Politics and International Relations, 2020-21

POL9: Conceptual Issues and Texts in Politics and International Relations

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Aims and Objectives

The paper gives students an opportunity under examination conditions to show what they have learned about politics over three years of study, and to write an extended piece of work. It tests students' accumulated political understanding in answer to a general question.

Paper Content

This is solely an examination paper. It is intended for those who have taken Politics and International Relations in Part IIA, and so by the time of the exam will have studied politics for at least two years, and in most cases for three. Candidates are required to answer one from a choice of ten general questions. POL9 gives candidates the opportunity to think about different kinds of general questions in politics and to use the knowledge and understanding they have acquired to reflect on these and develop arguments of their own at length. The paper is set to avoid advantaging or disadvantaging any particular choice of papers elsewhere in Part II. Some questions can be answered from a knowledge of political thought, some from a knowledge of practical or empirical politics. Most questions encourage candidates to connect critical reflection on political concepts with the analysis of features of modern politics.

The main teaching though is a series of **classes in Lent term**. Students will be assigned to a group for four fortnightly classes in that term, and will be notified of their group by e-mail just before the start of Lent. The classes are to discuss how to approach the paper and will take examples from previous examination papers (below). These classes should be sufficient to prepare for this paper, but you are also advised to develop your reading for this paper based on what you have studied so far, to draw out broader questions and themes that respond to your interests. Your Director of Studies has been encouraged to organise **two supervisions** for you after these classes are complete. The course organiser can be consulted in the event of any specific concerns.

Mode of Assessment

One three-hour examination paper, which is undivided. Candidates are asked to answer one question from a choice of ten.

Summary of advice on this paper from past examiners' reports

General

1. This paper is challenging, and the way to perform highly on it is to be prepared to think broadly about politics and its different features, in order to develop an independent and critical answer to the question or passage selected. Essays should draw on all the understanding and knowledge developed in the previous years of your study, and substantiate their arguments through the use of examples and by supporting the claims they make with evidence. The best answers are those which understand the complexity and ambiguity of real world politics; which, in setting out their own argument, take account of the strongest arguments against it; and which succeed in combining broad conceptual analysis with careful political explanation.

2. The opportunity to think and plan your answer for an hour should be used to the full. A coherent, sustained, and well-structured argument (or set of arguments) that is focused on the question or the passage is necessary for the essay. This can only be assured if you have a clear plan before you start writing.

3. This paper invites you to draw upon material you have studied for other papers. The questions though usually general in nature, and need, at least partly, to be addressed as such. For this reason, answers for this paper cannot be simply supervision essays or exam answers for other papers; they have to remain engaged with the question if they are to stay relevant. There is a formal restriction on overlap between different assessed pieces of work (exams, long essays and dissertations), in that you should not be submitting identical or near- identical passages of text for assessment of one or more paragraphs of length. It is *not* a prohibition on discussing the same theories, concepts, countries, historical episodes or authors across more than one examination. As long as you are addressing the question, the account you give will necessarily differ between examinations, and so problems of overlap should not arise.

4. It is not enough to set out what different theorists might think about a question, without engaging as to whether or not these theorists' claims are persuasive or not. The purpose of the paper is to test your ability to engage in political argument, not your accuracy in undertaking political exposition. If you want to make a point by saying that a particular theorist is right about something, then you need to explain why you think that theorist is right and deal with the strongest counter-argument that can be made against that position. Similarly, you should deploy examples to make an argument, rather than as a decorative illustration of a supposedly self-evident

abstract truth. Almost all examples from real-world politics will expose some political complexity and accordingly need to be unpacked. Using the same example both to make an argument and to deal with the counter-argument can be an effective method of both capturing that complexity and presenting a persuasive line of reasoning.

5. Avoid generalisation without evidence. It is surprisingly easy to make claims that have no empirical basis. Always seek to provide evidence for your claims.

6. In preparing for this paper you should spend some time thinking about some of the basic categories and distinctions of politics that have animated your studies hitherto. These may include time and space, power and virtue, conflict and co-operation, reason and desire, hope and fear, judgement and will, good and evil, chance and fate, the state and the international.

7. Because the paper asks you to make a detailed argument, it is very important to write at sufficient length. It is difficult to receive a mark higher than a 2.2 if your answer is shorter than eight sides of average-sized handwriting.

