



Student Performance Q&A:
2006 AP[®] Comparative Government and Politics
Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2006 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?

The intent of this question was to examine students' ability to distinguish between a liberal democracy and an illiberal democracy.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 0.35 out of a possible 1 point. Overall student performance was poor. Most students seemed to be completely unfamiliar with the concepts of liberal and illiberal democracy.

What were common student errors or omissions?

A liberal democracy is characterized by free and fair elections and individual and group civil liberties. An illiberal democracy typically has relatively free and fair elections but lacks individual and group civil liberties. A common student mistake was the failure to clearly distinguish free and fair elections from civil liberties. Another frequent error was a response that compared and contrasted liberals and conservatives. The most widespread omission was some mention of individual civil liberties when distinguishing between the two types of democracies.

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?

Questions 1–5 represent a new format for the AP Comparative Government and Politics Exam. In accordance with the newly redesigned Comparative Government and Politics course, these questions are meant to examine students' knowledge of important theoretical and methodological concepts in the study of comparative politics. Teachers should review their syllabi and teaching methods to make sure that students are provided with opportunities to learn these key concepts and are able to apply them in specific contexts. Using the topics provided in the *AP Government and Politics Course Description* will help teachers introduce the core concepts that are likely to be assessed.

Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of this question was to test students' knowledge and understanding of corporatism and to examine their ability to distinguish it from pluralism.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 0.17 out of a possible 2 points. This was the lowest-scoring question on the exam. Most students seemed to be completely unfamiliar with corporatist systems of governance.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Most students could not identify two defining characteristics of a corporatist system. A common error was incorrectly defining corporatist systems as systems of governance in which business interests alone played the dominant role.

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?

See the response under question 1.

Question 3

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of this question was to test students' knowledge and understanding of political legitimacy, a core concept for the study of political science.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 1.36 out of a possible 3 points. Many students had difficulty defining political legitimacy, despite its centrality in the study of government and politics.

What were common student errors or omissions?

A common error was to identify political legitimacy as being based on output and/or performance indicators such as the health of the economy. Another mistake was to confuse it with state sovereignty and diplomatic recognition by other countries. A third problem was to mention elections without indicating that such elections must be democratic and that leaders must be held accountable to the public through these elections.

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?

See the response under question 1.

Question 4

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of this question was to examine students' knowledge and understanding of mixed presidential/parliamentary systems. Students were asked to demonstrate their knowledge by providing examples from the Russian political system.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 0.86 out of a possible 2 points. Overall, the responses indicated that most students had received instruction on the current Russian political system. In many cases these responses were notable because of impressively detailed descriptions of specific features of the Russian government. Discussion of the Russian election system appeared in a majority of answers, as did knowledge of President Putin's use—and recent expansion of—presidential powers.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Although students demonstrated extensive knowledge of the Russian government, in general they did not have a fundamental grasp of the essential features of presidential and parliamentary systems. Many students mistook single-member districts and proportional representation as necessary features of a parliamentary system. Another common error was offering the bicameral structure of the Russian legislative assembly as a characteristic feature of Russia's mixed presidential/parliamentary 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?

See the response under question 1.

Question 5

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of this question was to examine students' knowledge and understanding of correlation and causation, two concepts that are essential for explaining a wide range of political phenomena.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 1.34 out of a possible 2 points. A majority of students who answered this question were able to define either correlation or causation and so earned partial credit. A large percentage, but not a majority, was able to define both concepts successfully. It appears that most students are encountering them in their AP courses.

What were common student errors or omissions?

A common error was the failure to clearly demonstrate an understanding of the two terms using precise language. For example, many students defined causation by simply employing the word *cause* (for example, "causation is when A causes B"). The scoring guidelines for this question required a more substantive definition in order for a response to receive credit. Definitions of correlation tended to use a great variety of examples, but points were awarded only to students who provided a clearly stated substantive definition.

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?

See the response under question 1.

Question 6

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of this question was to examine students' understanding of unitary and federal systems and to test their ability to accurately apply the concepts. Students were asked to discuss why leaders of unitary systems might decentralize power, explain one method of achieving decentralization, and describe the difference between a decentralized unitary system and a federal system.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 1.51 out of a possible 4 points. The vast majority of students attempted to answer the question. Many students, however, did not demonstrate sufficient understanding of the concepts of unitary and federal systems.

