

EXAMINERS' REPORTS  
HSPS TRIPOS PART II; 2023-2024



**HUMAN, SOCIAL AND POLITICAL SCIENCE TRIPOS  
POLITICS  
PART II EXAMINERS' REPORTS  
2023-2024**

**REPORT FROM THE SENIOR EXAMINER**

The HSPS examination process and result for 2023-24 turned out well. I am pleased that both external examiners noted the high quality of our students' work, and that the examining process was fair and efficient.

However, there are also clearly some areas in which our procedures need to be streamlined. The most pressing of these involves the manner in which we check for and investigate plagiarism. As both external examiners note, the absence of a clear set of procedures for investigating and penalizing plagiarism – at either the Department or the University level – created an enormous amount of unnecessary stress this year. My own experience as senior examiner supports their conclusion. The Department does not currently devote adequate resources to this area. The Department needs to rethink the way in which it allocates responsibility for checking for and investigating plagiarism, and also must articulate a clear set of procedures, including operational guidelines for assessing appropriate penalties. This last point is related, more broadly, to another issue that both external examiners highlighted (and which, again, my own experience also confirms): the Department's current examination process relies entirely on institutional knowledge which resides within the brains of a very small number of members of staff. This, in combination with the fact that the examination process is extremely centralized, creates a situation in which the process will either rely on one of a small handful of people (who may or may not be appointed senior examiner) to be heavily involved every year, or will become chaotic. If the Department plans to continue to cycle different members of staff into the senior examiner role, then it is imperative that the procedures be clearly established in writing. I would also note that it is likely worth considering ways in which examination procedures could be simplified. As one of the external examiners suggested, it may make sense to reduce the degree to which we use external examiners to adjudicate cases in which students are just below a class border.

I would like to thank the examiners for all their work and for their thorough reports.

Dr Steven Ward

## Gender Breakdown of Results

Across the POL and POL/SOC Part II tracks for HSPS – the two parts of the Tripos for which the POLIS exam board is responsible, and for whom we have the gender identities of students – the achievement of results looks at first sight to be almost equal between male and female students this year. In 2024, 31.9% of our male students and 31.8% of our female students achieved a first class mark – a statistically insignificant gap. The overall number of candidates is 126 female students, 72 male students and 2 non-binary students (for whom the number of too small for statistics without the risk of personal identification).

This headline appearance of equality though covers up an unexplained variation across second- and third-year students. For the previous three years, there was a noticeable difference in which in the second year (Part IIA) male students would have a higher rate of achieving firsts than female students, which would then be cancelled out or reversed in the third year (Part IIB), in which female students did better on average than male students. In 2023, for instance, in the second year 26.1% of male students and 23.8% of female students achieved firsts; while in the third year, 26.0% of male students and 32.5% of female students achieved a first. This was a consistent pattern for three years, which is especially curious given that one year's second year students are (mostly) the next year's third year students.

Furthermore, in previous years, the students who have not received a 2.1 (that is, they received a 2.2, a 3rd or a fail) have been predominantly male. In 2023, 5 of the 6 students who had a 2.2 or lower were male.

Both of these imbalances were reversed in 2024. This year, for Part IIA female students outperformed male students at the first class level by 10.3%, an extremely wide gap; while at Part IIB male students outperformed female students at the first class level by 6.9%, also a very wide gap but in the other direction. Because there were significantly more students in the third than second year, the differences evened out almost completely when taking both second- and third- year students together.

The gender difference at the level of 2.2s or lower was also different from that found in the preceding few years: across both years, 2 male and 7 female students did not reach the 2.1 ('good honours') standard.

The variation from year to year is quite significant but also does not lend itself to an easy explanation, especially when considering the achievement of a 1st class result. The format of exams for Part II students has not changed over this period, and the range of the papers also remains broadly the same. Rather surprisingly, there is only one assessment component in which for each of the last three years male students have outperformed female students: the dissertation – although the difference in average marks this year is small, with just 0.4 average difference in marks.

Rather than look at variation from year to year, it may be more helpful to take a three-year average. If so, the numbers are as follows:

	Part IIA tracks	Part IIB tracks
% Male students with a first	25.0%	33.6%
% Female students with a first	24.5%	32.8%
% Male students with a 2.1 or better	94.2%	96.9%
% Female students with a 2.1 or better	94.7%	99.0%

Across both Parts, there is a male > female gender gap in relation to first class results of 0.6%, and a female > male gender gap in relation to a 'good honours' result of 1.3%.

## **EXTERNAL EXAMINERS' REPORT**

### **Examiner: Professor Teresa M Bejan (University of Oxford)**

#### **Are you satisfied that you received sufficient programme materials (handbooks, regulations, marking and classing criteria) in a timely manner?**

I appreciated the effort to reduce the demand on my time as an external examiner, but given the abbreviated schedule, it would be helpful to circulate the listed programme materials to external examiners in advance with a warning about relevant policies that might come up—for example, I could have familiarized myself with the plagiarism policies and marking criteria/benchmark scripts on the train, which would have saved time on the first day.

#### **Do you have any concerns about the course, including standards and quality?**

I was impressed by the overall quality of exam questions and scripts. (Caveat: Because I focused on the Theory scripts, I did not see all of the revised exam papers in the end, but I did note when the drafts were circulated that some empirical papers had a tendency of asking/answering questions, that is indicating in the question itself a desired answer—I don't know if these were addressed to be more open-ended in revision.)

One serious issue that arose during the adjudication of a plagiarism case: a student claimed that s/he had never been expected to demonstrate or been assessed on proper citation/academic practice in the course of the POLIS degree. If this is true, I'd suggest that is a major lapse that the Department ought to consider.

#### **Are you satisfied that the procedures associated with the assessment are efficient (e.g. timeframes, draft papers, questions, design and conduct of exam, meetings, vivas)?**

The review of draft papers worked well, but there was insufficient time to deal with the number of plagiarism cases we encountered. My understanding is that this was due to an avoidable delay in accessing/evaluating TurnItIn reports, which were in some cases (e.g. Pol19) available in Lent Term. Hopefully with the return to in-person/closed book exams this problem will resolve itself in most cases, if not for research essays, but unfortunately this year it turned into a bit of a disaster, leaving the Chair and externals insufficient time to assess properly (1) the severity of the cases and (2) the appropriate policy response. The ad hoc nature of the response also meant that student privacy was in some cases violated—eg names were not removed from TurnItIn reports circulated to us as externals.

#### **Do you have any comments on marking and classing (e.g. range of marks, action around borderline marks, penalties, moderation, double marking, reconciliation of marks)?**

Much of my contribution was to resolve borderline cases upward by a point, because Cambridge does a good job of resisting grade inflation overall—in general, the reconciliation process appeared to work well. There were, as ever, some markers who engaged in arbitrary harshness and others who were consistently overly-generous, but the external examiner system works well to moderate such cases.

#### **Do you have any comments on the student experience of the course and/or their experience of the assessment process?**

I can't speak directly to the student experience—I imagine that the plagiarism process was quite stressful for the students accused, as well as for the examiners, and that this should be improved to give more time to both parties to respond.