Questions

1. The best answers sustain an argument or set of arguments, which display conceptual sophistication, deploy interesting and pointed examples, and arrive at a satisfying and persuasive conclusion.

2. Common failings include writing at too high a level of generality, falling back on polemic and assertion, failing to engage with the terms of the question, displaying only shallow knowledge of the empirical material that is being drawn upon for examples, and using exposition of what different theorists would have thought about the questions asked rather than developing your own argument.

Previous exam papers

In and before 2016, the exam paper contained eight questions. From 2016-17, the paper contains ten questions. The expansion was a response to the broader scope of taught papers now within POLIS. The best indicator of the structure and scope of the 2020 exam is the 2017, 2018 and 2019 exam papers, although the earlier papers contained below will also be useful to consult for examples of texts and questions. It is important to note a major difference between the assessment for this year and the proposed assessment for the past year – there will be *no gobbets* this year due to assessment alterations made in response to COVID-19.

The general instruction is that candidates must answer one question. Candidates are advised to use one or more examples in answering the questions.

The 2019 exam paper

1. Is violence a legitimate tool of political protest?

2. Is there a place for truth in politics?

3. Are great powers a force for good in international politics?

4. Is the personal always political?

5. Do opinion polls help us know what 'the people' think?

The 2018 exam paper

1. Why have democratic politicians found it so difficult to reduce economic inequalities?

2. To what extent is a modern state's foreign policy a reflection of its domestic politics?

3. Is political obligation an obligation of prudence?

4. Can the category of national culture ever be useful when explaining how forms of government work, or fail to do so?

5. Should aspirations for a peaceful world order governed by global institutions now be laid to rest?

The 2017 exam paper

1. Can we engage meaningfully with the world through the expression of political solidarities?

2. Are illiberal democracies sustainable?

3. What if anything in politics can be explained primarily through the reference to socio-economic class?

4. Do any foundational political concepts require rethinking in light of the digital revolution?

5. Does modern politics leave any space for the imagination?

The 2016 exam paper

1. Is progress inevitable?

2. Is sovereignty a necessary conditions of modern politics?

3. Is the age of party democracy over?

4. Whose interests does democracy serve?

The 2015 exam paper

1. In politics is everything contingent?

2. Are modern democracy and modern technology compatible?

3. Is politics personal?

4. Do organised interests corrupt politics?

The 2014 exam paper

1. Is technocracy compatible with democracy?

2. What makes a good politician?

3. Can there be a global politics?

4. Why vote?

The 2013 exam paper

1. Does democracy require partisanship?

2. Is the West in political decline?

3. To what extent do the rights of citizens still depend on the nation state?

4. What makes peace secure?

The 2012 exam paper

1. Are the most successful societies the most equal societies?

2. Is it dangerous to have convictions in politics?

3. Does power ultimately rest on opinion?

4. Do politicians ever learn from the past?

The 2011 exam paper

1.   What do politicians know?

2. Does power necessarily destroy itself?

3. Are there economic limits to the possibilities of modern politics?

4. Can politicians be honest?

The 2010 exam paper

1. How should the success of political leadership be judged?

2. Can war lay the foundations of peace?

3. Are politics and virtue reconcilable?

4. Do complex constitutions undermine political stability?

The 2009 exam paper

1. Is violence always the result of political failure?

2. Are there plausible political alternatives to democracy?

3. Is it ever possible to escape the politics of fear?

4. How utopian is the idea of global justice?

The 2008 exam paper

1. Is everything in politics mortal?

2. What purposes does honour serve in politics?

3. Could we live without the state?

4. What wins elections?

The 2007 exam paper

1. 'All government is oligarchy. Different oligarchies tell different stories.'

2. Are constitutions necessary?

3. Is there a place in politics for hope?

4.   Why are there more nations than states?

The 2006 exam paper

1.   What is it effectively to lead a democracy?

2.   Is there virtue in empire?

3.   Does context explain all in politics?

4.   Can the political ever be moral?

The 2005 exam paper

1.   Does politics always end in failure?

2.   Do political parties have a future?

3.   Is democracy ever not the best form of rule?

4.   Who is political theory for?

The 2004 exam paper

1.   Must political explanation take account of the past?

2.   Can politicians know what they are doing?

3.   Is there political virtue?

4.   Does power corrupt?

The 2003 exam paper

1.   Is political explanation necessarily comparative?

2.   Must politics be just?

3.   Must a successful politics rest on fictions?

4.   'States are too large to address the small problems and too small to address the large ones.'

