

Chief Reader Report on Student Responses: 2017 AP[®] United States Government and Politics Free-Response Questions

• Number of Students Scored	319,612		
• Number of Readers	754		
• Score Distribution	Exam Score	N	%At
	5	35,568	11.1
	4	39,784	12.4
	3	82,182	25.7
	2	78,666	24.6
	1	83,412	26.1
• Global Mean	2.58		

The following comments on the 2017 free-response questions for AP[®] United States Government and Politics were written by the Chief Reader, Dr. Stephen Meinhold, UNC-Wilmington. They give an overview of each free-response question and of how students performed on the question, including typical student errors. General comments regarding the skills and content that students frequently have the most problems with are included. Some suggestions for improving student preparation in these areas are also provided. Teachers are encouraged to attend a College Board workshop to learn strategies for improving student performance in specific areas.

Question #1**Max. Points:** 5**Mean Score:** 1.78***What were responses expected to demonstrate in their response to this question?***

This question examined the intent of the framers of the Constitution to keep the Supreme Court politically insulated. Part (a) asked students to describe one constitutional provision that seeks to insulate the Supreme Court from public opinion. Part (b) asked students to identify a power exercised by the Supreme Court that acts as a check on another branch of the federal government. Part (c) asked students to explain how Congress and the President can limit the independence of the Supreme Court. Part (d) asked students to explain how the Supreme Court protects its political independence.

How well did the response address the course content related to this question? How well did the responses integrate the skills required on this question?

Students performed best on the parts of the question requiring them to describe constitutional provisions that insulate the Supreme Court from public opinion and to identify a power exercised by the Supreme Court that acts as a check on another branch of the federal government. The students recognized that the following are constitutional provisions that insulate the Supreme Court from public opinion: Supreme Court justices serve life terms, Supreme Court justices are appointed rather than elected, and Supreme Court justices are protected from decreases to their salaries. The students also recognized that judicial review is the main mechanism by which the Supreme Court is able to check the other branches of the federal government. In addition, many students were able to explain that the Supreme Court protects its political independence through secret deliberations, by not allowing public recordings of their deliberations, by controlling its own docket, or by making limited public statements or media appearances.

What common student misconceptions or gaps in knowledge were seen in the responses to this question?

In part (c), students did not seem able to distinguish between *constitutional checks* on the Supreme Court by the other two branches of government and *mechanisms by which the other two branches*, Congress and the President, can limit the independence of the Supreme Court. A common error was to incorrectly identify the constitutionally-prescribed appointment and confirmation process for Supreme Court justices as a method by which the other two branches can limit the independence of the Supreme Court. Also, many students who correctly *identified* a mechanism that the other branches can use to limit the independence of the Supreme Court did not adequately *explain how* those mechanisms allow Congress and the President to do so. Another common error was that students confused constitutional provisions that insulate the Supreme Court from public opinion with mechanisms by which the Supreme Court protects its political independence. Similarly, in part (d), many students who correctly *identified* a means by which the Supreme Court protects its political independence did not adequately *explain how* it allows the Supreme Court to do so.

<i>Common Misconceptions/Knowledge Gaps</i>	<i>Responses that Demonstrate Understanding</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mechanisms by which Congress can limit the independence of the Supreme Court. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “Congress can limit the independence of the Supreme Court through changing its appellate jurisdiction. ...Congress can determine what kind of cases the Supreme Court has a constitutional right to review.”

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mechanisms by which Congress can limit the independence of the Supreme Court. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “The President can limit the independence of the Supreme Court by refusing to implement the Supreme Court’s decisions. This limits the independence of the Supreme Court because it must rely on the executive branch to enforce laws...”
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Means by which the Supreme Court protects its political independence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “The Supreme Court protects its political independence by refusing to allow the media to record court proceedings and by deliberating in secrecy. By taking these measures, the Supreme Court limits any outside pressures from political entities...”

Based on your experience at the AP® Reading with student responses, what advice would you offer to teachers to help them improve the student performance on the exam?

- With regard to *skills*, students must be able to distinguish between what various commands require them to do to earn points.
 - Identify: The student simply must name “it.”
 - No need to be in context
 - No supporting information required to earn point
 - Describe: The student must provide relevant, accurate facts about the topic.
 - Explain: The student must give information about *how or why* a relationship exists between phenomena (for example, cause and effect, or how one factor leads to another). The student must do more than simply repeat the stem of the prompt to adequately explain the relationship.
- With regard to *subject matter*, students must be able to:
 - Distinguish between *constitutional checks and balances between the Supreme Court and the other two branches of the federal government (Congress and the President)* and *mechanisms by which Congress and the President can limit the independence of the Supreme Court*.
 - Distinguish between *constitutional provisions that insulate the Supreme Court from public opinion* and *mechanisms by which the Supreme Court can protect its political independence*.

What resources would you recommend to teachers to better prepare their students for the content and skill(s) required on this question?