**Do you have any comments on University policies (e.g. the role of the external examiner, policies around plagiarism, script annotation)?**

I found the University plagiarism policies to be very unclear—they seem to permit for the application of ad hoc penalties by Departments (in the form of arbitrary point deductions) in a way that necessarily sweeps severe ethical breaches under the carpet and effectively de-incentivizes proper assessment/investigation to determine whether the violation is a case simply of laziness/poor academic practice or something more systematic and serious. With respect to the long research essays, it seems there is also significant confusion on the part of both students and (anecdotally) supervisors about the expectations for proper citation/academic apparatus. These ought to be made clearer.

**Please describe here any recommendations for improvement.**

1. Robustness: the process worked well overall, but seemed to rely quite heavily on the institutional knowledge and experience of one or two long-serving faculty members—in the absence of those individuals (e.g. due to leave) I expect the progress to run much less smoothly. This should be addressed by better training for new colleagues called upon to oversee the process/the production of clearer written guidelines offering a step-by-step overview of the process.
2. Plagiarism: the Department response to plagiarism needs to be streamlined and codified so that (1) cases are discovered as soon as possible (e.g. by circulating TurnItIn reports immediately to examiners who should then flag cases of concern) and (2) the penalties are defined in advance. E.g. “In cases of poor academic practice (where the plagiarism is minor/represents only a small percentage of the assessed material, and/or a source is cited, but not properly quoted (or vice versa) a point deduction of 2-, 5-, or 10- points will be applied to that question/script/etc based on the examiners’ determination of the severity of the case. If the plagiarism is major (representing a large percentage of the assessed material), and/or reflects efforts to deceive, or is part of a larger pattern, the student will be referred to University discipline. It may also then be able to constitute a plagiarism/academic misconduct panel (perhaps staffed by postdocs) tasked with investigating cases flagged for concern.
3. Good academic practice/research skills training: this should be prioritized both in the first year for incoming students and for finalists undertaking their long essays. My own view is that students ought to offer full citations in their tutorial essays in order to train them properly, but I understand that is not for the Department to impose on Colleges. But in any case, the Department needs to send a clear message to students and supervisors about expectations and penalties for assessed work.

**Please highlight any good practice you encountered.**

Although I have highlighted several areas of concern above, I want to emphasize that, overall, my experience as an external examiner was really pleasant—Steven, Glen, and Rosalie were wonderful and attentive hosts who did their absolute best to make the process clear and straightforward, in general the website/digital supply of scripts worked well, and communication beforehand was really good (if a bit lacking after the event). Tom and I felt

very well taken care of, integrated, and appreciated in the process. My overall impression was that the Cambridge system functions well, with occasional hiccups.

I was also really impressed by the overall quality of student scripts and the academic standards. Clearly, Cambridge POLIS is recruiting excellent students and providing them a foundation to excel. In particular, the two candidate dissertations for the John Dunn prize were stellar and a pleasure to read. Congratulations!

**Have you seen any evidence of grade inflation?**

No, POLIS appears to be resisting it much better than my home Department (Oxford Politics). In some cases, I think Theory examiners can be encouraged to be a bit more generous and explore the higher reaches of the First scale.

Thank you for having me, and I look forward to working with you again.

**Examiner: Professor Tom Long (University of Warwick)**

**Do you have any concerns about the course, including standards and quality?**

In general, I do not have concerns about standards and quality. I discuss some issues related to academic integrity in the following sections, however.

**Are you satisfied that the procedures associated with the assessment are efficient (e.g. timeframes, draft papers, questions, design and conduct of exam, meetings, vivas)?**

In general, I am satisfied with these procedures. I had adequate time to review exam questions early in the academic year. As noted below regarding plagiarism, the transitions around open/closed book exams as a legacy of the pandemic have created a few discrepancies in the conduct of exams. In terms of the broader structure of assessment, the focus of assessment (at least as I observed it) was heavily tilted toward exams. I do realize that students do a great deal of essay writing in their tutorials. That said, I would encourage future consideration about greater inclusion of assessments focused on independent research before the thesis. Some variety in form of assessment would not be remiss.

The conduct of the exam meeting was cordial and efficient, despite some complicated discussions regarding plagiarism and academic integrity.

**Do you have any comments on marking and classing (e.g. range of marks, action around borderline marks, penalties, moderation, double marking, reconciliation of marks)?**

The marks were generally reasonable and consistent. There were a few cases of disagreement where marks tended to the extremes, but these were clearly the exception. I found classing to be reasonable, although I don't think POLIS needs to be quite so worried about having a few more first-class students. The work is generally very strong, yet the tendency seems to be for very few high firsts on individual marks. As a result, students' averages are quite tightly clustered nearly the 2:1/1<sup>st</sup> border zone. In cases where the margin is very close and determined just by a split decision between markers, a procedure for automatically bumping a student into a higher class would seem reasonable. This would also allow the externals to focus more time of the most problematic cases.

**Do you have any comments on the student experience of the course and/or their experience of the assessment process?**

There is not much that I can infer about student experience from my visit, which was largely focused on looking at disagreements over marks, borderline cases, problems, etc. From the work that I observed, students appear to be generally well-prepared for the examination process.

**Do you have any comments on University policies (e.g. the role of the external examiner, policies around plagiarism, script annotation)?**

The main area where I think procedures and policies might be adjusted regards the treatment of plagiarism and academic integrity. It became clear during the examination that the change to open book exams had left something of a policy gap on this matter. It would be ideal to: a) emphasize matters of plagiarism (including self-plagiarism) to students on the coversheet of the exam; b) highlight these matters through tutors and other academic skills training in advance of exams and essays; c) clarify policies and procedures for detecting, evaluating, and addressing cases where violations of academic integrity are suspected; d) clarify the range of penalties as a matter of policy.

**Please describe here any recommendations for improvement.**

It also seemed that Turnitin assessments had not been provided and evaluated in advance even for exams/essays that had taken place well before our visit. It is important that such problems be detected and addressed as close to the examination as possible. For cases of poor practice (instead of cheating) this also allows for a pedagogical response instead of solely a disciplinary one.

Having Turnitin reports available anonymously—and ideally through the software instead of on a PDF—at the start of the visit would be preferable. This would have saved considerable time, as a good portion of our visit ended up focusing on this small number of problem cases. Conducting an evaluation on the Turnitin software instead of a PDF would permit the examiner to locate and compare against sources much more effectively. To the extent possible, screening and evaluation of possible cases of plagiarism should be done in a way to allow for investigation and meetings with students in advance of the examiner visit and meetings.

On a more positive note, regarding the prizes, I would suggest that the examiners be given a few bullet points regarding the criteria for the prize, including specifying any theme or aims of the prize. For example, regarding the thesis prize, there was some discussion of whether one might reward the most polished and near-publishable essay versus one that could be seen as more innovative but perhaps less polished. In general, deciding on the prizes was not a problem this year, although there was a bit of uncertainty at the meeting about which papers should be considered. It would be ideal to clarify precisely the scope of the essays eligible for the prize.

**Please highlight any good practice you encountered.**

The dedication of the staff was excellent, with a great deal of detailed knowledge from Glen and Steven helping guide the process, supported by Rosalie. It was very helpful to have some “benchmarking” scripts; procedures for borderline cases and fails were clearly discussed; the level of organization and detail of the spreadsheets provided was very helpful.

**Have you seen any evidence of grade inflation?**

No.

Thank you again for the invitation.

