



## **Student Performance Q&A: 2005 AP® Comparative Government and Politics Free-Response Questions**

The following comments on the 2005 free-response questions for AP® Comparative Government and Politics were written by the Chief Reader, Kerry L. 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?***

This question required students to demonstrate some general knowledge of comparative political economy. In part (a) students were instructed to use data on seven indicators of development to make an argument that either China or Russia was more developed than the other country. Students were asked to make a comparative statement in presenting the data and to link the data to the concept of development. In part (b) students were then asked to explain the level of development in the country they selected, using two of three factors provided: institutional arrangements, international forces, and leadership change.

#### ***How well did students perform on this question?***

The mean score was 4.49 out of a possible 8 points. Most students demonstrated extensive knowledge of the two countries. However, many either failed to understand the question's intent or lacked the ability to relate the seven indicators to development.

#### ***What were common student errors or omissions?***

Many students discussed the two countries comparatively and often presented extensive information on both China and Russia without applying the specified data required by the question. Additionally, many used a historical discussion to explain why the indicators had their values rather than explaining what the values said about development. Many students were unable

to relate the given data or the three political factors to development. Few put forward a concept of development against which to discuss the indicators. Most students resorted to a simple, almost circular statement regarding the relationship between the indicators and development. In spite of the data in the table, approximately 40 percent of the students selected China as the more developed country.

***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 economy and economic development are core comparative politics concepts that should be included in every comparative politics course syllabus. Moreover, students of government and politics should have the analytical and critical-thinking skills that enable them to connect and relate information and knowledge about discrete subjects (e.g., institutional arrangements and development). Teachers can design and organize their lectures and student assignments in a manner that helps students develop these skills.

## **Question 2**

***What was the intent of this question?***

This question assessed students' knowledge and understanding of the executive branch of government from a comparative perspective. In part (a) students were asked to describe the main function of two parts of the executive branch: the head of government and the head of state. Part (b) tested whether students could identify the offices that constitute the head of government in Great Britain and either India or Mexico or Nigeria. Part (c) tested understanding of the role of the head of government in those countries relative to the legislature and the electorate. Students were asked to compare those roles across the two countries.

***How well did students perform on this question?***

The mean score was 2.91 out of a possible 7 points. Scores for this question were surprisingly low. Head of state and head of government are central and core political science concepts. Students seemed to have extensive factual descriptive knowledge about these concepts, but they demonstrated a low ability to compare and analyze them across countries or in relation to other governmental actors. Many students were able to distinguish between head of state and head of government, and they were usually able to correctly identify the office that constitutes the head of government in the two countries. In general, students tended to be able to make correct comparative statements about the relationship between the head of government and the legislature for both countries. Moving from the specific to the general analysis, however, seemed to be a challenge for most students.

***What were common student errors or omissions?***

While many students were able to distinguish between head of state and head of government, a surprising number were not able to do this. They either confused the two or made erroneous claims about one having to do with domestic politics and the other focusing on international relations, thus confusing the French model with the question's generic intent. While students often made correct comparative statements about the relationship between the head of government and the

legislature for both countries, many had problems doing the same for the relationship between the head of government and the electorate in the two countries. Moreover, many students seemed to lack a clear understanding of the definition of “electorate.”

***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?***

Students should be aware that comparison involves making specific links between two or more concepts, occurrences, or countries. In order to correctly compare, students must include cross-paragraph references to the political phenomena in each country under consideration. Students should understand that it is important to note both similarities and differences. Class instruction and assignments can help them grasp the task of comparison.

### **Question 3**

***What was the intent of this question?***

The intent of this question was to assess students’ knowledge of how France’s colonial experience in Algeria contributed to constitutional change in France, as well as how the experience affected contemporary French political parties and public policy.

***How well did students perform on this question?***

The mean score was 1.77 out of a possible 6 points. In general, student performance on this question was poor. While students seemed to understand the question, it appears they lacked the knowledge and analytical skills to answer it satisfactorily.

***What were common student errors or omissions?***

Many students provided either a vague explanation or no explanation at all about how the colonial experience led to constitutional change. Many lacked relevant historical information about France’s colonial experience in Algeria, and even more were unable to relate this experience to contemporary French politics. Most students were able to name a current political party in France (e.g., the National Front or Gaullists). Although many were able to identify a current public policy that was influenced by the colonial experience (e.g., the ban on wearing headscarves, reluctance to go to war with Iraq), a sizeable number of students were unable to explain *how* a current political party has been influenced by the colonial experience.

***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?***

An important aspect of political change is the effect of past changes on contemporary institutions and policies. Many of the political features of a country have their origins in prior political changes. Lectures and student assignments that make explicit the linkage of current features of a country’s government and/or politics to prior events or situations can help students understand more clearly how past political experiences shape contemporary politics.

## Question 4

### ***What was the intent of this question?***

This question evaluated students' ability to differentiate between political and socioeconomic indicators and to explain how such factors affect female representation in national politics in India, Mexico, or Nigeria. It also assessed students' knowledge of how the features of a country's political system can affect female political representation.

### ***How well did students perform on this question?***

The mean score was 2.67 out of a possible 6 points. It appears that many students either did not understand the question's intent or did not pay close attention to the instructions.

### ***What were common student errors or omissions?***

Many students failed to address all of the requested tasks; some discussed more than the two required indicators from the table, and some tried to describe or compare indicators from all three countries instead of selecting just one of the countries as the instructions directed. Many students could not distinguish political indicators from socioeconomic indicators. Some answered the question as if it were about female political participation rather than female representation in politics.

Students also seemed to have very limited knowledge and understanding of the research on gender and development and gender and politics. This manifested itself in the difficulty many had with relating the various socioeconomic indicators to levels of female representation in national politics. Students often based links between socioeconomic indicators and female representation on common stereotypes instead of political science analysis. Most students had difficulty explaining how one feature of their chosen country's political system affects female representation in national politics.

### ***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?***

Research on gender and development and gender and politics should be a core subject in the AP Comparative Politics and Government course. Again, being able to connect and relate information and knowledge about discrete subjects—in this case, female literacy rate and female representation in government—is an essential analytical and critical thinking skill for students of government and politics.