



Student Performance Q&A:

2001 AP[®] Comparative Government & Politics Free-Response Questions

The following comments are provided by the Chief Faculty Consultant regarding the 2001 free-response questions for AP Comparative Government and Politics. *They are intended to assist AP workshop consultants as they develop training sessions to help teachers better prepare their students for the AP Exams.* They give an overview of each question and its performance, 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 performance in these areas are also included. Consultants are encouraged to use their expertise to create strategies for teachers to improve student performance in specific areas.

Question 1

What was intended by the question?

This question asked students to compare the electoral systems of Great Britain and Russia through a discussion of three different topics. In part (a) students were asked to describe the electoral systems used to elect members to the House of Commons and the Russian State Duma. Full credit was given to answers that characterized the British systems as a “first-past-the-post system” and the Russian system as a dual system that included provisions for proportional representation. In discussing Great Britain, if a student did not include the term “first-past-the-post,” but demonstrated an understanding of the concept in writing their essay, credit was awarded. An answer of single member districts alone was not sufficient to earn credit.

Part (b) of this question asked students to describe the impact of the electoral systems on the British and Russian party systems. To gain credit for this part of the question, students had to direct their answer to the consequences of the electoral system for the party system (i.e., number and types of parties) and not to individual parties or leaders. Some possible consequences for the party system could include limiting the number of parties; encouraging the formation of minor parties; and stability/instability of the party system.

Part (c) asked students to compare the impact of the British and Russian electoral systems on executive-legislative relations in those countries. Full credit for this portion of the question required that students present a comparative statement. The expectation was that students would explain how the electoral system affected the distribution of power between the two branches of government and within the legislative branch. Students frequently noted that the Russian president was elected separately from members of the Duma and consequently had an independent power base. Also frequently discussed was the fact that the British Prime Minister is also a member of the House of Commons and therefore there is an interdependent relationship between members of Parliament and the Government. Answers that simply described recent elections in these two countries did not receive credit.

How well did the students perform? What were the common errors or omissions?

Overall students demonstrated a high ability to answer this question. The most common problems encountered included a disproportionate focus on Russia, confusion over the terms plurality and majority, and a tendency to focus on parties and specific elections rather than on party systems. The last part of the question generally was the most difficult for students to answer and they often left out a comparative statement.

Question 2

What was intended by the question?

Question 2 asked students to identify two characteristics of political systems that promote civil liberties or political freedoms. They were to use specific examples from France and Nigeria *or* India *or* Mexico in explaining how these two characteristics contribute to the level of civil liberties or political freedoms in these two states. Given the way in which the question was worded, the expectation was that students would identify positive factors that normally promote civil liberties or political freedoms. This did not mean, however, that the factors necessarily worked for the promotion of civil liberties in France and the developing country chosen. Students were given considerable latitude in identifying two characteristics provided that they were political in nature. Some students identified broad characteristics such as the rule of law, while others focused on specific characteristics such as term limits. Most students did not have difficulty identifying two political characteristics that typically promote civil liberties or political freedoms.

Parts (b) and (c) asked students to explain how these factors promoted civil liberties or political freedom in France and the developing country chosen. Students were expected to use specific examples from each country rather than provide generic explanations of the factors. Interestingly, most students were more successful in providing such information for Nigeria, India, or Mexico than they were for France. On the whole, students were also able to provide recent information on developments in these states, such as the new constitution in Nigeria and elections in Mexico and Nigeria. Credit was not given for answers that presented a great deal of factually correct information that students were not able to link back to the question.

What were the common errors or omissions?

The most common errors in part (a) were that students identified nonpolitical characteristics (such as the economy) or they did not present two distinct political characteristics. In parts (b) and (c) the most common error was the failure to link the examples given back to the two characteristics of political systems that were identified in part (a). Unequal or incomplete discussions in parts (b) and (c) were also a problem. To receive full credit, students had to present specific examples from both countries in each part.

Question 3

What was intended by the question? What were the common errors or omissions?

Question 3 was intended to assess students' ability to interpret a graph and use their knowledge of Chinese politics to describe how the trends depicted in it may have come about and to explain their consequences. Students had little difficulty in identifying the two requested trends: increased personal income in both urban and/or rural areas and an increasing differential between personal incomes in urban and rural areas. Minimal statements of identification for each trend received full credit. No credit was given for answers that concentrated on a specific year in discussing the chart.