## **INTERNAL EXAMINERS' REPORTS**

### **POL3: International Organisation**

#### **Examiner: Professor Mette Eilstrup-Sandiovanni**

101 candidates sat this paper, with 34 agreed firsts, 74 marks in the 2i-range, four 2iis and one failing mark. Candidates answered two questions (from a list of 12) with no restrictions on what questions they could choose. There was a good distribution of answers across almost all of the questions offered. As in previous years, questions were broadly thematic, inviting students to draw on knowledge acquired throughout the entire course rather than focus narrowly on specific weekly topics. Answers were of a generally high standard and displayed evidence of wide-ranging reading. The average mark was 66.

In the best essays, students took advantage of an exam-format—3 hours within a 5 hour window--which allowed ample space and time to develop their arguments in detail and with precision. The strongest essays were well written and clearly structured, demonstrated a clear understanding of the issues at stake, and made an independent argument, supported by relevant empirical examples. Top marks were generally not awarded to the longest essays, but rather to essays that were clearly structured and that combined theoretical and empirical material to present a clear, sharp argument. Answers in the lower 2i-range often lacked clear structure and failed to back up arguments with examples. Some answers in the lower half of this category bore evidence of students 'cutting and pasting' from previous or pre-prepared work without sufficient attention to how well that content supported their present argument. Answers in the 3<sup>rd</sup> range typically were awarded to short, incomplete essays where a student had failed to provide a complete answer.

### **POL4: Comparative Politics**

#### **Examiner: Professor Christopher Bickerton**

The POL exam was a five hour exam, typed by students and uploaded onto the university system. This will be replaced by an in person hand written exam but the format adopted during the Covid-19 era remained in place this year.

There were a 124 scripts in total. As in previous years, the exam was divided up into multiple sections. The first section consisted of nine questions covering the topics given in the lectures in Lent term. All remaining sections, consisting of two questions each, covered material relating to the modular part of the course. All students answered one question from the first section and one question from two more sections, three in total. All scripts were double-blind marked.

The distribution of marks was as follows: 31 students obtained a first-class mark; 84 students obtained a 2:1 mark; 6 students obtained a 2:2 mark; 1 student obtained a third; two students failed the exam. The median mark for the paper was 66. There was a fairly even spread of questions attempted. In Section 1, there was none of the tendency – evident in previous years – for students to pick the same question. Questions 3, 4 and 5 proved the most popular in section one (questions on state formation and political regimes). Questions with the highest marks were overwhelmingly those which were clearly argued but also contained an extensive and in-depth treatment of some country-specific cases. The weakest answers were those with cursory summaries of existing literature and no empirical content.

## **POL5 & POL19: Themes and Issues in Politics and International Relations**

### **Examiner: Dr Giovanni Mantilla**

128 candidates took the long essay paper, which is POL5/HP2 for second-year students, and POL19 for third-year students. 422 individual marks were awarded, ranging from 40 to 80, with a mean of 65.8.

If we look at the overall marks for the paper, 6 candidates obtained 2:2s, 88 2:1s, and 34 Firsts.

It is difficult to offer general comments about student performance on the long essays, insofar as there are almost a hundred questions to choose from, with the marking divided up among a number of markers, and only a small number of candidates writing on each question. But here are some of the things the markers found to criticise in the essays they considered, in case it is a useful check-list of things to try to avoid—or, at least, to think about.

Markers highly valued essays that focussed sharply on the question at hand: “This essay provides an engaging, analytically focussed and empirically grounded response” and disliked it when candidates did the converse, i.e. when they evaded engaging the actual prompt: “This essay moves off the question by turning to [another topic] instead.” Importantly, markers noticed when (and counselled against) students narrow the focus of their answer too much: “the focus is fairly narrow and something of a straw man. Paper could be improved by widening the scope.”

In terms of structure, markers looked for clear organisation and a logical, well-written, cogent flow: “A stronger link between the parts would have certainly enhanced the overall essay as well as a more developed conclusion”; “Structurally, the essay reads a little too much as a rollcall of relevant theorists rather than an analysis led by the sequential progression of the argument”; “Despite the merits of parts of the essay, overall it reads very disjointedly and lacks the requisite coherence, cogency, and clarity”; “The various sections are informative but would have benefited from better structuring and clearer direct statements of what their general point is and how they fit together into a larger argument - the author pieces different elements together but the aggregate view should be clearer to the reader throughout”. The best essays were those “developed in a coherent and well structured fashion, with the different parts smoothly connected and building on each other.”

Markers had views regarding a successful introduction: “The essay starts with a thoughtful introduction that offers a deep engagement with the broader theoretical framework informing the essay question. The introduction concludes with a clear outline for the essay.” Conversely, less direct and wordier introductions were negatively remarked upon: “Intro is interesting but the argument is not very clear - the writing should be tailored to illuminate and guide the reader, and there's a lot of flowery text here that distracts from that.”

Candidates are reminded that good introductions always contain an efficient and direct statement of the essay's argument: “Good and interesting intro but very discursive (long) - and what's the argument? The reader should not have to guess”; “Good intro and argumentative direction - however the author's precise, structured argument is not made sufficiently clear, and it should be.”

An explicit roadmap for the essay is also always well appreciated, whether embedded within or immediately following the introduction.

Regarding essay arguments themselves, markers appreciated those that were not only clear and direct, but also “sophisticated” in terms of their engagement with conceptual and empirical debates about the



relevant prompt: “This is an excellent essay that develops a sophisticated thesis with clarity, precision, and real insight. The author combines a high level conceptual analysis with an extensive and critical engagement”; “There is good conceptual analysis to be overall found in the piece, with analytical depth and some critical engagement to support the argument’s overall robustness”; “The essay is consistently analytical, insightful, and makes excellent use of supporting evidence”; “A rigorously argued essay with a clear and persuasive argument; drawing equally on academic texts and policy literature to make its points. Strong grasp of empirical detail and sophisticated analysis, a comprehensive accounting of the issues”.

Markers assessed the degree of analytical engagement in the essays (versus a more descriptive/detached/uncommitted/uncritical, or overtly polemical approach) and valued precise, organized, and fair assessments of existing (contrasting) views in the literature: “Structure could be outlined more clearly and some sections feel more descriptive than analytical”; “The essay offers a great deal of useful historical insight, but at times lacks in analytical depth”; “At times the historical development was a little too broad brush and there was scope for a little more precision”; “More focus on the validity of the argument of the essay rather than the weakness of the opposing perspectives in the literature was needed for a stronger and more convincing answer”; “Bases its argument on readings of about five key texts; accurate and concise, but could use more substantial critical analysis of the texts and presentation of counterarguments”; “A lack of consideration of alternative arguments and the overall polemical tone makes it less convincing”; “Unfortunately, much of the essay does not support its contentions but rather provide an account of the structure of international organisation and the state of IR theories of it without tying it into the question”; ““The essay becomes hard to follow because it’s not driven by its own clear argument but rather by a patchy assessment of other arguments (each of which seems relevant in some way but insufficient by itself.)”

Further, markers also noticed it when essays arguments tracked the established views of one or two specific authors too closely, occluding candidate’s own analytical views and preventing bolder attempts at originality: “There was scope for greater originality and a clearer critical demarcation of the author’s argument vis-à-vis other authors/bodies of scholarship.”

Some thoughts were offered about what might make a good conclusion: “It would be particularly advantageous for the essay to offer a sustained reflection on the implications of the argument”; “Generalising beyond the case would be especially useful in the conclusion.”

