



Student Performance Q&A: 2008 AP® Comparative Government and Politics Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2008 free-response questions for AP® Comparative Government and Politics were written by the Chief Reader, Jean C. Robinson of Indiana University in Bloomington. The comments 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 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 concept of political socialization and to determine if students could make the link between an agent of socialization and the process of socialization. Students had three specific tasks: (1) to define political socialization; (2) to identify an agent of political socialization; and (3) to explain how the identified agent promotes political socialization.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 1.39 out of a possible 3 points. Many students clearly understood the concept of political socialization. They accurately defined it as a process by which people form their ideas about government. Even more students were able to earn a point for the second task, identifying an agent of political socialization. The task to “identify” was appropriate for this part of the question. Very few students simply used a one-word response or list; the vast majority put the task in context with the question and used complete sentences to correctly identify the agent. Explaining how the identified agent promotes political socialization was the most difficult task and, consequently, the task for which students were least likely to earn a point.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Many students could not complete the task of defining political socialization. Incorrect responses usually attempted to define it as political education, political identification, or political participation. However, most students had some familiarity with the concept of political socialization, and even if they could not succinctly define it, they could identify an agent. The most frequent responses were “the family/parents,” “school,” and “the media.” Sometimes, however, instead of identifying an agent, students identified a mechanism used by an agent. These examples included “education,” “voting,” and “elections.”

Students had difficulty explaining “how” the agent promotes political socialization rather than simply “what” the agent does. This distinction was one that many otherwise knowledgeable students did not make. They did not draw the necessary logical connection between the actions of an agent and how that action promotes formation of attitudes about government. For example, the typical student often used “the family” as the agent of socialization for the second task. In the third task, that student would then state that the family is the number one agent of socialization, that the family spends lots of time with its children, and that children vote the same way as their parents. These are all accurate statements, yet they do not explain *how* the family promotes political socialization.

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 would be helpful for teachers to work with students on understanding the expectations of different task words and the higher order of analysis that some task words anticipate. Thus the task word “define” is important; in a concept-driven course, it is imperative that students demonstrate their understanding of important terms and be able to use their own words to define meanings. Students should expect to see this straightforward task on the exam, and teachers should emphasize the process of defining, identifying, and explaining in their courses. In particular, teachers may want to pay attention to tasks requiring a higher order of analysis; teachers should help students to understand the difference between “how” questions and “what” questions (i.e., analytical versus descriptive or examples).

Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

The overall intent of this question was to examine the concept of transparency in government and to see if students could describe examples of a government acting to limit transparency within the context of a particular case. Students had to: (1) explain what it means to say that a government has transparency and (2) describe two examples that show how the Chinese government has limited transparency since 1977.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 1.02 out of a possible 3 points. Many students understood the concept of transparency. The question distinguished between students who did and did not understand that government actions create transparency. Those students who did not get the first point for

explaining what it means for a government to have transparency were still able to earn points if they could correctly describe examples of how the Chinese government since 1997 limits transparency. The question also distinguished between students with more basic knowledge (those who could identify an example) and those who truly understood *how* the example of government action or policy limited transparency.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Although it appeared that many students understood the concept of transparency, some did not earn the point because they described the consequences of a government being transparent rather than explaining what it means to say that a government has transparency. Many students who correctly identified examples lost points for not elaborating on those identifications by linking them to the concept of transparency.

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 help students learn to read the question carefully and make sure to answer the question that has been asked. For this question, students provided examples rather than the explanations the question required. More work on conceptualizing, in addition to learning examples and descriptions, would introduce students to this more complex reasoning.

Question 3

What was the intent of this question?

The overall intent of this question was to examine the concept of sovereignty and to determine if students could describe how the European Union's supranational status requires that member states relinquish ultimate authority in specific areas over their people and territories. Students had to: (1) define sovereignty and (2) describe two ways in which member states give up some sovereignty as members of the European Union (EU).

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 0.91 out of a possible 3 points. "Sovereignty" is a heading on the Curriculum Outline for this course in the *AP Government and Politics Course Description*, and students should expect to see it appear as a term on the free-response section of the exam. Consequently, this question was a good discriminator between those students who know the term and those who do not. A number of students gave sophisticated definitions that included the difference between internal and external sovereignty, which, although not needed, was nice to see. Many students understood that member states lose control of policy alternatives when they join the EU. Students accurately identified monetary policy, border control, judicial authority, and so on as issues for which the EU has standards with which states comply.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students struggled with the fundamental definition and often gave vague answers. Many students were content to say that sovereignty is "the right to rule," which is too simplistic. In their

descriptions of two ways in which member states give up some sovereignty as members of the EU, students who had only a passing familiarity with that institution were not able to give a depiction of the characteristics of this process of sovereignty loss. Although many students could accurately identify a policy, they often either gave inaccurate information about that policy, or they failed to describe how sovereignty was actually given up.

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 task “to define” is an important one that students have to be able to accomplish in this course. When responding to any of the short-answer questions on the exam, students must know how to move between definition, identification, and explanation.