What were common student errors or omissions?

A common problem in part (a) was the inability to describe *two* reasons why leaders of unitary systems might choose to decentralize power. Many students had a tendency to provide answers that were too vague to earn points. For example, they said that leaders of unitary systems might

choose to decentralize power because “the country is too large,” without giving any additional explanation of *why* the geographic or population size of the country might motivate a leader to decentralize power. Most students were able to describe one reason why leaders of unitary systems might choose to decentralize power but describing a second reason was more challenging. In part (b) a significant number of students could not accurately describe a correct method of decentralizing power. Another frequent error was the failure to describe the difference between decentralized unitary systems and federal systems in part (c).

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?

The question asked that students move beyond mere identification. They were required to engage in conceptual analysis to earn significant points. This is an important higher-level critical thinking and analytical skill that students should begin to acquire in introductory university-level political science courses. Teachers should stress the application of concepts in their syllabi and in their teaching.

Question 7

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of the question was to have students demonstrate knowledge about the impact of international integration of economies on political debates in Great Britain and China. Students were required to describe arguments for and against Great Britain’s adopting the European Union’s single currency. Students also were asked to describe arguments for and against privatization of industry in China.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score on this question was 3.22 out of a possible 6 points. Overall, student responses indicated knowledge about Great Britain’s currency debate. Students were often able to successfully describe the argument against adopting the European Union’s single currency, but many wrote overgeneralized descriptions of arguments in favor of Britain’s accepting it. Most students also had a general understanding of the concept of privatization of industry, and many were able to articulate arguments for and against it. However, some students’ responses reflected a lack of knowledge of the nature and extent of privatization in China.

What were common student errors or omissions?

A common student error in part (a) was an overgeneralized description of an argument for adopting the European Union’s single currency. A significant number of students provided responses that simply stated that the economy or trade would be improved. Moreover, students sometimes described arguments for and/or against Britain’s joining the European Union in general, not arguments for and/or against adopting the currency. A common erroneous statement in part (d) was that China had rejected privatization of industry. Student responses often reflected a belief that most privatization that has occurred in China has been in reaction to outside pressure. Nevertheless, a student’s ability to earn the point for part (d) was probably not impaired by this misconception.

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?

Teachers should go beyond defining terms like *privatization* and *supranational organizations*. Help students to carefully consider the intertwining of economic and political factors, particularly as they are affected by globalization. Use Britain and China as examples of countries that have operated for years within a world divided into nation-states and that have often made economic decisions relatively independently from other nations. A study of the European Union should be an important part of a comparative government course, particularly Britain's relationship to it. Likewise, teachers need to ensure that students keep up with the rapidly changing current trends of privatization of industry in China.

Question 8

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of the question was to have students describe how Iran and Nigeria have moved toward democratization in the past two decades, while at the same time explaining how those two countries have restricted the democratization processes.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 2.10 out of a possible 8 points. Student responses generally demonstrated knowledge about both countries. Many students captured the essence of the question, focusing on efforts at democratization and resistance to it. Appropriate knowledge about the political structures in the two places was frequently displayed. Students also seemed familiar with events during the past 20 years. For Nigeria, they often mentioned the multiple coups d'état, recent competitive elections, and some of the effects of Shari'ah law in the northern part of the country. For Iran, they wrote about the relaxation of some sanctions against criticism of the government, the election of reform candidates, and increased political party activity.

What were common student errors or omissions?

In part (a) some students were unable to provide two measures taken by Iran's political leaders to democratize that country's political process. Many supplied inaccurate information about suffrage for women and neglected to demonstrate knowledge of the competitive nature of elections in Iran. Similarly, others did not capture the competitive nature of elections in Nigeria, nor did they indicate that elections were preceded by a formal constitutional transition from a military government. A sizable number of students made unsuccessful arguments about corruption, focusing on economic factors and not on political leadership.

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?

Teachers should give some attention to basic concepts in comparative government and have students work to relate and apply those concepts to concrete political structures, political events, and varieties of political contexts.