Regarding style, markers cautioned against problems such as 1) repetition (“The analysis that is promised sounds interesting but gets a bit bogged down by repetition (‘this essay will...’) rather than actual argumentative development. What follows is a lit review with interesting and relevant elements, albeit one not sufficiently clearly woven together by a precise line of argument”); 2) overstated claims and polemical tones (“The writing is a bit exaggerated, which detracts from the argument’s merits at the outset”; “Polemical tone remains for the first few pages, no trace of a scholarly framing. References to scholars begin to appear later but the narrative is not disciplined in analytical terms - it jumps about without a clear structure and retaining the polemical tone”; 3) unfinished writing (“The essay lacks a strong argument at points and there is some very sloppy writing – incomplete, incoherent, and repeated sentences. Proof reading is essential”; “A minor quibble: copy-edit would be valuable; 4) incohesive writing: “There is a ‘word soup’ quality to the writing and, at best, the paper comes across as a ‘knowledge dump’”; and 5) imprecise writing: (“The writing is a bit woolly in places”).

A few markers noted the lack of smooth, purposeful ending to essays: “The conclusion comes across as quite rushed, which undermines the opportunity to discuss implications of the argument in a sustained and illuminating way.”

When candidates relied on too few sources, this was pointed out by markers: “Draws on relevant sources, but depends on one or two in each section”; “Dependent on a few sources which it follows closely”; “There's a serious paucity of sources.”

The converse (effective use of multiple sources) was applauded: “Considers counter-arguments effectively and a firm grasp of empirical material. Engages a range of sources, into which it provides some insight.”

Finally, there were very general comments regarding footnotes and bibliographies: “Odd presentation of footnotes”; “Messy works cited list”; “The bibliography is absurdly long”.

## **POL6: Statistics and Methods in Politics and International Relations**

### **Examiner: Dr Pieter van Houten**

The assessment for this paper consisted of a coursework element (a report of maximally 5000 words on a data analysis project) and an online exam (to be taken in a five-hour window). Both elements counted for 50% of the overall mark. 19 candidates submitted the coursework assignment and took the exam (11 HSPS Part IIA students, 6 HSPS Part IIB, 2 History & Politics Part 2).

As always, there was some variation in the results:

- For the *overall marks*, the average mark was 65.9 (median mark was 67), with 4 candidates receiving a First class mark, 13 candidates a 2.1 mark, 1 candidate a 2.2 mark, and 1 candidate Third class mark.
- For the *coursework element*, the average mark was 65.0 (median: 67), with 2 candidates receiving a First class mark, 14 candidates a 2.1 mark, 2 candidates a 2.2 mark, and 1 candidate a Third class mark.
- For the *exam*, the average mark was 66.6 (median: 68), with 7 candidates receiving a First class mark (the highest mark was 80), 9 candidates a 2.1 mark, 1 candidate a 2.2 mark, and 1 candidate a Fail mark.

In total, 9 candidates received a First class mark for at least one of their assessments.

For the coursework, candidates had to choose a topic from a provided list. The most popular topics this year were voting behaviour, patterns of corruption, and Sustainable Development Goals.

The patterns in the submitted work were very similar to previous years. There was a lot of good work done in the data analyses and reports. Most reports had a good research question and an analysis to address the question. The best reports were well written, and usually had a well specified focus. presented convincing interpretations of the statistical results. The weaker reports were not always strong on providing the links between theoretical arguments and statistical results, and often lacked a good balance between the different aspects of the project.

Almost all exam scripts provided very competent answers to the questions this (which one or two exceptions, where the scripts showed some fundamental misunderstandings of some of the issues covered in the paper). As in past years, some candidates failed to answer some parts of questions which reduced their marks. The weaker scripts tended to make some mistakes in the interpretations and did not elaborate on some of the answers (for example, several scripts didn't mention or explain the ICC in 1.5, a few missed the interaction effect in 1.7, and several of the answers to 1.10 and 1.11 were not elaborate enough to get high marks). The best answers provided concise but detailed answers, and had good discussions of the broader interpretations of the presented results.

It should be noted that the content of the exam next year will be comparable to this year's, but that it will be conducted as a two-hour, in-person, closed book exam.

## **POL7: History of Political Thought to c. 1700**

### **Examiner: Professor Duncan Kelly**

Thirty-nine candidates sat the paper. This was the first year in which the revised POL7 was offered to students. The median mark was 66 (1 mark higher than the median mark for the final year which sat the previous version of POL7).

The markers noted that the quality of the scripts was generally solid: directly addressed to the question, closely-reasoned, and creditably substantiated. The strongest responses were those which ensured (i) that their claims were grounded in the texts by quotation or specific paraphrase and (ii) that they responded to the question posed, and had thought carefully about its nuances, in lieu of recycling a response on a contiguous but ultimately unrelated issue. Answers which included lengthy summaries of the texts / theories that were disengaged from the specifics of the question tended to receive lower marks. Students were rewarded if they could demonstrate familiarity with scholarship on the author(s) under discussion. Students should not consider a recitation of scholars' views an unnecessary digression. Conveying an accurate account of scholarly arguments is a difficult task and qualifying or critiquing those views incisively was rewarded by the examiners.

The most popular topic this year was Plato (19 responses), followed by More (15 responses), slavery (10 responses), and colonial empire / republicanism and monarchy / Hobbes (8 responses each). Romans and Christians and Obedience and Resistance received no responses; Sovereignty received 1 response.

In Section A, the best Plato responses conveyed evidence of clear familiarity with the text and scholarship on the issue raised by the question; it was not necessary to be familiar with Bernard Williams' well-known criticism of the city-soul analogy, but students who demonstrated an acquaintance with the problem were rewarded. On More, the best responses demonstrated some familiarity with the contending scholarly assessments of More's purposes (Nelson was helpful here) without slipping into a laborious narrative summary of the social and political arrangements in Utopia. As is often the case with Hobbes questions, the best answers were keyed into Hobbes's precise conceptual language, paying close attention to his definitions of 'liberty' and 'authority'. Answers for the Machiavelli question received the lowest average mark in Section A – good answers here showed an understanding of both *The Prince* and *The Discourses*, but several essays focused almost entirely on the former.

In Section B, strong responses on slavery, colonial empire, and republicanism and monarchy succeeded in paying due attention to at least 2 authors, drawing on scholarly commentary to complement their analysis. They were also alive to shifts in the meanings of words and concepts over time. The most effective essays tended to be structured in such a way as to allow for the texts to be analysed side by side, rather than offering discrete paragraphs on each one.

## **POL8/10: The History of Political Thought from 1700-1890**

### **Examiner: Professor Duncan Bell**

Ninety-one candidates sat this paper, working remotely on an open-book basis, in a five-hour window, and with a limit of 4500 words. Seventeen candidates were awarded a mark of 70 or above; sixty-nine candidates received a mark in the 60-69 range; four in the 50-59 range; and one received a mark below 40. The median mark was 67. This was the first exam using the revised syllabus for the paper and the standard of answers was generally high. As ever with this paper, the best candidates based

their answers on close reading of the texts, leavened with judicious use of material from the commentary literature and lectures. To score well, candidates needed to demonstrate a high level of conceptual understanding and to focus on the demands of the question, rather than provide a summary overview of the topic. Weaker answers engaged with the questions to only a limited extent or not at all, or else revealed a limited understanding of the material.