The 2002 exam paper

1.   Are there general political truths?

2.   Are states in the modern world to be identified with their governments or their peoples?

3.   Can politics ever escape from the past?

4.   If politics is 'the art of the possible', can one know in advance what is possible?

The 2001 exam paper

1.   Are states legal fictions?

2.   Can political leaders transcend the context in which they lead?

3.   Is political thought unavoidably historical?

4.   What in politics remains inexplicable?

Examiners' reports

These are reports for seven recent examinations, chosen because they make different and complementary points. It is strongly recommended that students consult these.

2017

There were 103 candidates for the paper this year. 16 candidates were awarded a first class mark, 55 candidates an upper second, 29 a lower second, and 3 a third. The average mark was 62. There were more answers on the passages than the general questions.

In general, the scripts this year were disappointing with the caveat that there were significantly fewer short answers than in recent years. In the case of the passages, a significant number of students appeared to misread at least one of the claims in the text, attribute arguments to the authors that were not actually there, or were confused about the meaning of individual words. Others showed a good understanding of a passage in the preliminary part of the essay and then developed

an argument at a tangent to the relevant claims. Most candidates who tackled the passage on the explanatory value of theory in empirical analysis treated the passage as a set of arguments about normative political theory.

In the case of the general questions, a significant number of candidates struggled with the terms of the questions, in particular with 'foundational political concepts' and 'engage meaningfully with the world'. Others spent too much time setting up the question before embarking upon an argument directed at answering question. Candidates should indeed engage with the terms of the questions but this task can be done considerably more economically than some candidates have come to do so.

For the most part there was considerable uniformity in the material used in developing arguments. In particular, a large number of candidates used examples about conflict in post-colonial countries, especially African ones. Some candidates deployed this material effectively. But others chose to use it in ways that were not well-suited to the passage or question answered.

Across the board there was much less intellectual variety in the answers than there has often been. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this issue was least pervasive on the question about imagination. For the most part seemed determined to use pre-prepared arguments without much thought as to how those arguments pertained to the text or question. There was also a striking unwillingness to subject some ideological arguments to sceptical reflection. Some candidates seemed to assume that the arguments they endorse are self-evidently true and that those they oppose are *a priori* incoherent.

Many candidates also struggled to use examples effectively. Most examples were deployed quickly without depth or nuance. Only a few candidates were willing to engage with an example in both making an argument and dealing with counter-arguments to that position.

Overall, there were enough good answers to suggest that candidates can perform well on this paper, but there may be some need for reflection on why a not insignificant number of students either struggle or perform significantly less well than on other papers. The fact that there has been progress on issues like length suggests that the classes are performing their role of establishing the expectations for the paper. What is less clear, however, is how well POL9 is working in conjunction with other papers, particularly given the rather narrow range of material candidates used this year.

2015

56 candidates took the paper in 2015. There were 8 agreed firsts and 2 more candidates where a candidate received one first class mark. There were also 8 agreed lower seconds and 2 more candidates received one lower second mark. This year there were no third class scripts.

The scripts in aggregate showed a significant improvement on 2014. There were proportionately fewer short answers although a number of the lower seconds were still awarded to candidates who wrote less than five pages. Within the upper second range, proportionately more candidates received a mark of 65 or above.

This year far more candidates answered a text question than in 2014. Generally, the text questions were also answered better at least at the top end. All the agreed firsts came on a passage question. Candidates seemed to focus their answers more clearly and precisely on passages than on the general questions. In part this disparity arose because many candidates did not answer the general questions very directly. For example, only one candidate on the question about contingency really got to grips with the contingency versus necessity antithesis on which the notion of contingency relies. No candidate made a clear distinction between that which could or could not be otherwise by virtue of political agency and that which could have been otherwise by virtue of chance in the material world. Similarly, most answers on the compatibility of modern democracy and modern technology paid rather little attention to modern technology itself. Here nobody got much beyond the internet, and several candidates tried to answer the question as if technology were itself the fundamental issue in democracy's ability to adapt to crisis.

