



Student Performance Q&A:

2004 AP[®] U.S. Government & Politics Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2004 free-response questions for AP[®] U.S. Government and Politics were written by the Chief Reader, Kerry Haynie of Duke University in Durham, North Carolina. 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 performance 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

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of this question was to examine students' knowledge and understanding of presidential and congressional powers in making and conducting U.S. foreign policy. The question attempted to discern whether or not students could distinguish between formal and informal presidential powers in this policy arena and whether students understood how the informal powers can enhance the formal powers of the office.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for this question was 3.6 out of a possible eight points.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students were surprisingly less knowledgeable about the formal (i.e., constitutionally-based) foreign policy powers of both the president and Congress than was expected. For example, many students wrote that "the President may declare war" and that Congress may negotiate and sign treaties. Another common error in the responses to this question was that students seemed not to understand the difference between formal and informal powers. Even when they did know the difference, many lacked the ability to provide explanations of how a president's informal powers enhanced the formal powers of the office.

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

It is important for students to know and understand the differences between formal (i.e., constitutionally-based) and informal powers or duties of the president.

Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

This question intended to examine students' knowledge of the various techniques that interest groups use to achieve their policy-related goals and whether they understood *why* different types of interest groups use different techniques. The question asked students to apply this knowledge and understanding to a specific interest group.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for this question was 4.4 out of a possible eight points.

What were common student errors or omissions?

The two most common errors were incorrect descriptions or explanations of litigation and grassroots lobbying/mass mobilization. Many students seemed to be unfamiliar with the term "litigation," although this term commonly appears in major textbooks. Many students seemed to confuse grassroots lobbying with direct lobbying. Student explanations of mass mobilization were often quite muddled (they tended to discuss public opinion or membership building). Many students failed to explain why an interest group would select one technique over another and how a specific technique would help the group achieve its policy goals.

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

Vocabulary and terminology are important. Political scientists expect students of the subject to know certain core concepts and to be familiar with and understand a subject-specific lingo. Introductory or survey courses should introduce students to many of these core concepts. Higher-level thinking and analysis often go hand in hand with adopting a more subject-specific vocabulary.

Question 3

What was the intent of this question?

This question asked students to demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the political context in which third parties must operate in U.S. politics. Specifically, the question sought to examine students' understanding of how U.S. electoral rules create obstacles to third party participation in the political process. Additionally, students were asked to demonstrate knowledge of the significant contributions of third parties to the U.S. political system.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for this question was 3.0 out of a possible seven points.

What were common student errors or omissions?

While most students correctly interpreted the political cartoon, a sizeable number did not. The most common misinterpretation was “third parties are bad.” Many students could provide only one acceptable explanation for how the rules of the U.S. electoral system act as an obstacle to minor (third) party candidates. In general, students had difficulty describing contributions that minor parties make to the political system.

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

Political parties do not exist in a vacuum. Students should understand that the structure, roles, and functions of parties are related to or dependent upon the larger political context.

Question 4

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of this question was to examine students’ knowledge of how divided government and increased campaign costs have contributed to a decline in trust and confidence in government. Divided government and increased campaign costs are two significant features of contemporary U.S. politics.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for this question was 2.2 out of a possible six points.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Surprisingly, a majority of the students could not define “divided government.” Many provided definitions or descriptions of checks and balances or separation of powers as their definition for divided government. In many cases, students correctly identified a correct consequence of increased costs of election campaigns, but they failed to link the explanation to the decline of trust and confidence in government. Many students could not provide two specific consequences of the decline in trust and confidence in government for individual political behavior.

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

Divided government is a core U.S. government and politics concept that has analytical significance. Students should know this term and be able to apply it analytically as called for in this question. Students should understand that explanations should answer the “how” and/or “why” questions.