All questions received at least one answer. The question on Hume (3) asked for comment on his views as to the advantages of republics over monarchies. The most effective answer made good use of the essays, and particularly of 'Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth'; the weaker answers engaged to only a limited degree with the relevant primary texts. On Montesquieu (4), some candidates demonstrated a sophisticated understanding of key concepts relevant to the discussion of modern monarchy, but more could have shown an awareness of scholarly controversies over this question and of relevant historical context. Rousseau (35) was, as ever, popular, and the best answers demonstrated a sophisticated understanding of the role of historical conjecture in his works, particularly the *Second Discourse*. Some answers suffered from a lack of a clear focus on the question as posed. Smith (7) attracted some strong responses, and even the weaker answers demonstrated in-depth knowledge of the set text and its key arguments. What distinguished the best answers was a close focus on the concepts of beneficence and justice. Burke (13) was less popular than in years past and the quality of responses to the question on his views on society as a contract was mixed, with weaker answers providing merely descriptive overviews of his thought. The best answers were those that demonstrated closer knowledge of the text and a higher level of conceptual analysis. Consistent with the pattern in recent years, Wollstonecraft (47) received the most answers. The question invited candidates to consider whether she privileged reason over emotion. There were a number of candidates who offered a sophisticated response to the question, often drawing on the works of Tomaselli to do so. Weaker answers failed to adequately examine one or other of the two principal terms in the question, or got lost in extraneous detail. The Kant (4) question was relatively straightforward, requiring discussion of his views on revolution, but it elicited few responses. Discussion of the relationship between Kant's moral and political philosophy was required, as well as comment on the specifics of the argument concerning revolution. Candidates might have made better use of the extensive scholarly commentary on the issue. For Hegel (2), too, a standard question on the relationship between the individual and the community found few takers, and though the candidates demonstrated a basic understanding of the key issues, the level of conceptual analysis could have been higher. The Tocqueville (10) question, now focused on *The Ancien Regime and the Revolution*, was generally answered to a very high standard, with candidates demonstrating a sophisticated understanding of the text and of the nuances of Tocqueville's own presentation of the eponymous 'Tocqueville paradox'. For Mill (25), candidates were asked to think about 'paternalism' in relation to his political thought, and though the results were mixed, there was generally a good understanding of the primary texts on display. Candidates might have benefitted from consulting more of the commentary literature, such as Gregory Claeys' study, *Mill and Paternalism* (2013). For Marx (9), candidates were asked to think about his discussion of 'just distribution' in the *Critique of the Gotha Programme*. Several candidates demonstrated an impressively detailed understanding of the context of the argument, and a few were able to connect it to the critique of bourgeois equality to be found in his earlier works.

Turning to the Section B topics, the more heavily revised section of the paper, there is less scope for comparison with examinations in previous years. The History, Progress and Enlightenment question (8) was answered to a high standard. It was evident that a number of candidates had made careful study of the historiography and were able to make effective use of the conceptual distinctions they had encountered in authors such as Pocock. The Condition of Women (36) was by some distance the most popular of the B topics and the standard of the answers was generally strong, with the median mark falling in the upper reaches of the 2.1 range. The best responses drew effective comparisons

between thinkers and offered deeper analysis of authors' handling of the concept of freedom. The Revolutions (17) topic was likewise answered to a high standard, with the best answers likewise closely engaged with the primary texts and comparative in approach. Weaker answers offered over-generalized descriptions of aspects of revolutionary politics in America, France and Saint-Domingue, without much effort to engage with the specifics of the arguments advanced in the primary texts. The Constitutions (2) question, on the influence of American constitutional ideas in Europe, was not very well answered. Candidates displayed some knowledge of the primary texts, but a weak sense of context and in one case some confusion between American and French constitutional debates. The Culture and Politics in Germany (2) was better answered, with some close discussion of the set texts and a clear focus on the question. Answers on Modern Liberty (9) were weaker, with a surprising number of candidates struggling to make sense of the idea of limitations on popular rule. Some candidates demonstrated a good knowledge of individual thinkers, with Constant being the most consistently well treated. For Political Economy (2), both candidates opted to compare Smith and Malthus. Some useful points of comparison were made. One candidate saw the importance of the Irish question for Malthus; the other sensibly made some use of Hont's works to discuss international competition. Curiously, however, neither essay gave any thought to the issue of the distribution of natural resources or variation in the fertility of the land. The question on Socialism before 1848 (5) required candidates to reflect on the relationship between socialism and republicanism. Most could say something about the differences between the two, though some candidates displayed a patchy understanding of the historical context and of some of the thinkers discussed. Slavery (12) attracted some weak answers that offered descriptive and selective accounts of abolitionist argument, without engaging very closely with the question. The best answers focused closely on the question and used it as a way in to closer analysis of the set texts. On Empire (20), candidates demonstrated engagement with a wider range of texts than in previous years, but the average answer would have benefitted from a more sustained effort to contextualise the debates under discussion.

## **POL9: Conceptual Issues in Politics and International Relations**

### **Examiner: Professor Ayşe Zarakol**

POL 9 is an examination only paper that does not substantive lectures. Students are expected write one long essay that draws from all of their coursework during their time at Cambridge. In recent years POLIS has offered supplementary essay writing help in the form of small student group meetings with lecturers. In the 2023-4 this support entailed 8 hours of essay writing instruction in Lent Term, offered by Profs Bell, Kelly and Zarakol.

69 scripts were co-marked for the POL9 exam by the assessors: Prof Thompson, Green and Zarakol. Prof Zarakol was the examiner. 1 script was due to be marked but was missing. The median mark was 66. The highest mark was 74, and the lowest was 56, but the vast majority of students scored over 60, with 20 scoring over 68.

The most popular question was Question 7: 'How should structural injustice be understood?' (answered by 10 students for an average mark of 64), followed by Question 8: 'Does the future of world politics lie with 'the rest', or 'the West'?' (answered by 8 students for an average mark of 61.5). After that Questions 1, 2 and 10 were equally popular, answered by 7 students each. Question 1: 'Is there a necessary connection between international politics and progress?' had an average mark of 66; Question 2: 'Does truthfulness matter in politics?' had an average mark of 65 and Question 10: 'Has the crisis of democracy been exaggerated?' had an average mark of 67. All questions had at least a few students answering them. The least popular questions were Question 5: 'Is a 'science' of comparative politics possible?' (average mark 70) and Question 12: 'Are we now in an era of deglobalization?' (average mark 63).

We can surmise that the different types of politics (theory, comparative politics, IR etc.) questions attract similar levels of interest from our students, which is not surprising given the variability of research interests among students in the Politics track. It is not possible to say, given the small numbers of students answering each question and the very narrow spread of marks, that picking one type of question over another type leads to better results. Overall, the students seem well-prepared to meet the expectations of the POL9 paper.

## **POL11: Political Philosophy and the History of Political Thought since c.1890**

**Examiner: Professor Duncan Kelly**

This year, 28 students sat this paper from Part IIb HSPS, and 42 took it as a History paper (21 in History, 17 in History and Politics, and 4 in History and Modern Languages). The exam was taken in an online, open-book format. There were some excellent answers this year that received high first-class marks, and a great many very strong answers just below. The overall average was very high.