Certainly the best answers, especially on the passages, showed a considerable analytical flair and engaged directly and intelligently with specific material. Otherwise promising answers of both kinds, however, were rather let down by an apparent unwillingness to make arguments through a command of detail about something of substance. Many examples were under-developed, and too many candidates still fell back at least in part of their essays on rehashing various political theorists' approaches to the issue at hand. Candidates need to think harder about the way they make arguments so that their essays both use evidence through cases more effectively and have a sharper analytical structure. On this paper this requires candidates to reflect more on the pertinence of the material they bring to bear on either the propositions on the passage or the analytical terms of the general questions.

2014

80 students took the exam this year. The division between texts and questions was more unbalanced than in previous years, with 64 opting for questions and 16 for the texts. The most popular questions were no. 6 and no. 7 (on what makes a good politician and whether there can be a global politics). The question that produced the highest average mark was no. 5 on democracy and technocracy. The question that produced the lowest average mark, by some distance, was no. 8: 'Why vote?' Too many answers to this question showed no knowledge of any relevant literature and seemed to be based solely on its topicality, leading to thin and insubstantial answers. I'll return to this below.

The overall spread of marks showed that this paper continues to stretch students at both ends of the scale. There were not any of the truly outstanding scripts that we have sometimes seen in previous years but there were still a good number of very strong scripts and fourteen agreed firsts were awarded. However, there were also a significant number of scripts that received agreed 2.2 marks or 3rds. The weaker scripts almost all tended to fall down on two fronts:

(i)   **Length**: too many answers were too short, often only 6-8 sides of handwritten text and sometimes as few as 4. This is insufficient for a three hour exam that is designed to give students the opportunity to show the range and depth of their knowledge after three years of studying politics. We expect answers to contain detailed analysis and to back up the case being made with substantive discussions of relevant examples. Too many answers lacked this detail and consisted simply of generalisations coupled with very brief or sketchy examples.

(ii)   **Choice of question**: too many students chose questions that they were not equipped to answer. This was especially true of q. 8 ('Why vote?'). Questions should be chosen that allow the student to develop an argument in some detail that relates to an area in which they have particular knowledge and interest. General questions are not intended to produce only general answers or answers based on a recapitulation of material covered in the first year course. For that reason, some students this year might have been better choosing a passage to write about, since the passages require a greater attention to detail and the development of a range of different points. Students should avoid questions that appeal simply because they seem topical or relevant to current events (many of the answers to q. 8 were focussed on UKIP's electoral success the previous week). Topicality can be an asset in a well-grounded essay but topicality on its own is no substitute for broad knowledge and detailed analysis.

Overall, students taking this paper need to make sure that they select a question that gives them the best opportunity to show the range of their knowledge and understanding acquired over three years, and particularly during the two years of their degree when they have been specialising in politics. They should be prepared to write at some length and to develop their arguments in detail. This means choosing to write on a topic about which they have some detailed knowledge. There should be sufficient scope across the eight questions for this paper to give all candidates the opportunity to do that.

2013

There were 77 candidates for this paper. The distribution of answers was fairly even between passages (33 in total) and essay questions (44 in total). There was also a relatively even mix between answers that focussed on political theory and those that

drew primarily on comparative/empirical studies. The most popular passage was no. 3 on democracy and the most popular question was no. 6 on the decline of the West. Overall there was a pleasing number of first-class scripts, with 12 agreed firsts being awarded. A number of these were extremely impressive and the very best answers showed an excellent mix of knowledge, insight and analytical precision. This exam remains a good test of the ability of students to sustain and develop an argument over an extended time period. Many showed that they were able to do this but a number of answers seemed to run out of steam quite early. There were a surprising number of relatively short scripts (6-8 sides) for a three hour exam (though having said that a couple of the very best answers were of that length). Students should be reminded that this exam is an opportunity to show the range of their reading and interests and it is disappointing when answers become repetitive or simply tail off. It should be possible for all politics finalists to draw on a wide range of material when writing for this paper.

