

## **AP Government and Politics: A Teacher's Perspective**

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When most Americans think of government and politics in school, they conjure up memories of courses with names like “civics” or “Principles of Democracy.” Often these courses emphasize the importance of good citizenship and participation in our democratic system. Most states require government courses to be included in their curriculum, but they have a wide variety of requirements and standards. Understandably, students in one classroom may study an almost totally different curriculum than those presented to their counterparts across the country. One common national thread, however, is that very few school districts require students to study any political systems other than the one in the United States.

Part of the challenge of preparing students for the AP Government and Politics curriculum is that it defies both of these characteristics. It requires students to learn important basic principles and concepts of political science, and it consists of two courses with two separate exams: one focuses on the United States and the other on comparative politics. Student success is much more likely if they enter the course with a set of reading, writing, and thinking skills that they learn in earlier grades.

A teacher preparing students in earlier years for the AP Government and Politics courses may have to put aside preconceived notions of what high school government students are supposed to learn. The AP curriculum still allows teachers plenty of room for their own interests and emphases, but students need to leave the course with a knowledge base and a set of skills. Teachers can be particularly helpful in developing the latter—reading, writing, and thinking skills that will help to insure that students are prepared for the challenges of the AP Government courses.

### **General Overview of the AP Government Curriculum**

Schools combine the AP Government and Politics courses in different ways. Some offer United States government only, some focus completely on comparative government, and others have one semester of each. Teachers should find out what configuration is used in their school district and plan their curriculum accordingly. The most important thing to keep in mind is that both courses are really about analyzing concepts that will help students to keep up with government and politics throughout their lifetimes no matter how much the particular landscapes may change over the years.

## Focus on Pre-AP for History and Social Sciences

Outlined below are the major topics covered by each course in the proportion that they are tested on the examination. AP teachers generally try to portion their classroom time and study assignments in the percentages reflected on the exam, but it is a big challenge to complete the courses with time to spare before the exams. Most teachers require students to read from sources outside the textbook, perhaps through a book of collected readings or from teacher- or student-collected materials.

### U.S. Government and Politics

#### Content Area I: Constitutional Underpinnings (5 to 15 percent)

Students study the historical situation surrounding the Constitutional Convention, as well as the ideological and philosophical traditions that shaped the framers' work. For example, theoretical perspectives include democratic theory, theories of republican government, pluralism, and elitism. Student reading beyond the text might include *Federalist No. 10*, *Federalist No. 15*, readings from Anti-Federalists (such as Richard Henry Lee), or excerpts from John Locke's *Two Treatises of Government*.

#### Content Area II: Political Beliefs and Behaviors (10 to 20 percent)

This section starts with a study of U.S. political culture—the complex mix of beliefs, values, and expectations that shape the political system. Then it examines how these political beliefs and values were formed over time, as well as the modern-day results. Topics include political socialization, political ideologies, and factors that shape political opinions. A second focus of this content area is political participation, including voting behavior. Typically in this unit students analyze data from opinion polls and charts and tables that compare participation and/or attitudes by race, ethnicity, gender, age, region, and social class. Teachers may find up-to-date information from many sources, including the National Election Studies (from the University of Michigan), the Gallup Poll, and CNN All Politics.

#### Content Area III: Political Parties, Interest Groups, and Mass Media (10 to 20 percent)

This content area focuses on “linkage institutions,” or organizations that link citizens to the government, such as political parties, interest groups, and mass media. Students learn about the evolution of the party system, the functions and structures of political parties, and the effects they have on the political system. They also get exposure to the

processes and consequences of political campaigns for office, and they consider efforts to reform campaign financing. Students evaluate the role that interest groups and PACs play in the political process and in shaping public policy, and they analyze which groups have the best access to government and why. A final section focuses on the media and its relationship to the political system. This content area is best taught if students are provided with up-to-date examples of party politics, campaigns, elections, and media issues. So extra reading tends to be drawn from newspapers and magazines that emphasize national news or from news-based Web sites. The topics in this section also lend themselves to research-based, student-produced opinion papers.