As in previous years, successful answers provided clear and direct answers to the questions asked rather than rehearsing pre-written essays and trying to finagle new introductions or conclusions into them; they showed good textual knowledge, often challenging the question, and arguing a point that took historical and normative contexts seriously. Indeed, the most successful answers managed to open up, rather than close down, the question, taking the examination as an opportunity to consider the wider conceptual stakes of what was being asked, and showing attention to the nuance behind a seemingly straightforward answer. Weaker scripts often interpreted the question rather simplistically, again, so that that a cut-paste rehearsal of previous supervision/practice essays might be repurposed in an exam setting. It has been widely noted that work which simply re-packages supervision essays to answer differently focused questions is unlikely to be able to do justice to the question.

This year more people in HSPS chose to answer on Rawls than is normal, and while typically high numbers answered on Nietzsche, or on politics/morality, the question with the highest number of answers focused on decolonizing political theory. Several topics (British state theory, welfare/democracy, political obligation, utilitarianism, markets, toleration/multiculturalism) had no takers.

In History, the largest number of answers came on the Nietzsche and Rawls topics. Topics on Hayek, feminism, and concepts of liberty also proved popular. The question on politics and morality garnered several answers, though was less overwhelmingly popular than in recent years. Three questions received no replies: theorists of welfare and democracy; state, sovereignty, and political obligation; and multiculturalism, toleration, and recognition.

To do well on this exam requires close attention to texts, in a manner that goes beyond lecture material, and some awareness of how ideas change in relation to circumstance and over time. The best responses were able to use texts in a nuanced way, consider shifting views across time, and highlighted ambiguities, while also taking a stance on how we understand key arguments as both philosophical projects and political interventions.

## **POL12: The Politics of the Middle East**

**Examiner: Dr Glen Rangwala**

There were 22 exam scripts submitted for this paper. The breakdown of results was 7 scripts with a mark of 70 or higher (including one outstanding script with a mark of 80); 11 scripts with a mark of 60-69; two scripts with a mark in the 55-59 range; one script with a mark in the range 40-49; and one radically incomplete script with a fail mark. The two scripts that did not reach the mark of 55 are exceptional within the recent history of this paper, and both have been the focus of subsequent applications in light of the specific circumstances of those cases.

The wide range of material and argument brought to the essays this year was particularly noticeable. Most clearly, there was a good spread across the different questions, with every question receiving at least two answers. Within the essays there was also the broad use of examples, deflecting the common concern that scholars and students neglect countries in the Middle East that they label peripheral to the region's headline-worthy events. In terms of arguments, again, it was good to see students drawing upon a range of types of literature – from the deeply theoretically to the richly descriptive – in providing their accounts. As always, the best essays had critical engagement with advanced arguments from the academic literature; displayed good, detailed knowledge of the region's politics, from an historical or comparative angle; and/or were able to draw out compelling and non-obvious arguments through the substance of their essays.

Some of the more common problems mentioned in past exam reports – of unfocused narrative accounts, of insufficient attention to the difference between 'how' questions and 'why' questions, of essays sacrificing depth by trying to pack too many examples in – were less evident this year. There wasn't really a common pattern across the weaker essays this year: a few were marred by factual mistakes, some by not moving beyond a literature review, and some by resorting to too high a level of generalisation in making their arguments. Still, a few essays felt 'pre-written', especially those which tried to reinterpret the essay question into a form that better suited their material. It would be fair to assume that in the open-book format this is a result of some students compiling material in advance to populate the final essay. This I think has not been a worthwhile approach to take in this paper, and by the time this paper returns in 2025-26 (after being rested for a year), it should not be possible with the anticipated and welcome return to closed-book exams.

## **POL13: British and European Politics**

**Examiner: Professor Peter Sloman**

POL13 was assessed for the fifth year running through an online open-book exam, with a five-hour window in which students were required to answer three questions. 38 students took the exam: 24 from HSPS and 14 from History and Politics. 22 students answered three questions on British Politics, 5 students answered three questions on the European Union, and 11 combined questions from both modules. The uptick in students' interest in the EU this year was encouraging, and so too was the overall performance: 10 scripts received agreed marks of 70 or more, and no scripts fell below 60.

The most popular questions this year were on New Labour (19 answers), Thatcherism (16), UK immigration policy (14), and 'crises' in the European Union (11 answers). The clustering of answers was slightly stronger than usual, especially on the EU side, and several questions attracted no takers or only one taker.

On the whole, the amount of literature and empirical detail which the strongest candidates deployed was extremely impressive. There were some distinctly creative and well-argued answers on a number

of questions – e.g. on New Labour, UK immigration policy, ‘democratic backsliding’ in the EU, and British politics since 2010. However, in other cases insightful essays were held back by either poor quality writing or a failure to engage directly with some aspects of the question. Weaker answers relied more heavily on supervision material (or, in some cases, online newspaper reports) or lacked the depth of knowledge to sustain an effective answer. It is difficult to give a high mark to an answer which is basically descriptive or which does not really answer the question.

## **POL14: International Security**

### **Examiner: Dr Steven Ward**

37 students attempted the POL 14 exam in 2023-24. Of these, there were 17 scripts that scored 70 or higher; 19 scripts that scored between 60 and 69; 1 script that scored below 60; and 0 scripts that scored below 50. The highest overall score was 81; the lowest overall score was 59; the median score was 68; the standard deviation was 6.11. In general, the markers were quite impressed with the quality of the exam scripts.

The exam’s format asked student to choose three questions, including at least one from each of two sections. These were designed to provide comprehensive coverage of all the material covered in the paper. Each section included six questions.

Essays that scored exceptionally well shared some common characteristics. They 1) offered a clear answer to the question; 2) demonstrated mastery of relevant material from the paper (both readings and lectures); 3) clearly defined all terms and concepts; 4) exhibited a significant degree of originality, in the sense that the argument developed went well beyond simply summarizing readings or lectures; 5) were well-structured, well-organized, and clearly-written.

Essays that scored poorly also shared some common characteristics. They often 1) failed to answer the question asked, or offered an answer to a question that had not been asked; 2) failed to demonstrate mastery of relevant material from the paper, due to a combination of sins of omission (ignoring obviously relevant material) or commission (interpreting or summarizing material from the paper incorrectly or ineffectively); 3) failed to define key terms and concepts; 4) failed to demonstrate originality, by declining to go beyond summarizing material from readings and lectures; 5) were poorly organized, poorly structured, poorly written, and generally difficult to follow.

A final note is in order on the relationship between supervisions and exams. Students sometimes express anxiety about whether the questions on the exam would match questions on which they had prepared supervision essays. The implication is that some students expect to use supervision essays as, essentially, templates for or drafts of exam essays. This view is misguided and is an obstacle to success on the exam. The objective of the exam is to incentivize students to master material across the *entire paper*, in a way that allows them to synthesize ideas from different parts of the class. To that end, the construction of exam questions is aimed at 1) offering students the opportunity to demonstrate that ability; and 2) rewarding students who read and learn broadly across the paper guide, rather than restricting themselves to preparing to answer only specific questions related to a small handful of topics. The latter approach was sometimes reflected in unsuccessful answers that appeared to rely heavily on recycled material from supervision essays. This is an understandably tempting practice given recent changes in the administration of exams, but it results in essays that are disjointed, poorly directed, and that do not provide full, coherent answers to questions posed in the prompt. It is, in short, not an effective path to a first-class exam script.