Question 4

What was the intent of this question?

The overall intent of this question was for students to define a theocracy as a system that is based on religious authority or leadership. The second part of the question asked students to identify nationally elected officials in the theocracy of Iran. The aim was to emphasize the dominant role of religious doctrine along with citizen input.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 1.8 out of a possible 3 points. While some students had a basic understanding of theocracy, they had trouble defining it. Many students stopped short of including the impact that religion has in a theocracy. Identifying two national-level institutions in Iran that are directly elected seemed manageable for most students.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Rather than stating that religion is the dominant or controlling authority in a theocracy, students wrote that in a theocracy, religion has a role in or is a part of the government. Many students also simply stated that a theocracy is based on religion—the general term “religion”—rather than noting that it is tied directly to a specific religious doctrine or authority.

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?

Overall, most students did well on this question: it was straightforward and relatively simple. Teachers and students are gaining more knowledge of Iranian institutions and the kinds of political structures represented in Iran. Helping students understand that they need to provide full definitions stating the obvious will assist them in improving their performance.

Question 5

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of the question was for students to provide a definition of a welfare state and then relate Great Britain, through a description of two of its social welfare programs, to that definition. Skills tested were “define” and “apply.”

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 1 out of a possible 3 points. Definitions can be problematic for students, but many were able to handle the task. Even so, they had more trouble adequately describing two examples of social welfare policy important in Great Britain. For the most part, students demonstrated a basic understanding of British welfare programs, but many could not provide a description beyond just mentioning the name of the program

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students raised in the United States have a misperception that a welfare state is one that is organized to help only the poor. This was expressed in many responses, causing students to miss a point. At times, students also went off task by focusing on taxation, stating that “a welfare state means high taxes.” Some students had problems describing what a welfare state does and could only say that “a welfare state provides welfare”—a statement that did not earn a point. Some students gave a superficial definition that needed further clarification, but their responses did not provide those clarifications. While the question wanted students to recognize a welfare state as providing for the *needs* of citizens, students referred to “benefits,” “aid,” “aspects,” “services,” and other terms that needed explanation (“services”—is that health care or garbage collection?). The wording of some of the responses indicated a belief that welfare is only for those in need, so students felt no necessity to provide a further description.

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?

After three years on the exam, the short-answer questions present a continuing challenge for students: the challenge of learning how to define and describe, rather than just name or identify. Teachers might spend time throughout the term helping students to practice these different tasks, moving among the levels of analysis: conceptualizing definitions, finding examples, providing explanations of why the examples work, and learning how to apply the concepts.

Question 6

What was the intent of this question?

The overall intent of this question was for students to examine multiparty, two-party, and one-party systems, linking them to the electoral systems that tend to lead to the various party systems, and explaining advantages of each type of system. The question asked students to: (1) identify and

explain the type of electoral system that tends to create a multiparty system; (2) identify and explain the type of electoral system that tends to create a two-party system; (3) describe one reason that a one-party system might emerge; and (4) explain one advantage of each system (multiparty, two party, or one party) in a multiethnic society.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 2.63 out of a possible 6 points. Generally, parts (a), (b), and (c) were clear, and many students could earn points; part (d), in which students needed to show the benefits of the different party systems for a multiethnic society, was more challenging. Many students correctly identified and explained proportional representation as the type of electoral system that tends to create a multiparty system, and many students correctly described reasons that a one-party system might emerge. Students generally had few problems explaining one advantage of a multiparty system and one advantage of a two-party system in a multiethnic society; however, the responses revealed that students found it more difficult to explain an advantage for a one-party system in a multiethnic society; that is, they could not move from a simple descriptor or definition to a deeper understanding of how two concepts are related (in this case, party systems and political and ethnic diversity). The tasks in this question distinguished between students who had a good grasp of these concepts and could apply them and those who did not have the same level of understanding.

What were common student errors or omissions?

The majority of students who did not earn the point for a correct identification and explanation of proportional representation either did not identify proportional representation as the electoral system that tends to create multiparty systems or did not explain the electoral system.

Although most students could clearly associate the two-party system with the United States or Great Britain, many answers linked the presidential system or the federal system to the two-party system. In other words, students were less clear about what part of the system tended to lead to a two-party system, and/or they linked it to something other than the electoral system. In this part of the question, it was necessary for students to show they understood that the electoral system deals with a district or a region or a seat, rather than with a country as a whole. Because of this, the very general answers, such as those that discussed “majority parties,” were not accepted.

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?

A substantial number of students apparently wrote all they know about the election systems for each country covered in the AP Comparative Government and Politics course, but examples alone do not demonstrate that students have a conceptual grasp of important themes and terms. Students may not be internalizing that the conceptual question does not require specific country examples. Teachers might emphasize practice with this type of question, which gets at basic concepts that comparative politics students must understand. Students should be encouraged to make connections among and between concepts and to apply their understanding of how political institutions work in different settings (large and small populations, homogeneous or diverse, urban or rural, etc.). It appears that students learn a clear, concise definition for proportional representation, but they do not have the same level of clarity when explaining single-member district plurality electoral systems.