### **Content Area IV: Institutions of National Government (35 to 45 percent)**

This section is by far the longest, and it includes the “branches” of government: the legislature, the executive, the bureaucracy, and the judiciary. Students become familiar with the organization and powers, both formal and informal, of these major political institutions in the United States. Issues that come up in class regarding Congress include minority districting, the representative nature (or lack thereof) of the two houses, efficiency/inefficiency of the lawmaking process, and incumbency. For the presidency, students enjoy considering the importance of presidential character, and rating systems for past presidents stimulate a great deal of class discussion. Studying the bureaucracy does not inherently stimulate most students, but the material may be made more interesting by bringing it into the “iron triangle” of decision making. For the judiciary, it is important for students to understand that our system is the exception, not the rule, for modern democracies in terms of the strength of the judicial branch. A particular challenge is to get students to understand that court decisions do make policy.

### **Content Area V: Public Policy (5 to 15 percent)**

An important emphasis of this section is on how politicians and institutions interact with one another to bring about public policy. Students consider various patterns of interaction among the branches and how powers are separated but also shared, checked, and balanced. Additionally, students learn about how these institutions are tied to linkage institutions (Content Area III), such as interest groups, political parties, and the media. Most students tend to think that policymaking and passing legislation are one and the same, so it is important to get them to think about how executive actions, linkage institution activities, and court decisions also make policy.

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### **Content Area VI: Civil Rights and Civil Liberties (5 to 15 percent)**

This section focuses on the development of individual rights and liberties and their impact on citizens. Students examine significant judicial decisions that have defined the civil rights and liberties of American citizens, and they analyze judicial interpretations of freedom of speech, assembly, and expression (civil liberties); the rights of the accused; and the rights of minority groups and women. Of all the content areas in the course, this one is usually most interesting to most students. Some teachers present this material early in the course, but it works best if students know something about the functioning of the judicial system before they study it. Here teachers often present portions of court decisions—famous excerpts or complete majority/dissenting opinions—so that students get a sense of their policymaking power.

### **Comparative Government and Politics**

(Note: The outline below reflects changes to the curriculum beginning with the academic year 2005–06.)

Examples of the content areas focus on six countries: Britain, Russia, China, Mexico, Nigeria, and Iran.

### **Content Area I: Introduction to Comparative Politics (5 percent)**

The introduction orients students to the comparative, conceptual nature of the course, and emphasizes the importance of studying government and politics abroad, especially in terms of global interdependence. Teachers contrast the concepts of state, nation, regime, and government and explain legitimacy, authority, and bases of political power. This material is highly theoretical, and what students need more than anything else are examples and more examples. One technique is to use current news articles to illustrate the concepts. The jargon can be overwhelming as well, so it is important to have students apply the terms consistently so that they learn to incorporate the concepts into their thinking about political systems.

### **Content Area II: Sovereignty, Authority, and Power (20 percent)**

This section focuses on different arrangements of sovereignty, authority, and power and encourages students to recognize that states are relatively new configurations of sovereignty. At this point, students consider the potential for further development of

supranational systems of government, such as the European Union and the United Nations. Here the course investigates sources of legitimacy and power, such as constitutions and legal systems. Students study different types of political regimes, such as democracy and authoritarianism, and evaluate the bases of authority and power of each type. Teachers also address relationships between government and the economy, as well as the impact of core societal values and beliefs on the political system. Again, this material is theoretical, but students, like the rest of us, have a particular fascination with power, who wields it, and how it affects others. Again, the more examples teachers can work in, the easier it is for students to understand the concepts.

### **Content Area III: Political Institutions (35 percent)**

Students compare formal institutions of government (such as legislative, executive, and judicial branches) with examples given from each of the six countries. Also addressed are the informal ways that governments conduct their business, especially as they interact with political parties, electoral systems, the military, and interest groups. The biggest challenge in this content area is avoiding the syndrome of dryly comparing structures. For example, students have a limited tolerance for comparing names of legislatures in different countries and statistics like the numbers of representatives that various bodies have. Much more interesting is helping students to appreciate how the institutions reflect the political culture and how political leaders actually operate inside and outside the formalities. Readings that contrast and/or illustrate political institutions within the six countries are necessary to help students understand the variety of ways that political institutions are organized and function.

### **Content Area IV: Citizen, Society, and the State (15 percent)**

This section places the political system within the context of society, as demonstrated through the six case study countries. For example, students learn how ethnicity, religion, and social class impact the way governments operate and the decisions that they make. Here the concept of civil society is crucial, which is defined as citizens' areas of activity and interests that lie outside of the government's immediate control. Civil society includes the impact of the media, advocacy organizations, and social networks. Students also focus on the ways that citizens participate in politics. Participation takes different forms, and the six countries provide good comparisons of the ways that citizens relate to their governments. Current events write-ups usually provide good discussion material for this section, although it is important that these events are used to illustrate

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concepts, particularly civil society and social cleavages. The focus here should also be on comparing the ways that citizens relate to the state, so that students don't assume that everyone else in the world sees government roles in the same way that Americans see them.