## **POL15: The Politics of Africa**

### **Examiner: Professor Adam Branch**

Sixteen scripts were received from students taking POL15 exam this year. Students selected three questions to respond to from a list of sixteen questions (six of which were in pairs from which students could pick only one). The questions were designed to be nuanced and specific enough to encourage students to address the question posed rather than drawing on pre-prepared content. The majority of the scripts

received marks distributed across the 60-69 range (12). Three students achieved marks in the 70-79 range, while the highest mark received was a 75. One student received a mark of 55. The average mark was 67.0 and the standard deviation 5.6. Students had a five-hour window to respond to their chosen three questions and a word limit of not more than 4500 words.

Students who did especially well offered clear argument(s) in their answers rather than summaries of course readings evidencing and anchoring these arguments with at least one example. The most popular question was from the digital politics module, which nine students answered; six answered the first question on colonialism and African history. The highest average mark for a question was 73, achieved on both the question on African political thought and the question on African environmental politics, although only three students answered each. Every question had at least one student answering it, although three of the questions had only one attempt.

The exams in the upper (70+) range demonstrated a strong authorial voice, made clear the scope of their arguments, and engaged with diverse readings in a consistent and compelling manner, clearly distinguishing their own theoretical and empirical points. The best answers demonstrated an agility with conceptual or theoretical arguments by grounding them in their knowledge of empirical case studies. The strongest answers drew from across the paper and developed a distinctive perspective on key debates to draw out their relevance in specific contexts. Some of the weaker answers either did not directly address the terms of the question, used evidence more superficially, for instance with a passing reference to a country, or made relatively unnuanced conceptual arguments without developing them.

Overall, the POL15 Examiners were very pleased with the students' results and the way they engaged with the questions in insightful and convincing ways. In general, there was an impressive breadth of knowledge and agility with the key debates, theoretical and conceptual material from the course that students harnessed to engage with the questions of African politics that most concern them.

## **POL16: Politics of Global China**

### **Examiner: Dr Christian Sorace**

The 2023-2024 exam for POL 16 was sat by 19 students. Students chose three questions to answer out of a total of 13 question choices (corresponding roughly to each lecture topic over Michaelmas/Lent terms) with a word limit of 4,500 in a 5-hour window. We were impressed with how students both critically engaged the literature and formulated their own ideas.

Five students received marks in in the 70-80 range with one 80. The majority of the scripts received marks across the 60-69 range (14). No students performed below a mark of 60. The median mark was 67.0 with a standard deviation of 4.88.

The most popular questions were: Q2 (Does the Chinese Communist Party's political legitimacy depend on economic growth?); Q5 (Does "ecological civilization" provide an alternative to industrial

civilization); Q7 (What explains China's dynamic Zero Covid policy and its abrupt end?); and Q11 (What is the purpose of China's Belt and Road Initiative?). The marks had a wide distribution range. The range for Q2 was 62-78 (with clusters at both ends); Q5 (60-81); Q7 (63-80); and Q11 (60-77). There were several questions with only 1-2 student responses: Q1 (Has China repudiated the Mao era?); Q3 (Are Xi Jinping's ethnic policies examples of the "second generation ethnic policy?); Q4 (What role does China's urban/rural divide play in the global division of labour?); Q6 (How much control does Beijing exert over local state actors); Q9 (Are China's politics exceptional from the rest of the world?); and Q13 (To what extent do explanations of China's politics rely on Cold War assumptions?). In the middle range, Q 8 (To what extent is China seeking to change the world order?), Q10 (How does China's definition of "territorial sovereignty" shape its relationship with its neighbors), and Q12 (Does Taiwan have any control over its future?) had 4-5 student responses each.

Essays that scored exceptionally well were able to make bold conceptual arguments that were solidly supported with empirical examples. They could integrate and address different perspectives in their own framework. A few of the weaker scripts tended to be unsure of what they wanted to argue and/or rely on unexamined assumptions and talking points that were problematised in lectures and supervisions. Overall, we were quite pleased with the quality of writing and careful reflections given to the questions.

## **POL17: Politics and Gender**

### **Examiner: Dr Holly Porter**

Thirty-two scripts were received from students taking POL17 exam this year. Ten of these were from History and Politics and the rest were HSPS. Students selected three questions to respond to from a list of fifteen possible questions. The questions were designed to be nuanced and specific enough to encourage students to address the questions posed rather than drawing on pre-prepared content. The questions addressed specific themes from the course but did so in a way that encouraged students to draw together ideas or theoretical frames from that were cross-cutting. The majority of the scripts received marks distributed across the 60-69 range (21) and the rest were in the 70-79 range (11). The highest mark received was 76, though there were several of these. No students performed below a mark of 60. The median mark was 68.5 with a standard deviation of 5.19852. Students had a five-hour window to respond to their chosen three questions and a word limit of not more than 4500 words.

Students who did especially well offered clear argument(s) in their answers rather than summaries of course readings evidencing and anchoring these arguments with at least one example. The most popular question was: 'Should demands for gender and/or sexual justice be addressed via the state?' with 17 attempts, followed by: 'To what extent must our analysis of the politics of gender and/or sexuality begin with an analysis of the politics of the body?' with 14; two others both had twelve attempts: 'To what extent is gender a useful category of analysis in understanding political violence?' And , 'To what extent is strategic essentialism necessary to protect women and girls in the midst of war?' All of the questions had at least one attempt though two had only one: 'How does centring the experience of sexual and/or gender minorities change our understanding of the politics of climate change?'; and 'Can we have both gender difference and equality, and if so, how might this be achieved? If not, why not?' The strongest answers drew from across the paper and developed a distinctive perspective and authorial voice demonstrating an agility with conceptual or theoretical ideas and grounding them in particular examples. Some of the weaker answers either did not directly address the terms of the question, used evidence in fairly superficial ways, sacrificed depth for breadth, or made unnuanced arguments without developing them sufficiently.

Overall, the POL17 examiners were very pleased with students results and the way that they engaged with the questions in thoughtful ways applying different theoretical frames from the course to think

through the questions. Overall, they demonstrated a good breadth of knowledge and agility with relevant theoretical and conceptual frames on gender and politics.

## **POL18: The Politics of International Economy**

### **Examiner: Professor Helen Thompson**

Twenty-four candidates took the examination. There were four firsts, eighteen upper seconds, and two lower seconds. The highest mark was 73.

The answers generally were of a higher standard than last year, and candidates collectively attempted a larger number of the questions. Of the most popular questions, the best answers were on the either-or-paired questions about the 1970s crises. Here, candidates used the historical detail most effectively in delivering an analytically sharp argument. There were also some very good answers on the origins of the industrial world economy that showed deep reading. At the weaker end of the scripts, there were issues with writing and structure.

At times, candidates showed some reluctance to engage directly and systematically with the precise question asked rather than rehearsing more general arguments around the topic. This was a particular issue with the question on the 2008 financial crisis. Some essays appeared pre-prepared and then edited around the question. Too few candidates on the question on American financial power engaged with the comparison in the question with other forms of power. Some candidates answered the question on resource competition without setting up with any specificity the comparison with the geopolitical dynamics generated by fossil-fuel energy.

