



Student Performance Q&A:

2006 AP® United States Government and Politics Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2006 free-response questions for AP® United States 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 was intended to test student knowledge and understanding of two similar but distinct linkage organizations in the United States political system. Specifically, the question asked students to distinguish between the fundamental goal of political parties and the fundamental goal of interest groups and to articulate the ways in which these two entities sometimes interact.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 2.80 out of a possible 6 points. In general, most students demonstrated some knowledge of both interest groups and political parties. Student responses indicated a basic understanding of the ways in which interest groups help parties achieve their fundamental goal. Students were less able to demonstrate ways in which interest groups, in helping political parties, also help themselves achieve their own goal.

What were common student errors or omissions?

The most common error was that students often listed multiple functions of interest groups and political parties rather than clearly identifying *the* fundamental goal of each. A number of students also had difficulty explaining ways that interest groups support the fundamental goal of political parties and how that form of support helps interest groups achieve their fundamental goal.

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 instruct their students to be sure to respond to the specific questions that are asked. For example, when asked to identify the fundamental goal of political parties and interest groups, students should refrain from listing multiple goals, which implies that they are unsure of the fundamental goal.

Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

This question was intended to examine student knowledge and understanding of Social Security, an important public policy issue in United States government and politics.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 3.16 out of a possible 6 points. Most students had some general knowledge about the political and public policy issues related to Social Security and could identify the primary source of revenue for the program. The vast majority of students were able to use the chart that was provided in the question to identify one demographic trend that threatened the future of the Social Security program. However, most students had some difficulty in explaining *how* the demographic trend they identified was a danger.

What were common student errors or omissions?

A common omission was an explanation of one of the essential elements that characterize an entitlement program. Students often neglected to mention both the eligibility requirements and the mandatory nature of entitlement spending. Many students provided vague identifications of the source of funding for Social Security (for example, referring merely to “taxes” rather than specifically identifying the payroll tax). Furthermore, many students did not appear to understand what was meant by “demographic” trend.

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 continue to stress the importance of assimilating and being able to apply critical social science concepts like “demographic trends.” Another way that teachers can help students improve their performance is by encouraging precision in the definition of key terms and concepts.

Question 3

What was the intent of this question?

This question was intended to test student knowledge and understanding of the discretionary power delegated by Congress to bureaucratic agencies in the implementation of federal law.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 3.38 out of a possible 6 points. Most students seemed to understand the intent of the question and demonstrated a basic understanding of why Congress grants federal agencies policy-making discretion. The majority could also identify the policy area of one of the agencies listed and give a specific example of how that agency exercises that discretion. Moreover, most students displayed a general knowledge of the ways Congress ensures that federal agencies follow legislative intent.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Although students had a general understanding of why Congress gives federal agencies policy-making discretion, they often could clearly explain only one specific reason for this and commonly made the error of offering “checks and balances” as another reason. Common incorrect answers to the question of how Congress ensures that federal agencies respect legislative intent included “Congress hires/fires members of the agency” and “Congress impeaches members of the agency.”

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?

Being able to connect and relate information and knowledge about discrete subjects is a central analytical and critical thinking skill for students of government and politics. Teachers should make learning such linkages integral to their lectures and course assignments. They should also convey to students the importance of integrating their knowledge of different relevant topics in United States government and politics when responding to free-response questions.

Question 4

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of this question was to gauge student understanding of the theoretical arguments and rationales for the bicameral structure of the United States Congress and to examine their knowledge of the distinctive powers granted to each chamber.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 2.49 out of a possible 6 points. In general, most students were able to discuss how the provisions of the Connecticut Compromise justified the creation of two congressional chambers with different bases of representation. Most were also able to identify at least one unique power granted to each chamber. Explanations of those powers tended not to be as strong.

What were common student errors or omissions?

A common error was students' inability to provide a rationale or justification for bicameralism other than the Connecticut Compromise. Many were unable to identify more than one specific and unique power for each of the chambers. Another weakness in the responses was the tendency for students to discuss general congressional powers rather than specific powers connected to a particular chamber. Quite a few students had difficulty explaining why the powers they identified were expressly given to the House or the Senate.

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 theoretical bases of political institutions are a significant aspect of United States government and politics. Teachers should address this topic when covering the United States Constitution and revisit the theoretical foundations of political institutions when each specific institution is covered in class.