Question 7

What was the intent of this question?

Economic reforms have led to major legal reforms in China. Question 7 was designed to test students' knowledge of such reforms in the last two decades by asking them to: (1) identify two reforms to the Chinese legal system in the last two decades; (2) explain two reasons the reforms have occurred; and (3) identify two important features of the legal system that have *not* changed in the past two decades.

How well did students perform on this question?

Students did not perform well on this question. The mean score was 0.98 out of a possible 6 points. The few students who grasped the meaning of the phrase "legal system" and thus understood the intent of the question provided responses that received higher scores. Students who grasped the intent of the question generally were often able to offer reasons for the reforms, but they sometimes lost points by being too vague in their explanations. On average, students seemed to perform best on the third part of the question by noting one or more of the following: "the CCP still controls the legal system," "there is no judicial review," "high rates of incarceration," "high rates of conviction," and "use of capital punishment." Even students with less overall knowledge of China could get a point in this section.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Those who failed to grasp the meaning of the phrase "legal system" and focused instead on political reforms or economic and social policy reforms received low scores. Also, students often showed knowledge of China under Mao Zedong, but their answers lacked detailed knowledge about contemporary China (the past two decades). Some students had abundant information about current economic reforms but could not make the connection to the new laws and legal procedures established to protect capital and investments or to create binding legal commercial frameworks. Many students wrote generic responses about various political and economic reforms in China with no reference to reforms to the legal system. Few students wrote about the judicial 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?

Information about legal and judicial reforms in China is available in many places, although not always in any detail in textbooks. Teachers are reminded that briefing papers and additional substantive materials and resources must be used in the Comparative Government and Politics class to ensure that students are aware of the kinds of issues discussed in the commensurate college course. There is a tendency to focus on economic reform in China to the exclusion of other kinds of reforms (and failure to reform). Teachers might remind students that authoritarian systems still have elements of legal/judicial processes, and that the conceptual outline should be used to understand all kinds of political institutions in less-democratic as well as more-democratic systems.

Question 8

What was the intent of this question?

The overall intent of this question was for students to examine economic and political liberalization in the context of Mexico and Russia. It asked students to: (1) define both economic liberalization and political liberalization; (2) describe one economic liberalization policy in Mexico (since 1985) and in Russia (since 1991); (3) describe one political liberalization policy in Mexico (since 1985) and in Russia (since 1991); and (4) compare one consequence of economic liberalization on class in both Russia and Mexico.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 2.26 out of a possible 7 points. Students did well on this question if they could distinguish economic from political liberalization, compare these processes in Russia and Mexico, and discuss the consequences of economic liberalization. Students were likely to do *very well* if they grasped the difference between political liberalization and democratization, comprehended what constitutes a policy, and summarized class differences.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Most students had a good sense of economic liberalization as being about “more free markets.” Those who wrote answers that did not earn points tended to argue that economic liberalization was about increasing “free trade,” instead of linking this economic process to the domestic politics that are the focus of comparative politics. Overall, many students relied more on their general knowledge of politics and current events than on the definitions and concepts they learned in class.

Students appeared less familiar with the concept of political liberalization, and very few knew the distinction between political liberalization (increasing civil liberties and political rights) and democratization (reforming the electoral procedures to establish free, fair, and competitive elections). Students also appeared to have trouble comprehending what constitutes a policy, but most who knew the countries well came up with a description of at least some policies. Social class was also a challenging concept for some students; however, many grasped the concept and discussed poor farmers and the North–South divide in Mexico and the oligarchs in Russia. Students who did not understand social class spoke of the general social pain of liberalization.

In terms of the countries, students are clearly still learning a lot about Russia’s transition away from communism. Weaker students did know about glasnost and perestroika but knew less about post-1991 policies. Students also appeared to have a tough time writing about something counterintuitive: liberalization in Russia at a time when Putin has backtracked. This kind of answer required application of course concepts, not just knowledge of events. Students also struggled to describe a policy that fostered political liberalization, perhaps because they did not have a sense of the difference between democratization and liberalization (“free, fair elections” was the most common answer).

Students seemed more knowledgeable about Mexico. Many were able to identify the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) as a policy of economic liberalization. Many could also come up with reforms to the electoral system to eliminate corruption (specifically, the Federal Electoral Institute). Others could only come up with the vague statement that elections are now more free and fair, as illustrated by the end of dominance by the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI); these responses did not earn a point.

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 can help students learn to distinguish between such concepts as democratization and liberalization and how to apply political science concepts (as opposed to descriptions of current events) to these country-concepts questions. Many students appeared to be relatively adept at the task of “describing,” and some were adequate at “defining” (they tended to define the outcome of liberalization instead of the process). On the other hand, explicit comparison is challenging for students. More opportunities to compare and apply conceptual terms will help them to perform better.