



Student Performance Q&A:
2007 AP® United States Government and Politics
Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2007 free-response questions for AP® United States Government and Politics were written by the Chief Reader, Gary Copeland of the University of Oklahoma in Norman. 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 overall intent of this question was to examine the winner-take-all feature of the electoral college and to see if students could address the consequences of the system. The question focused on specific aspects of the system by asking students (1) to define the winner-take-all feature of the electoral college; (2) to explain how the winner-take-all feature affects the campaign strategy of the presidential candidates from the two major political parties; (3) to explain one way in which the winner-take-all feature hinders third-party candidates; and (4) to explain two reasons why the electoral college has not been abolished.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 1.58 out of a possible 5 points. Students were often able to describe the winner-take-all feature of the electoral college and frequently could explain how it hinders third-party candidates. Overall student performance was low, especially given the importance of the system in recent elections.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students were typically unable to explain accurately how the winner-take-all feature of the electoral college affects the way in which presidential candidates from the two major political parties run their campaigns and were incapable of linking it to a particular campaign strategy. They were also

often unable to provide one or two correct reasons why the electoral college has not been abolished.

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 critical information conveyed about this subject should emphasize that the electoral college is an institution that is not neutral in its impact. Students need to understand the mechanics of the system and how they influence the pursuit of the 270 electoral votes necessary to win the presidency. It is important for students to understand the difference between the national election and the campaign for individual states' electoral votes, as well as other consequences of the system. Answering each part in the sequence given by the question might help to highlight the points that the student should try to make.

Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

The primary objective of this question was not to test students on their knowledge of Supreme Court cases per se but rather to assess their understanding of religious freedom and the fact that there are *limits* to the freedom of religion. This question required students to identify the two First Amendment clauses relating to religion, and then, via two Supreme Court cases, students had an opportunity to show how the Supreme Court has imposed limits on freedom of religion. To facilitate responses to parts (b) and (d), students were cued to the topic of each case within the question. The question tested whether students with a basic factual understanding of religious freedom could use that understanding in an analytic way.

A secondary intent of the question was to determine if students understood that even though the Supreme Court can make a decision, other political institutions can limit the impact of such a decision.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 2.69 out of a possible 6 points. Performance on this question was mixed. Although students had difficulties identifying the pertinent constitutional clauses, they usually were able to describe a Supreme Court ruling in at least one of the cases. In addition, some were able to describe one way in which political institutions could blunt the impact of Supreme Court decisions. For example, many noted that this could be done with the passage of a constitutional amendment or by the refusal of the executive branch to enforce Supreme Court decisions.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Many students were unable to identify the establishment clause as the First Amendment clause upon which *Engel v. Vitale* and *Lemon v. Kurtzman* were based. Many were also unable to identify the free exercise clause as the First Amendment clause upon which *Reynolds v. United States* and *Oregon v. Smith* were based.

Students were often under the impression that *Engel v. Vitale* banned “prayer in school” without understanding that the key to the case was that it actually banned *state-sponsored* (sanctioned) prayer in school. Others believed that polygamy was legal under *Reynolds v. United States* and that the Supreme Court legalized drugs in religious ceremonies under *Oregon v. Smith*. Student performance on *Lemon v. Kurtzman* was substantially better than on the other three cases.

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 reinforce fundamental parts of the Constitution such as the establishment clause and the free exercise clause. Furthermore, it is important for students to understand *general principles* that the Supreme Court has established. A student who knew, for example, that freedom of religion is a relative right rather than an absolute right would probably have been able to answer parts (b) and (d) even without a complete knowledge of the court cases. Students should be encouraged to move beyond memorization to critical evaluation of key concepts.

Question 3

What was the intent of this question?

This question was intended to examine students’ understanding of the nature of the relationship between Congress and the presidency regarding war. The frame of the question was the War Powers Resolution of 1973, but the central issue had to do with formal conflicts between the two branches. Students needed to know the primary constitutional conflict, two provisions in the resolution itself, and two other formal congressional powers regarding the war-making dilemma.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 2.62 out of a possible 7 points, with students earning points across the entire range of scores. The highest possible score occurred infrequently, seemingly separating the very top students from others in an appropriate manner.

What were common student errors or omissions?

In part (a), although perhaps a majority of students correctly identified the primary conflict between Congress (declaration of war) and the President (commander-in-chief) in war making, a common error was to say that “the President declares war” or to claim that the primary constitutional power of Congress regarding war had to do with money or appropriations.

In part (b) students were generally able to understand that the War Powers Resolution limited presidential war making, but many were unclear about any of the particular provisions of the act. Given the problematic constitutional status of the War Powers Resolution and the fact that it has rarely been invoked over its 34-year history, it is probably not surprising that such detailed knowledge is not easily obtained. Additionally, textbooks provide vague, incomplete, or inaccurate discussions of some of the provisions of the law.

In part (c) most students were able to identify one or more “other” powers of Congress regarding war making. In many cases, however, they could not articulate explicitly how such powers impinge on war making.

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?

One of the potentially deceiving aspects of this question was that its primary focus was on the nature of the congressional/presidential conflict over war making rather than on the War Powers Resolution itself. Teachers who had emphasized the conceptual nature of the relationship between the two branches would have put their students in a position to do well on this question, even without specific knowledge of the resolution itself.

Question 4

What was the intent of this question?

This question asked students to define federalism and to explain how certain tools are used by the federal and state governments to affect government policy in order to increase their respective influence.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 2.21 out of a possible 5 points. Students were usually able to define federalism and frequently could explain one or two ways that the federal government increases its power relative to the states. They were typically less able to correctly explain how states succeed in increasing their power relative to the federal government.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students often confused federalism with separation of powers and therefore were unable to define the term. Many could not distinguish categorical grants from block grants. Others incorrectly asserted that mandates are conditions placed on federal grants or thought that federal block grants constituted a “blank check,” giving the states complete discretion over the federal funds. Finally, although students were generally able to define the Tenth Amendment, they often could not explain how it is used to increase the power of the states relative to the federal government.

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?

Many students understood the core elements of federalism, as well as the items listed in parts (b) and (c), but they were less able to grasp the connections among the key concepts. It is important for students to learn linkages and relationships across the entire curriculum. Additionally, responses do not have to be in formal, essay format. Answering the question in the sequence given by the prompt highlights the points that the student is trying to make.