### **Content Area V: Political and Economic Change (15 percent)**

The processes of change vary from country to country, but some changes occur rapidly (such as revolutions), and other changes gradually impact the political system. Often political changes are intertwined with economic forces, so change in one area may radically alter the other. Changes within the six countries are placed in the context of broader trends, such as globalization and fragmentation based on religious or ethnic identities. Generally students need outside readings on the topics of revolution, globalization, democratization, fragmentation, and trends toward a market economy. Once they understand these trends and countertrends, students can consider their impacts on the individual countries.

### **Content Area VI: Public Policy**

Policy issues are addressed both as domestic and global matters. Students investigate and compare the interactions of branches of government and other institutions, such as political parties, interest groups, and the media, within each of the six countries. However, some issues transcend borders—such as poverty, social welfare, the environment, and individual liberties and freedoms—and students learn how countries address these common themes and come up with their own solutions to problems. It is important that students understand that different countries make policies in different ways. For example, the presence of a legislature does not necessarily mean that the body actually makes laws, just as an authority figure called a “president” does not necessarily direct the executive branch.

## **The Examinations**

Students take separate examinations for AP United States and AP Comparative Government and Politics. Each examination is two hours and 25 minutes long, consisting of a 45-minute multiple-choice section and a free-response section of four questions. The time allotted for each examination's free-response questions is 100 minutes, with the expectation that students will spend approximately 25 minutes on each one. Students must answer all questions. The multiple-choice section of each

examination is worth 50 percent of the grade on the exam, and the four free-response questions collectively account for the other 50 percent. In other words, each free-response question is equally weighted against the others and accounts for 12.5 percent of the total grade on each examination.

United States Examination				Comparative Examination			
<i>Time</i>	<i>Type of Questions</i>	<i>Number of Questions</i>	<i>Percent of Grade</i>	<i>Time</i>	<i>Type of Questions</i>	<i>Number of Questions</i>	<i>Percent of Grade</i>
45 minutes	Multiple-choice	60	50%	45 minutes	Multiple-choice	60	50%
100 minutes	Free-response	4	50%	100 minutes	Free-response	4	50%

### Skills and Abilities

What do the questions require students to know, and what skills do they need?

- First, students need to know facts, concepts, and theories. Content knowledge is very important.
- Next, students need to understand patterns, principles, and consequences of political processes and organizations. The more connections students are able to make between concepts they have learned, the better. Thinking skills are necessary to help students to answer such questions as “How do governments make decisions?” and “Who are the important players in decision making, and how do they interact?”
- Students must be able to analyze and interpret data on charts and tables and to interpret political cartoons and draw conclusions from them.
- Students must learn to read questions carefully and answer them precisely and completely. Sometimes students miss questions about material that they know well because they don’t read carefully enough or write complete answers. Of course, students who start the courses with these skills have an advantage over those who do not have them.

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- Students must pay careful attention to specific multiple-choice and free-response questions and must have the ability to stay on task.
- Particularly for comparative government, students must be able to compare political institutions and processes and come to make generalizations about them.

### How Teachers in Pre-AP® Can Help

Teachers of children in elementary and middle school have many responsibilities to carry out. The demands are many, and state and national testing standards must be met. So how can they find time to prepare students for AP courses in high school? The task is daunting, but luckily many of the same skills necessary to meet state and national standards are also vital for doing well in the Advanced Placement Program®. The biggest challenge is working government and politics into an already crowded curriculum. However, if teachers in earlier years of instruction can manage to get youngsters interested in politics, they not only give their students an advantage in the AP courses, but they enrich their lives for years to come. Types of activities that will help include:

- Discussing and analyzing data on already constructed charts and tables
- Constructing charts and tables from previously collected data
- Collecting, organizing, and analyzing data from different sources
- Discussing, interpreting, and reacting to political cartoons
- Researching, studying, and writing about political issues in the United States and in other countries
- Reading and reacting to political views of people from other parts of the U.S. and from other countries

### Resources and Teaching Ideas

The first set of resources may be used for AP United States Government and Politics, and the second set is most appropriate for sparking interest and developing skills in AP Comparative Government and Politics.