



**Student Performance Q&A:**  
**2001 AP<sup>®</sup> United States Government & Politics**  
**Free-Response Questions**

The following comments are provided by the Chief Faculty Consultant regarding the 2001 free-response questions for AP United States 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 wrestle with the issue of the durability of the United States Constitution by (a) identifying two of the four possible ways of formally amending the Constitution; (b) describing two informal means that have been used to change the meaning of the Constitution, and providing a specific example of each of the informal means described; and in the final task (c) by offering an explanation of the predominance of informal over formal methods.

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

The identification of formal methods requested in part (a) is straightforward, as laid out in Article V of the Constitution. Students were frequently unsure about the exact fractions necessary for either proposal, ratification, or both, but credit was granted if the student demonstrated understanding of (1) the two-step nature of the formal process — proposal and ratification, (2) the importance of federalism — action is required at both the national and state levels, and (3) the requirement of a supermajority, but less than unanimity. Some students mistakenly identified informal methods as formal methods, indicating the continued lack of understanding of these terms as evinced on previous exams.

Part (b) of this question asked the student to describe two informal methods used to change the meaning of the Constitution. This section appeared to be a bit more challenging for the students. Many were able to describe the methods universally included in texts — judicial interpretation, Congressional use of the “necessary and proper” clause, and custom and practice. However, students often described, “how a bill becomes a law” as an informal method and did not receive credit because passage of legislation does not change the meaning of the Constitution. Other students related stories of formal amendments from United States history as examples of informal amendments. Still other students wrote long essays expounding on particular interest groups’

positions on Constitutional provisions (e.g., the NRA’s interpretation of the Second Amendment), but because the Supreme Court has not ratified the interpretation, credit was not earned for describing a method of changing the meaning of the Constitution.

If students had a problem with the task of providing a correct example it was in matching the example to the method. For example, a court case that is an example of judicial review was not credited as an example of Congressional use of the “elastic clause.” The example and the informal method had to match to earn credit.

Most students who had earned points earlier in the essay earned at least one point in part (c). A simple statement asserting the relative ease of informal methods over formal methods sufficed. Full credit required a more elaborate explication of “why,” e.g., the difficulty of gaining extraordinary majorities in both chamber of Congress.

## **Question 2**

*What was intended by the question?*

This question presented the students with a line graph presenting data about incumbency reelection rates in both chambers of Congress and asked them to (a) identify two patterns displayed in the graph, (b) explain incumbency advantage with reference to two factors that contribute to it, and (c) discuss a consequence of incumbency reelection advantage for the United States political process.

*How well did the students perform?*

Students performed fairly well on this question. There were numerous valid patterns the students might identify in response to (a), and fewer students than in past years went out of their way to complicate a simple task. When students did go astray on part (a), it tended to be in the forms of either offering two statements that identified the same pattern or focusing on one or two years as a “pattern,” rather than a broader sweep.

Students had more difficulty explaining how factors contributed to incumbency advantage than they did in identifying the patterns in the graph. Some students mentioned valid factors, e.g., name recognition or franking privilege, but failed to explain how incumbents might translate these factors into an electoral advantage.

*What were the common errors or omissions?*

The most common problems for students in part (c) seemed to be in explicitly identifying a consequence to discuss or in discussing consequences too narrowly. Thus, some students wrote long, indirect paragraphs about incumbency in general, never addressing the “So What?” question implicit in the request for a discussion of consequences. Other students discussed consequences, but did so only within a narrow venue, e.g., one chamber of Congress, rather than the broader political process, as demanded by the question.

## **Question 3**

*What was intended by the question?*

Question 3 was intended to assess students’ knowledge of the components of the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution, particularly the equal protection clause and the due process clause, and to test students’ understanding of the consequences for United States politics of a landmark case in which each of these clauses was either raised by the litigants or used by the Supreme Court in rendering its decision.

