was likely to have had an international impact. Such instruments and examples included

- the Australian foreign aid program: Australia budgeted to spend \$5.153 billion on foreign aid in 2012–13
- peacekeeping forces: currently, there are more than 3500 Australians serving in peacekeeping and security operations in many trouble spots across the world
- emergency assistance: Australia provided financial and other direct assistance in response to the Christchurch earthquake in 2011.

Some weaker responses simply described two examples of Australian foreign policy without making any real attempt to demonstrate the impact they may have had or the difference they may have made in shaping international events. A further weakness of some responses was the use of examples that could not be described as recent. The signing of the ANZUS Treaty (1951) is clearly not a recent event, yet it was cited by some students.

2012 Assessment Report



Question 4c.

| Marks | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | Average |
|-------|---|---|----|----|----|---------|
| % | 7 | 9 | 18 | 32 | 33 | 2.8 |

It was crucial for students to recognise that, in referring to ‘an uncertain and volatile part of the world’, the extract referred to the Asia-Pacific region. Fortunately, most students realised this and confined their responses to regional challenges. These included

- regional terrorism: the Bali bombings (2002) in which 88 Australians lost their lives meant terrorism became a much higher regional foreign policy challenge. Since then, Australia has formed a series of bilateral and multilateral agreements to counter and prevent such terrorist attacks in the future
- the orderly processing of asylum seekers and the control of people trafficking: while many asylum seekers do not come from the immediate region, most travel through the region in order to get to Australia. These asylum seekers often depart from Indonesia in a boat owned and crewed by Indonesians. Restricting and processing of these asylum seekers is a long-term challenge for Australia
- environmental challenges: the Asia-Pacific region faces many environmental challenges, including climate change and natural disasters. As a wealthy nation, Australia is expected to play a leading role in meeting these challenges.

Question 4d.

| Marks | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Average |
|-------|---|---|----|----|----|----|---------|
| % | 5 | 6 | 11 | 27 | 32 | 19 | 3.3 |

Foreign policy is often seen as being ‘above’ public opinion. It is largely bipartisan and rarely becomes the subject of intense political debate or a core election issue. It is influenced by the longer-term national interest rather than by the short-term, often poorly informed, knee-jerk reactions of the general public. Foreign policy is also influenced by expert opinion and specialists, rather than opinion polls or focus group findings.

For these reasons, public opinion tends to be relatively unimportant in the formulation of foreign policy. For instance, in recent years the Gillard Government maintained Australia’s military presence in Afghanistan, despite a clear majority of Australians opposing it. This policy was supported by the Opposition. However, in some circumstances the government may take the views and opinions of the broader public into consideration. For instance, in 2011 the Gillard Government acted quickly when it became clear that the Australian public was concerned by the treatment of live animal exports to Indonesia, which became a trade and foreign policy issue. However, the trade was resumed six months later when the government deemed the public’s interest in the issue had waned.

This excerpt from a successful response argued that: *Many Australians have tried to influence the refugee and asylum seeker policy however, it remains uncertain if their opinions had any effect on the policy formulation.*

It was notable that many weaker responses concluded that public opinion is significant in the formulation of Australian foreign policy, while stronger students tended to argue the reverse. This indicated that some students did not really appreciate the nature of foreign policy formulation. The following conclusion was reached by a successful response to the question: *Generally, public opinion in foreign policy formulation is fairly minimal in most cases given the complex and delicate nature of foreign policy.*

Section B – Essay questions

| Question chosen | none | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
|-----------------|------|---|----|----|----|
| % | 0 | 3 | 48 | 10 | 38 |

| Marks | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 | 14 | 15 | 16 | 17 | 19 | 20 | 21 | Average |
|-------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|---------|
| % | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 7 | 10 | 13 | 13 | 10 | 11 | 6 | 5 | 2 | 1 | 13 |

Question 1

This question required students to explain and discuss a range of recent reforms to the operation of the Federal Parliament and then to evaluate the effectiveness of these reforms. Effectiveness related to the ability of parliament to achieve its major roles, such as holding the executive to account and the passage of legislation. In this context, ‘recent’ reforms included those made since the 2010 election, which resulted in a minority government. This led to a series of significant changes to the operation of parliament, including the role of the Speaker, the operation of question time, and the profile of Independent members of Parliament.