- US GoPo Online Teacher Community, Resources
- AP Central, US GoPo, The Course
 - AP US GoPo Course Description
 - Teacher’s Guide
- AP Central, US GoPo, Classroom Resources
- Question Bank (scheduled for 2018 release)

What were responses expected to demonstrate in their response to this question?

This question examined the significant role of interest groups in government and politics. Part (a) asked students to identify the primary goal of interest groups. Part (b) asked students to describe interest groups' strategies of lobbying and *amicus curiae*. Finally, part (c) asked students to explain how separation of powers and bureaucratic discretion can hinder the success of interest groups in obtaining their primary goal.

How well did the response address the course content related to this question? How well did the responses integrate the skills required on this question?

Students were required to know the purposes of interest groups, the tactics they use to achieve their goals, and impediments to the achievement of their primary goal. Students were generally able to identify the primary goal of interest groups, as well as describe the strategy of lobbying. Fewer students were able to correctly describe the strategy of *amicus curiae*, with the most common error being a failure to recognize that *amicus curiae* briefs relate to the judiciary. Regarding hindrances, students struggled to explain how separation of powers adversely affected the ability of interest groups to achieve their primary goal, with a significant number of students discussing federalism or intra-government machinations as opposed to separation of powers. Finally, few students were able to correctly explain bureaucratic discretion (with many lacking a basic understanding of what the term meant) and how it inhibited the ability of interest groups to achieve their primary goal.

What common student misconceptions or gaps in knowledge were seen in the responses to this question?

<i>Common Misconceptions/Knowledge Gaps</i>	<i>Responses that Demonstrate Understanding</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The <i>amicus curiae</i> strategy used by interest groups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> "<i>Amicus curiae</i> is a brief written by an interest group to a judge presiding over a court case that involves their agenda in order to sway that judge's opinion..."
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How separation of powers hinders interest groups from obtaining their primary goal 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> "...even if an interest group has successfully lobbied, for example, a member of Congress...that influenced bill still must make it past the President, and even then, can be declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court."
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How bureaucratic discretion hinders interest groups from obtaining their primary goal 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> "...the bureaucracy is allowed to implement specific policies of its own. For instance, the Food and Drug Administration passes thousands of regulations...Because bureaucratic agencies possess these powers, it is more difficult for an interest group to get a uniform policy across the board."

Based on your experience at the AP[®] Reading with student responses, what advice would you offer to teachers to help them improve the student performance on the exam?

Students should be able to comprehensively answer questions that require an explanation. This answer can include an example to illustrate knowledge of the concepts being discussed, although an example is not required to earn the maximum score. Students routinely showed a lack of understanding of basic concepts (e.g., bureaucratic discretion and separation of powers). This lack of foundational understanding hampered students' ability to effectively answer the question as it was asked.

Students need to be reminded that answering an "explanation" question, as opposed to a "description" question, requires a different level of skill. Students should be able to provide a "how" in their responses when asked to answer this explanation. Also, in addressing an explanation, students may find that using concrete examples will help them better illustrate their understanding of the concept(s) and provide a more cogent and clear explanation.

What resources would you recommend to teachers to better prepare their students for the content and skill(s) required on this question?

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Question #3**Topic :** Entitlements, Demographics, and the Budget Process**Max. Points:** 5**Mean Score:** 2.27***What were responses expected to demonstrate in their response to this question?***

This question examined changes over time in federal spending, including entitlements and discretionary spending. Part (a) asked students to identify a change in federal spending between 1970 and 2023 (projected) based on a chart provided in the question. Part (b) asked students to describe the difference between entitlement programs and discretionary programs. Part (c) asked students to describe one demographic trend that has contributed to changes in entitlement spending. Part (d) asked students to explain why changes in entitlement spending make balancing the federal budget difficult. Part (e) asked students to explain how deficit spending affects the projected trend in net interest.

Skills that students were expected to demonstrate included reading data from a chart and using that data to examine the political difficulties involved in the federal budget process, including explaining various political pressures policymakers face while developing the federal budget.

How well did the response address the course content related to this question? How well did the responses integrate the skills required on this question?

This question allowed students to scaffold their response. The different tasks within the question required students to engage in increasingly higher order thinking skills. The responses progressed from a simple identification of data from the chart to a differentiation between entitlement and discretionary programs. Students were then asked to describe a demographic trend that has impacted entitlement spending. Finally, the students were required to explain why balancing budget is so difficult and how deficit spending impacts net interest.

What common student misconceptions or gaps in knowledge were seen in the responses to this question?

- Students need a better understanding of what entitlement and discretionary programs are and how they differ from one another. Though students were not asked to define demographics in the essay, it was evident that they did not understand what it is as they could not identify a trend.
- Students need a better understanding of the political and procedural influences that affect the federal budget-making process, as well as federal spending.
- Students need to understand the different expectations required by the verb in the stem. “Identify,” “describe,” and “explain” each require students to demonstrate a deeper understanding of the content.
- Students should refrain from using only the terminology provided by the prompt and stem in the question. To demonstrate their understanding of the concept, students need to go beyond using the term.

