



Student Performance Q&A:

2002 AP[®] Government & Politics: United States Free-Response Questions

The following comments are provided by the Chief Reader regarding the 2002 free-response questions for AP[®] Government & Politics: United States. *They are intended to assist AP readers 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. Readers 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 was a question about the impact of divided partisan control of different branches of government. Specifically, students were expected to describe two problems divided government poses for the president's use of the president's appointment powers. Knowledge of the meaning of the term "divided government" was not required; that definition was provided in the stem of the question. The second part of the question asked students to discuss how presidents cope with these problems. Specifically, students were called upon to identify and explain two ways presidents attempt to overcome the challenges identified in the first part of the response.

How well did students perform?

Students performed moderately well on this question, though not as well as on the other questions. Most students could 1) identify one problem that divided government poses for the president in making federal appointments and 2) could identify one way presidents attempt to overcome a problem affecting appointments caused by divided government.

What were common errors or omissions?

A significant number of students could not clearly distinguish a second problem divided government poses for presidents in making federal appointments. Similarly, some students' attempt to identify a second way presidents try to overcome a problem the students had identified was merely a restatement of the solution already identified.

Many students spent considerable time and space describing divided government, which was not required and earned them no points. Similarly, many students provided extensive descriptions of senatorial courtesy, which, while true and interesting, earned them no points. There were also numerous extended general descriptions of checks and balances, which were unrelated to divided government. A notable

number of students could not clearly distinguish a second problem caused by divided government, and a significant number of students failed to identify or explain a second way presidents try to overcome a problem, often merely restating the solution already described.

Based on your experience at the AP Reading, what message would you like to send to teachers that could improve the performance of their students on the exam?

Teach students to analyze the question asked and *answer it!*

Question 2

What was intended by the question?

This was a standard, recent, vintage, AP stimulus-based free-response question: 1) describe what the figure tells us and 2) how or why does the pattern or trend occur? This particular question asked students to relate two different trends in the distribution of government benefits. The second part of the question asked students to identify two *politically relevant* (the importance of the emphasis on this phrase is clarified below) factors that cause the trends to head in opposite directions (assuming this appropriate description). The third part of the question called for a linkage between the two factors identified in the second part of the question with the different trends identified in the first part.

How well did students perform?

Almost all of the students were able to see the trends in the graph; most were also able to identify multiple factors that affected the trends. The distinction between the “well-prepared” and “less well-prepared” students seemed to hinge on their ability to explain the factors they had identified.

What were common errors or omissions?

Students who failed to attain full credit had difficulty explaining in a politically relevant way the factors they had identified. For example, a student could gain credit for identifying a demographic factor (e.g., “growing elderly population”) or the impact of entitlements (e.g., “social security makes the costs of welfare for old folks go up”) but have difficulty explaining how that was a “politically relevant factor” that “affected the changing distribution of government benefits.” (N.B. “Entitlements” was not accepted as an identification because it assumes that laws cannot be changed, so there could not be politically relevant factors involved.) In sum, students had difficulty linking explanations to identifications.

Based on your experience at the AP Reading, what message would you like to send to teachers that could improve the performance of their students on the exam?

This question illustrates the good news and the bad news about students’ performance on the AP Exam. In previous years, students, in responding to graphic presentation of data, often missed the forest and discussed each individual tree. This year, few students made that mistake. On the other hand, they still exhibited an inordinate difficulty in linking explanations to identifications.

Question 3

What was intended by the question?

This question sought to assess whether students could identify a feature of one of three political institutions — federalism, the U.S. party system, or the U.S. electoral system — and how that identified

feature presented obstacles/opportunities to racial minority groups in their efforts to gain political influence. Students could select the same/different political institutions for their “feature” identification and their obstacle/opportunity explanation.

How well did students perform?

Students scored points for knowing basic information about one or two of the institutions provided in each half of the question, and this question, along with the next, produced the highest scores. It was easier for students to explain obstacles than opportunities, because many approached this part of the question from a historical context.

What were common errors or omissions?

Students seemed to have difficulty identifying a feature of whichever institution they chose. Often, a feature was simply a restatement of the institution. Students had difficulty explaining *how* the institution selected presented an *opportunity* to racial minority groups.

Based on your experience at the AP Reading, what message would you like to send to teachers that could improve the performance of their students on the exam?

Students performed relatively well on this question, which required some sophisticated understanding. The only advice for improving their performance would be to make sure students can argue both sides of an argument equally well.

Question 4

What was intended by the question?

This question presented students with information about voter turnout, both 1) over time in federal elections and 2) in presidential versus midterm elections. Students were asked to 1) identify two factors that have contributed to the decline in voter turnout over time, 2) identify two factors that contribute to higher turnout in presidential versus midterm elections, and 3) explain why each of the factors identified produces the results it does.

How well did students perform?

Very few students failed to respond to the question at all, and those students who earned the highest scores had *very* strong responses. Even the weakest students were generally at least aware of the issues involved with voter turnout.

What were common errors or omissions?

There were four common problems. First, the question asked for an explanation of change over time. Many students responded with factors that did not change (e.g., registration requirements or the electoral college) and therefore could not have caused the change. Second, many students failed to distinguish among distinct concepts (e.g., efficacy, apathy, cynicism). Third, too many students failed to recognize that the question asked for a comparison of higher turnout in presidential elections to that of midterm elections and discussed *increasing* turnout in presidential elections. In this discussion, many students demonstrated that they did not know the meaning of the term “midterm elections.” Fourth, too many students used a definition of a factor/reason as an explanation of a factor/reason and therefore received no points for explanation.

Based on your experience at the AP Reading, what message would you like to send to teachers that could improve the performance of their students on the exam?

Make sure students *understand* the meaning of basic terminology (aka jargon/argot), such as “midterm election,” because such knowledge will be assumed for a college-level course.