Students who contended that recent reforms have failed to make parliament more effective were able to discuss a range of arguments, including that

- the parliament remains a very adversarial and, at times, aggressive institution. Indeed, it can be argued that, since the 2010 election and with the House of Representatives operating as a hung parliament, the behaviour and attitudes of MPs (particularly at question time) have deteriorated further. The intensely partisan nature of question time continues
- the executive has found it quite difficult to pass important elements of its legislative program. For example, Kevin Rudd was forced to abandon the Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme in early 2010 because he could not get the legislation through the Senate
- Kevin Rudd's attempt to introduce Friday sittings of parliament in 2009 basically failed to achieve any lasting change
- reforms to the operation of the House of Representatives made by recent Speakers added an element of dignity and civility to parliament and added to the authority of the Speaker; for example, Peter Slipper's practice of reintroducing some of the traditions and ceremony to parliament (such as robes for the Speaker and formal entry of the Speaker to the chamber with the sergeant-at-arms). Others saw it as merely another opportunity to ridicule parliament as an institution out of touch with contemporary Australian society.

Arguments supporting the contention that recent reforms have made parliament more effective included that

- despite operating as a minority government, the Gillard Government was able to pass the majority of the Bills it presented to parliament. Parliament remains the means by which major changes to Australian law and policy are made. For example, in November 2011, the Gillard Government passed the 'Clean Energy Future' legislation, one of the most significant and wide-reaching reforms for many years
- following the 2010 election, the 'Agreement for a Better Parliament' came into effect. This Agreement contained various aspects including: the introduction of greater independence for the Speaker of the House of Representatives; supplementary questions now being common practice in the House of Representatives; strict time limits that are applied in both asking and answering questions in the House of Representatives; and greater control for the Speaker to ensure answers are 'directly relevant' to the question that was asked. Matters of Public Importance was extended to 90 minutes, and changes were made to the parliamentary committee system. There are greater opportunities individual MPs to present private member's bills.
- as Speaker, Peter Slipper changed the standing orders of parliament to improve the operation of parliament. His practice of removing MPs from the chamber without the need of a warning may have reduced rowdy behaviour
- Slipper further reduced the time MPs were given to ask a question during question time, which allowed more questions to be asked, so increasing the degree to which the parliament could hold the executive accountable.

Few students attempted this question. While a small number were well aware of and knowledgeable about recent changes to the operation of the Australian Parliament, others lacked the key knowledge required to answer the question successfully.

Question 2

This question allowed many students to display their extensive knowledge of the Australian and US electoral systems. In many cases, that knowledge was presented in a rather mechanical and packaged listing of points. The more successful responses avoided that tendency by providing a genuine analysis and discussion of key ideas. Few students compared the UK, German or Indian electoral systems with the Australian model.

The most successful responses analysed the nature of democracy and described a range of key democratic values and principles in the introductory sections of their essays. These values included accountability, representation, popular sovereignty and extensive participation by citizens. The following passage formed part of an effective introduction to the essay.

While both the US and Australian electoral and voting methods have many democratic features, they both have some undemocratic aspects. While the US electoral system upholds the democratic values of direct democracy through primaries, the Australian system provides for better representation and accountability, making it ultimately more democratic than the system used in the US.

Weaker responses did not include such analysis, and instead jumped straight into a comparison of the features of the respective electoral systems, often merely asserting that one aspect was more 'democratic' than another. Without any justification or explanation as to why a particular aspect was more or less democratic, such assertions were of limited merit.



Students who argued that the Australian system was not as democratic as the US system raised numerous factors, including that

- Australia does not use a system of primary elections to select candidates for election as the US does. This reduces the level of political participation of Australian citizens
- the US uses a simple majority principle in which the most favoured candidate wins. This favours the key democratic value of majority rule
- Australia compels its citizens to take part in the electoral process, so breaching the principle of political freedom not to express a view
- the US system allows all eligible US citizens to take part in the election of their head of state and head of government. Australians can do neither of these.

A significant number of students argued that the Australian system is democratically superior. Their arguments included that

- Australia has an independent electoral body (the AEC) to run elections, conduct electoral education, conduct electoral redistributions, etc.
- the Australian electoral system is organised on a national basis, rather than the localised system characteristic of the US. This assists Australian voters to understand and use the voting system properly
- electoral distributions are not subject to political interference in Australia as they can be in the US. Gerrymandering is not regarded as a problem in Australia
- Australia has much higher levels of voter participation in elections than the US does
- the Australian Senate is elected under a proportional system that allows for greater representation of minority views
- the method used to elect the Australian executive branch results in a stronger government mandate than that used to elect the US president.

Some students opted to 'sit on the fence' by arguing that both systems have various democratic strengths and weaknesses, making it difficult to come down strongly on either side of the question. In many cases, this was a sensible and successful approach.

Given that a US election was conducted in the week prior to the examination and the events leading up to that election had unfolded throughout 2012, it was disappointing that comparatively few students made much reference to contemporary American political evidence in their essays. Highly sophisticated knowledge of the 2012 US election was not expected, but certainly rewarded those students who demonstrated some awareness of the election and could refer to some of the key participants and key features such as the electoral college result or the outcome of a Republican Party primary election conducted during 2012.