What was generally lacking in all but the very best individual answers was clear evidence that candidates were thinking for themselves about the question and the particular analytical demands of answering it. With questions about causality, there is scope for more reflection on the distinction between necessary and sufficient conditions. Such reflections would encourage candidates to press arguments harder and engage more systematically with counter-arguments. There were some otherwise good and very good essays that were let down by weak conclusions that did not move beyond a quick summary of the prior argument.

## **POL20: The Politics of Latin America**

### **Examiner: Dr Pedro Mendes Loureiro**

The 2023-24 POL20 exam comprised 15 questions divided into two sections. Section A consisted of six questions addressing cross-cutting themes that straddled different aspects of the paper, aiming at a broader understanding of Latin American politics. Section B in turn consisted of the remaining nine questions, focussing on more specific topics (e.g. political economy, international relations, everyday politics). Students had to answer three questions, at least one in each section.

14 students took the exam in 2023-24, the first time the paper was offered. Overall results were outstanding: there was one Starred First (equal to or above 75), five Firsts, four high II:1s, and four low II:1s. Half of the students chose to answer two questions from Section A and half chose two from Section B. The distribution of marks was similar across the two, if somewhat higher for the former: Section A had a mean mark of 68.6 (standard deviation 3.6) and Section B of 67.1 (standard deviation 5.4). For the final average, the mean mark was 68.2 (standard deviation 4.0) and the standard deviation of marks for individual answers was 5.4. The lowest overall mark was 63 and the highest 76; for individual answers, the lowest mark was 54 and the highest 80. The number of students

following different Triposes is too small to produce meaningful statistics, but there is no evidence of significant differences between them.

The examiners were impressed by the breadth, rigour and independence of thought displayed in the answers. As a rule, it was clear that students had acquired a high level of understanding about Latin American politics, with theoretical sophistication and empirical nuance. It is worth emphasising that results were stronger for Section A than for Section B and that, in general, the political economy answers were very strong and received corresponding marks. This was reassuring for examiners, as students had indicated a certain apprehension about approaching Section A and about political economy questions, which, as indicated above, did not materialise into a suboptimal performance.

The strongest answers displayed most of the following characteristics. They were capable of situating their specific arguments in relation to a broader context (whether national, regional or global); were well structured and presented clear causal mechanisms; successfully rebutted counterarguments; paid due attention to empirical nuance, which involved maintaining a consistent line of argumentation without trying to shoehorn an explanation into an unwieldy reality; and approached the questions with independence of thought, highlighting the student's take on the literature. Conversely, scripts at the lower end tended to display some of the following characteristics: incorrect, unclear, or inconsistent use of concepts; getting lost in describing empirical detail, without an overarching argument; poor structure, especially when attempting to cover too much ground and without a clear flow between elements of an argument; forcing a one-sided interpretation of Latin American politics, without either successfully rebutting counterarguments or acknowledging contradictory forces at play. Nevertheless, most answers managed to display few of these negative qualities, reflecting the overall high marks. In sum, scripts this year are indicative of a highly successful learning process throughout the year.

## **POL21: The Politics of the Future**

### **Examiner: Professor Duncan Bell**

There were 17 candidates for Pol 21. As usual, assessment was via two Long Essays, one submitted in Lent, the other in Easter. The average mark for the course was 70, with the highest scoring candidate achieving 77, the lowest, 64. As with previous years, the overall standard of the scripts was pleasingly high – the best of them were very impressive pieces of work.

Candidates chose a wide range of essays. For Essay 1, the essays on H. G. Wells and on socialism were popular. For Essay 2, the questions on cyborg feminism, on Hannah Arendt and the space race, and on Afrofuturism were the most popular. The strongest answers were those that pushed beyond the material covered in the lectures and seminars, and that aimed to engage in some depth with texts or theoretical debates (rather than offering general surveys of the topic).

## **POL22: Politics and Public Policy**

### **Examiner: Dr Margarita Gelepithis**

Number of scripts: 33. The overall quality of answers was very good. The median mark was 68, with a standard deviation of 4.2. The lowest agreed mark for a script was 63. The highest agreed mark for a script was 75.

1. To what extent can median voter interests explain changes in public policy over time?  
This question produced the lowest average mark (67) compared to other questions on the paper. Most answers successfully maintained a focus on interests rather than preferences. A small number of weaker answers demonstrated superficial or inaccurate understanding of the median

voter concept. The strongest answers drew on up-to-date empirical examples to evaluate the explanatory power of median voter interests.

2. 'The flaw in the pluralist heaven is that the heavenly chorus sings with a strong upper-class accent'. (E. Schattschneider, 1960). How insightful is this as a critique of public policymaking today?  
Strong answers demonstrated a clear understanding of the pluralist ideal, and critically assessed a range of evidence for the systematic overrepresentation of elite interests in public policymaking. Weaker answers tended to focus descriptively on the arguments of Culpepper/Lohmann/Elässer. A small number of weaker answers demonstrated lack of clarity as to the identity of the elites in question, and the mechanisms through which elites exert policy influence.
3. How do causal beliefs shape public policy?  
This question produced the highest average mark (70.5) compared to other questions on the paper. Weaker answers to this question tended to focus heavily and descriptively on Hall. A small number of answers seemed at times to mistakenly conflate causal with normative beliefs. Stronger answers demonstrated understanding of a broad range of relevant theoretical arguments, and an ability to assess and synthesise these arguments critically.
4. What is 'the social construction of target populations' and how is it relevant for policymakers?  
Stronger answers to this question focused specifically on normative arguments involving the social construction of target populations. Some emphasised ideas as constraints on policymakers, while others emphasised ideas as sources of change. Weaker answers lacked a tight focus on the social construction of target populations, describing instead a range of different normative arguments that have been deployed by political elites and the media.
5. Is public policy more democratically responsive in majoritarian than in consensus systems?  
The strongest answers clearly set out what was meant by 'democratically responsive' public policy, showing awareness of alternative views of democratic responsiveness. Weaker answers tended to discuss the policy patterns identified by Finnegan/Lijphart as if their implications for democratic responsiveness were self-explanatory.
6. If public policy is path-dependent, how does transformative change occur?  
Strong answers drew on relevant institutionalist literature, demonstrating understanding of mechanisms of path dependence and path departure. Some particularly strong answers showed understanding of how path dependence can be strategically harnessed to produce transformative change over time. Weaker answers often demonstrated clear understanding of Hall's account of third-order change, but they tended to stop short of providing their own distinctive arguments. A small number of weaker answers uncritically dismissed the transformative potential of incremental, path dependent change.
7. Why do some policy problems persist even where solutions exist?  
This was the most frequently answered question. Most answers drew on the 'wicked problems' literature to answer this question. The strongest answers were those that went further, synthesising insights from the wicked problems literature with theoretical claims from Michaelmas term. Weaker answers engaged only minimally with why policy problems persist where solutions exist, providing a more 'off-the-shelf' discussion of the intractability of wicked problems. Stronger answers explicitly engaged with the politically contested nature of policy solutions.
8. If public policy is political, can it also be evidence-based?

This was the least frequently answered question. It produced some insightful answers demonstrating understanding of the political construction of both policy narratives and their supporting evidence. Weaker answers were premised on a stark dichotomy between evidence and politics, reflecting minimal engagement with relevant ideational arguments.