The answers to text passages were sometimes a little formulaic: these essays would break the passage down into its component claims but said too little about how and why these claims went together. The best answers were alive to the structural tensions and ambiguities in the passage as a whole. Some answers also neglected aspects of the passage in question: for instance, too many answers to question 3 neglected the implications of the final sentence about 'too much' democracy; in the case of question 4 answers tended to ignore the demographic claim at the heart of the passage or decide that it was incidental to the main point. It is important when writing about these passages to be alive to the full range of what is being said and to explore how and why particular illustrations or iterations of the argument might be there.

The essay answers on the whole made good use of examples though these were sometimes a little general and lacking in detail. The best examples don't simply reinforce the case being made but develop and when necessary complicate it. Students should not be afraid of using complex examples to show the limits of general answers to the question being asked. In some cases there was also a tendency to spend too much time focussing on the terms of the question. For instance, with question 6, a number of essays devoted an excessive amount of space to inconclusive definitions of 'political', 'decline' and 'West'; likewise, with question 8 too many answers circled around the problem of defining peace without pursuing a particular line on it. Essays for this paper do not need extended definitional or scene-setting introductions. It is better to get on with answering the question in a forthright way and then developing variations or complications on that theme.

2011

There were 63 candidates for this paper. There was one starred first, 8 firsts, 41 upper seconds and thirteen lower seconds. There were 17 answers on the passages

and 46 answers on the general questions. The average mark on the passages was 61.8 and on the general questions 63.6. Question 1 was answered least well and question 8 most effectively. Around 60 per cent of candidates performed in the same class on this paper as their overall class, around 30 per cent performed one class below, and around 6 per cent one class above. One candidate performed two classes below his/her overall class but the mark for this paper did not determine his/her class because there were compensating marks on other papers. Of the 2.2 scripts, 12 were significantly short answers and one contained a significant amount of discussion that was irrelevant to the question.

The length of answers on this paper has proved a significant weakness for some candidates over the past few years. Candidates are expected to produce at least eight pages of single-spaced average-sized handwriting. Candidates have three hours for one question and cannot expect to receive upper second marks for answers that are significantly shorter than that. Candidates also must offer conclusions to their essays to achieve upper second marks or above.

The relatively weak answers on the first passage stemmed from an almost uniform failure to read the passage accurately. All but one answer attributed a normative argument about the problem of democracy and/or the common good to the author that is not there in the text and failed to set out the individual propositions of the argument that is in the text. These answers generally read as though they were prepared answers on democracy that had been put on to this question rather than direct engagement with the argument in the passage.

Across the passages and questions there was a general weakness in dealing with the relationship between the question asked, the argument made, and the examples used in the making that argument. Too many candidates moved to their examples too quickly, particularly on the general questions. Candidates need to offer some general discussion of the question in setting up and then to reflect on the relevance of the examples they wish to use in engaging with that question. This requires some discussion of the limitations and issues created by using particular examples. Candidates need to think hard about what the terms of particular questions require in this respect. 'Can politicians be honest' is not the same question as 'Should politicians be honest?' And 'Does power necessarily destroy itself' is not the same question as 'Does power destroy itself?'. Examples need to be directed at the question as asked and to be reflected on as examples in that context. Candidates need to return in the conclusion of the essays to the issues raised by the examples they have used in relation to the question.

More generally, a significant number of candidates struggled in setting questions up and missed some obvious distinctions. Rather few candidates distinguished between the power of states internationally and domestically in discussing the nature of the power of the state. A number of candidates got into a muddle trying to define 'economic' in a way that could be used in answering question well.

Finally, there is still a tendency among some candidates to offer answers that lack the architecture and language of an argument. Some candidates describe arguments rather than make them by presenting a particular author's argument as evidence itself that the claims in it are persuasive. Some candidates also use the words through which arguments are made – thus, therefore, however, nonetheless, yet, but, consequently – in incorrect ways. In particular there was a tendency among some candidates to use 'therefore' 'thus' and 'however' as conjunctions and undermine their own arguments in doing so.

2009

There were 60 candidates for the paper. The examiners gave nine agreed firsts, 36 agreed upper seconds, and 10 agreed lower seconds. Three candidates received a first class mark paired with an upper second. Generally, the scripts were very encouraging compared to recent years. There were more firsts, fewer lower seconds, and no thirds. More than half the candidates who got agreed firsts for this paper achieved an overall first in the Tripos because of their performance on Pol13.