*How well did the students perform?*

As in previous years, students continued to have difficulty in demonstrating a mastery of issues related to both the Fourteenth Amendment and Supreme Court decisions, although performance on this year's exam appeared to be somewhat better than that on related questions in previous years.

*What were the common errors or omissions?*

As in past years, a significant number of students failed to demonstrate knowledge of specific provisions of the Fourteenth Amendment. Students commonly knew something about one of the cases in both parts (a) and (b), and thereby earned some credit, but either failed to specify the equal protection or due process clauses as the relevant provisions of the Fourteenth Amendment or failed to explicate the significance of the chosen decisions in United States politics and did not earn full credit.

The most common problem in the essays was devotion of excessive attention to a description of the facts and holdings of the case chosen, while either failing to explain the significance of the decision at all or explaining the significance in very narrow terms, not in terms of United States politics, as asked in the question.

#### **Question 4**

*What was intended by the question?*

Question 4 sought to test the students' knowledge of the impact on the public policy-making process of three political factors — divided government, weak party discipline, and growth in the number of interest groups and PACs — commonly discussed in contemporary United States politics. It required some knowledge of the public policy-making process and assumed that students would know the meaning of the terms used to identify the political factors. The students were provided with the argument that each of these factors was thought to make public policy-making more difficult and were directed to provide an explanation of how this would be so and an example that illustrated that explanation. Either real or hypothetical examples were credited as long as they supported the explanation.

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

Students, on average, wrote long responses to this question, but the quality of the responses was the worst among this year's four questions. Many students devoted a great deal of time to defining the factors — a task they were not asked to perform and for which they received no credit. These definitions sometimes revealed that the students were confused about the meaning of the terms. For example, many students, either explicitly or implicitly, confused divided government with checks and balances, which was not part of the question. Also, numerous students offered an answer to the factor "growth in the number of interest groups . . ." as if they were being asked about "strength of interest groups . . ."

Although the question explicitly required an explanation of how these factors made the public policy-making process more difficult, numerous students attempted instead to explain how these factors facilitated the process. Even when students demonstrated knowledge of a factor, they often stopped short of establishing a linkage between the factor and the public policy-making process.

Many students made no attempt to provide examples to bolster their explanations; when they did, the examples were often inappropriate or unclear, thereby failing to illustrate the difficulty posed

by the political factors for the public policy-making process. Many of the examples offered were descriptions of institutional features of government, not prompted by the question, and were left unrelated to the policy-making process.

### **General Commentary on Student Performance**

There is some evidence of improvement in areas that were problems in previous years, but there are still enough examples of similar issues that these suggestions bear repeating in summary form.

- Time spent outlining an answer before beginning writing would be time well spent.
- Students can expect to be asked to link different “units” (e.g., federalism with formal Constitutional procedures) of the course in the same question.
- Too many students continue to have difficulty interpreting data presented in graphical form, and are often unable to apply knowledge of United States politics to explain the data. In many cases, this problem is compounded by a tendency to make simple tasks overly complicated. Development of skills related to data interpretation will pay off both in the free-response part of the exam and in the multiple-choice section.
- Students will be expected to know key terms that would be used in the introductory college course, e.g., formal/informal, institutional/non-institutional.

### **Suggestions for Improving Student Performance**

Without a doubt, the most important piece of advice we can give to students is to **answer the question that is asked**. Take time to analyze the question and identify the tasks required to respond. Is the task to identify? Describe? Discuss? Explain? Each of these differs from the other and requires different types of responses. *Identification* is something that can be accomplished quickly, with few words. *Description* and *discussion* require more development of thought. And, *explanation* requires linkage between what is being explained and how or why it exists, happens, or whatever the question spells out.

These points are emphasized because every year we see students spending paragraphs or pages responding to the task *identify*, which often can be accomplished in a one or two sentences. If time is an issue, writing these paragraphs or pages is not time well spent. At the other extreme, we see one- or two-word *explanations*, which invariably fail to earn credit and may well fail to communicate all the student knows.

Students will not be held responsible nor will they be rewarded for tasks they are not asked to perform.