Question 3

This question required students to distinguish between the formulation and the implementation of domestic public policy. Students needed to develop a clear argument at the commencement of their essay, and use their knowledge of a specific domestic policy or policy issue they had studied during the year to develop and illustrate their contention. Without a clear and consistent structure, essays risked losing logical flow and direction. This flaw was evident in a number of weaker responses.

In answering this question, students could

- largely agree with the statement and stress the difficulties in putting policy into effect (implementation)
- largely disagree with the statement by pointing to the complexity and difficulty of the policy-making process (formulation)
- argue that the relative difficulties of policy formulation and implementation largely depend on the prevailing circumstances of each particular policy and the numerous, often unpredictable factors involved in the policy process.

Students whose responses basically agreed with the statement discussed points such as

- the reasons why implementation of policy might prove difficult, including funding and finance difficulties, bureaucratic delays and lack of resources, resistance and opposition from the media, powerful stakeholders and interest groups, and attacks from political opponents
- once implemented, many policies fall short of their aims. Relevant examples of this included the roof insulation scheme under the Rudd Government, the Rudd/Gillard Government's computers in schools program, some aspects of indigenous policy and asylum seeker policy



- a change of government may see the complete abandonment of the previous government's policy or major revisions of it
- the media tends to focus on the formulation stage of policy, rather than its implementation, so the public tends to know more about policy-making than policy implementation.

Responses that basically disagreed with the statement, argued that

- there are notable examples which demonstrate that the formulation of policy is the most difficult aspect of the policy process. Recent examples include the Minerals Resource Rent Tax, the Clean Energy Future/carbon tax package, asylum seeker policy, Federal Government schools funding, and controlling problem gambling and poker machine use
- experience shows that despite the difficulties in formulating public policy, once it has been passed by parliament most of it is implemented successfully. Examples include the Clean Energy Future/carbon tax implemented in July 2012. At least in its first few months of operation, its implementation seemed relatively straightforward.

Students adopting the third approach to the question used examples and evidence to demonstrate that in some policies implementation is relatively straightforward, while in others it is not. For instance, the Rudd Government's roof insulation scheme was relatively easy to formulate but clearly very difficult to implement, while the asylum seeker policy has been both difficult to formulate and difficult to implement.

The more successful responses to this question reflected a strong and quite detailed knowledge of at least one contemporary domestic policy issue. This knowledge included the names of key policy participants, such as government ministers and interest groups; the type and level of support and opposition the policy encountered within parliament; the degree of public support for the policy; and the attitudes of the Australian media towards the policy. Lacking this type of knowledge, weaker responses were too general and repetitive, with many students finding it difficult to write more than two pages.

Question 4

Many students had the ability to discuss and evaluate the relative importance of major objectives of contemporary Australian foreign policy. The study design lists these major objectives as

- maintaining national security
- promoting Australia's economic and trade interests
- expanding regional and global links
- promoting Australia as a good global citizen.

The majority of students were familiar with these objectives and confined their discussion to them.

Students who largely agreed with the statement raised relevant evidence, including

- the ANZUS agreement/US alliance, which remains the central plank of Australian foreign policy and is primarily based on the concept of protecting Australia's security from external threats. The expanded presence of US forces in northern Australia, which commenced in early 2012, and the annual AUSMIN meetings conducted between Australia and the US, is clear evidence of this
- Australia's participation in the war in Afghanistan, which is primarily designed to prevent the re-emergence of terrorist threats from Al Qaeda or similar organisations that are regarded as a threat to Australia or Australians
- government policy on asylum seekers, including off-shore processing, mandatory detention and policies aimed to prevent people trafficking, which are all designed to protect the security of Australia's borders
- Australia's cooperation with neighbours such as Indonesia in joint military training, which is designed to build greater understanding and improved relations with these nations and so reduce any potential threat they present to us.

Few students strongly disagreed with the statement, although many argued that the maintenance of national security is simply one of the range of major objectives listed above. Stronger responses argued that the priority given to these objectives may vary with changing circumstances. For instance, following the Bali bombing in 2002, the priority given to national security was higher than it is at present. Similarly, the objective of being a good global citizen via leadership on climate change might have been regarded as more important in 2009 at the time of the UN Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen than it is now. However, Australia displays its commitment to good global citizenship in many other ways, including an expanding foreign aid program and extensive participation peacekeeping forces.

2012 Assessment Report



Many students also highlighted the continuing importance of economic and trade interests in Australian foreign policy. Australia continues to support multilateral trade liberalisation in the World Trade Organisation and seeks to extend its bilateral trade by successfully negotiating Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) with nations such as the United States, Thailand and Singapore, as well as ongoing FTA negotiations with China and South Korea.