Candidates directed their answers to the questions and used a broader and more imaginative range of examples than they have for some time. Candidates were also more willing to tackle the general questions than they were last year, and most of the first class answers came from this part of the paper. Whilst it is crucial that candidates set out the propositions in the text in answering the passage questions, they also should be willing to engage with the persuasiveness of those propositions in ways that goes beyond the immediate content of the passage. Examples can be deployed as effectively here as on general questions. It was striking that the question about fear was so much better answered than the question about hope in 2007 when substantively they were exactly the same question. Here candidates did engage with the nature of fear before embarking upon an answer and generally reasoned their way to a set of conclusions that answered the question. The contrast with the previous answers on hope suggests that candidates help themselves when they contain any urge they may have to use Pol13 as a space to polemicise.

Despite the improvement in quality in this year, there are some long-standing failings that remain. Setting out what different theorists would think about a question, without engaging as to whether or not these theorists' claims are persuasive or not, is not making an argument but offering exposition and will not suffice. If candidates want to make a point by saying that a particular theorist is right about something, then they need to explain why they think that theorist is right and deal with the strongest counter-argument that can be made against that position. Similarly, candidates need to deploy examples to make an argument, not as decorative illustration of some supposedly self-evident truth. They also need to remember that virtually all examples from real-world politics will expose some political complexity and accordingly need to be unpacked. Using the same example both to make an argument and to deal with the counterargument can be an effective method of both capturing that complexity

and presenting a persuasive line of reasoning. Finally, candidates are still sometimes too willing to generalise. This was particularly true this year when discussing globalisation, development, and the international economy and it led some candidates into some claims that are entirely empirically untenable. Pol13 gives candidates enough time to think hard about each claim made in an essay and candidates need to use that time profitably to ask themselves about the persuasiveness of everything that they want to say.

2007

There were fifty candidates for the paper. The examiners gave one agreed starred first, 2 agreed firsts, 17 agreed upper seconds, 17 agreed lower seconds, 4 agreed thirds. Three candidates received a first class mark paired with an upper second, and 6 an upper second paired with a lower second.

For the first time since this paper began the answers were very unevenly distributed between texts and general questions. 14 candidates answered a text question and 36 a general question, with 24 of those taking a general question writing about hope. Given that the answers on hope were of a variable quality and that the majority of the candidates failed to establish any real analytical purchase on what hope might mean, the disposition to this question did not on balance do a service to candidates. The average mark for text questions was higher than for general questions. Whilst there was no mark lower than 52 on the texts, there were 4 thirds for general questions. The question on constitutions was particularly poorly answered with no script receiving two marks above lower-second quality.

The two best scripts showed once again just what candidates can achieve on this paper when they pursue the question or text with vigour and rigour and use the time available to think through their answer before beginning to write. That one of these scripts was on a question (oligarchy) that nobody else answered also suggests that the apparently obvious or easy question to answer might not always be the wisest choice.

The questions on hope and constitutions produced virtually all the weakest answers. On both several candidates dumped what were clearly supervision essays or exam answers for other papers. The examiners cannot emphasise strongly enough that such answers on Pol13 will meet low marks. This almost invariably has deleterious consequences. At least five candidates dropped a class in Part IIB because of their performance in Pol13. The risk is not simply a pair of third class marks, which cannot be compensated for an upper second degree, but of low lower second mark which reduces a candidate's overall average below the 59 threshold required for an upper second. Of the better lower-second answers, too many candidates wrote at too high a level of generality, fell back on polemic and assertion, or failed to engage with the terms of the question. This was particularly striking on the answers on hope, which was taken to mean a multitude of different things, some of which bore little relation to

any definition of hope as the wish for something in the face uncertainty. No candidate stopped to distinguish between hope as a reasoned belief and hope as an emotion, or between the relationship between hope and politics in the context of the hope-possessing agent having power and in a context in which that agent is without power. Some fairly simple distinctions would get answers to general questions off to a good start and provide a clearer analytical structure to answers than many candidates are deploying. Too many candidates this year gave the impression that they had embarked on answers before getting their general thoughts under control, or having worked out how to use specific empirical and theoretical points to make their arguments. As the examiners said last year, the opportunity to think for an hour should be used to the full.