Part (c) asked students to describe two reforms that led to these trends. There were two common errors in answering this section. First, they identified a reform but did not describe it. For example, creation of special economic zones identifies a reform but does not describe the reform's content or intent. Second, some students described trends within Chinese society such as urbanization or industrialization instead of reforms.

Part (d) of the question asked students to identify and explain two political consequences of these trends for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The expectation was that students would link the increased personal income growth or the growing disparity in urban and rural incomes to consequences for the CCP. One frequent mistake made by students in this section was to frame their answer with reference to the reforms rather than the trends in the graph. Possible consequences receiving credit included loss of support among the rural population, a legitimacy crisis, an ideological or identity crisis within the party, and increased public support in the urban sector. Students did not receive credit for simply answering this part of the question by referencing the consequences of permitting increased foreign trade, market reforms, or some other reform. Consequences had to be linked to the CCP. Students could earn credit if they began by discussing a reform and, in the context of doing so, made a clear link back to the trends in the graph. No credit was given for self-contained discussions of the Tiananmen Square incident or general discussions about the impending fall of the communist party.

Question 4

Question 4 tested students' knowledge of patron-client politics as a form of political participation in developing nations using India or Mexico or Nigeria as an example. Students were first asked to define patron-client politics. Answers receiving credit conveyed the notion that patron-client politics involved an exchange of benefits among unequals. Of the students not earning credit, many incorrectly defined patron-client politics as being equivalent to representative democracy in which voters elect officials or confused it with rich state-poor state relations as presented in dependency theory.

Part (b) asked students to describe one advantage and one disadvantage of the patron-client relationship for the client either in India or Mexico or Nigeria. On the whole, students were far more successful in presenting an advantage than in presenting a disadvantage even if the advantage was only presented in the most general terms of enabling the client to get ahead or accomplish goals. No credit was given to answers that in effect merely stated that patron-client politics disadvantaged the client because he or she was the client.

Part (c) of the question asked students to explain how the *formal* structures of the political system they were discussing encouraged the development of patron-client politics. The expectation was that students would show how failures or problems in the functioning of the formal political system encouraged patron-client politics. Answers receiving full credit presented country-specific and relevant examples. Answers cast in terms of vague generalities or that failed to use the formal structure of the political system as the point of departure for the answer received little or no credit. One common error in this section was the omission of formal structure in the explanation. Explanations that cited political culture, for instance, did not earn credit unless they were linked to the formal structures of the government.

How well did the students perform? What were the common errors or omissions?

Of all of the free-response questions on the exam, this question presented students with the most difficulty and produced few scores in the middle ranges. There were many excellent examples for all three political systems that demonstrated sophisticated understandings of the role patron-client politics plays in these systems and the central role played by formal political structures in shaping

these relations that received full credit. On the other hand, numerous students failed to answer the question at all or demonstrated no knowledge of patron-client politics in their answer.

General commentary on student performance

Following the general trend over the past several years, students taking the AP Comparative Government and Politics Exam showed continued improvement in their ability to answer questions in a knowledgeable manner. The most difficult questions for students to answer were questions 2 and 4, which focused on *concepts* rather than *countries* as their starting points and focused on developing states. AP teachers should be encouraged to continue helping students become comfortable with conceptual material that they then apply to countries rather than just deal with concepts in country-specific settings. The developing state question continued to pose greater challenges to students than did core state questions. In part this reflects problems in trying to phrase questions that are germane to all three countries — Mexico, Nigeria, and India. It also appears to reflect a tendency to focus teaching time more narrowly on fewer aspects of these political systems than is the case for the core states. The result can be that otherwise qualified students have more difficulty with a question than expected.

Two final observations can be made on the basis of this year's exam that will benefit students in the future:

- **First, it is no longer necessary for students to preface their answer with a thesis paragraph.** Full credit is given to answers that present all of the necessary information but do not contain a thesis or conclusion.
- **Second, students should be encouraged to present material in the sequence in which the question was written.** This increases the likelihood that students will not omit important information (such as failing to talk about the trends in the graph in question 3) and that they will make the necessary connections between the various parts of the answer.