<i>Common Misconceptions/Knowledge Gaps</i>	<i>Responses that Demonstrate Understanding</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students need a better understanding of what entitlement and discretionary programs are and how they differ from one another. • To demonstrate their understanding of the concept, students need to go beyond using the terms provided by the prompt and stem. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “The difference between discretionary programs and entitlement programs are that discretionary spending is subject to the federal government on what they want to spend it on, while entitlement programs are promised initiatives to the public and must be funded.” Q3A

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students need a better understanding of the political and procedural influences that affect the federal budget-making process, as well as federal spending. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “The government is also generally unable to raise taxes to pay for this deficit because it is an extremely unpopular policy among the public, causing deficits in the budget.” • “Deficit spending increases the net interest because the government must borrow more to pay for the deficit, which increases how much the government must pay in interest back to the lenders...” Q3A
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Based on your experience at the AP[®] Reading with student responses, what advice would you offer to teachers to help them improve the student performance on the exam?

Teachers should use the resources available to them on the AP Central College Board website. This site provides all previous FRO examples and scoring guides to use with their students. Teaching students how to score these essays will teach them how to write better ones.

What resources would you recommend to teachers to better prepare their students for the content and skill(s) required on this question?

- US GoPo Online Teacher Community, Resources
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Question #4**Max. Points:** 5**Mean Score:** 1.86***What were responses expected to demonstrate in their response to this question?***

This question examined the balance of power between the United States national government and state governments as shaped by the Constitution and Supreme Court rulings. Part (a) asked students to describe each of the following constitutional provisions: the Supremacy clause and the Tenth Amendment. Part (b) asked students to explain how one of the following court rulings changed the balance of power between the national government and state governments: *United States v. Lopez* or *Obergefell v. Hodges*. Part (c) asked students to describe two advantages of federalism for the creation of public policy in the United States.

How well did the response address the course content related to this question? How well did the responses integrate the skills required on this question?

In Part (a), students were generally able to describe the Supremacy Clause and the Tenth Amendment. In Part (b), students were generally unable to explain how *United States v. Lopez* changed the balance of power between that national government and state governments. In Part (b), students were generally unable to explain how *Obergefell v. Hodges* changed the balance of power between that national government and state governments. In Part (b), students attempted to explain the importance of each case with similar frequency and with comparable rates of success. In Part (c), students were generally able to describe one advantage of federalism for the creation of public policy in the United States.

What common student misconceptions or gaps in knowledge were seen in the responses to this question?

In part (a), responses often would misidentify or simply misunderstand the constitutional provision that was being described. They also did not clearly describe the content of the relevant provision or provide the required contrast between the levels of government.

In part (b), responses demonstrated a fundamental lack of knowledge about key case facts, the ruling of the Court, and how the decision impacted the balance of power between the national and state governments.

In part (c), responses often would not describe an advantage of federalism for the creation of public policy in the United States. Often, the responses would provide a general description of the concept of federalism, how elections are beneficial in a democracy, or an advantage of federalism only for citizens.

<i>Common Misconceptions/Knowledge Gaps</i>	<i>Responses that Demonstrate Understanding</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Description of constitutional provision 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “For example, the Supremacy Clause states that the Constitution is the ‘supreme law of the land.’ That document created for the federal government ensures that the national government is ultimately more powerful than state governments, and the national government’s laws prevail over conflicting state laws.”
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Knowledge about key case facts, the ruling of the Court and how the decision impacted the balance of power between the national and state governments. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “In <i>United States v. Lopez</i>, the Supreme Court ruled that limiting guns in areas surrounding a school is not a power of the national government. This case ruled that the commerce clause does not include regulation of guns near schools as interstate commerce, so it is a regulation that can only be addressed by states.”

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advantages of federalism for the creation of public policy in the United States. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The creation of public policy under federalism ensures for a more uniform policy. Instead of having differing policy in each state, public policy created under federalism leads to uniform policy nationwide.”
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Based on your experience at the AP® Reading with student responses, what advice would you offer to teachers to help them improve the student performance on the exam?

Remind students to carefully read the question. Students should have developed a proper understanding of the different *task verbs*, such as “identify,” “describe,” and “explain.” Each of these terms requires a different skill, and explanation is the highest order skill. Students need to provide an appropriate elaboration of “how” or “why” within their responses when asked to explain a concept or how it relates to other political changes.

Additionally, students need to develop a deeper understanding of federalism, comprehending how and why the dynamic relationship between the national and state governments has changed over time. Key court rulings have significantly impacted that balance of power and students need to be more knowledgeable about those rulings. Specifically, they need to be able to draw links between such rulings and their impact on the federal-state balance. Also, students need to develop a better understanding of the policy-making process and what advantages federalism brings to policy creation.

What resources would you recommend to teachers to better prepare their students for the content and skill(s) required on this question?

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