



Student Performance Q&A:
2008 AP[®] United States Government and Politics
Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2008 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 congressional reapportionment, redistricting, and gerrymandering. The question asked students to (1) define congressional reapportionment and explain one reason why it is important to the states; (2) define congressional redistricting; (3) explain two goals of politicians when they gerrymander during redistricting; and (4) describe two limits that the United States Supreme Court has placed on congressional redistricting.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 2.68 out of a possible 7 points. In part (a) students struggled with defining reapportionment. Students who were able to correctly do so, however, were usually able to explain how or why it is important to the states. Even if students were unable to complete either of these tasks, they were generally able to define redistricting correctly in part (b).

Many students were able to earn at least one point on part (c). When they did so, they often explained how gerrymandering can enhance political party strength or how it can increase racial minority representation. Part (d) seemed to be the most difficult part of the question. Most students were unable to correctly describe a limit that the United States Supreme Court has placed upon congressional redistricting.

What were common student errors or omissions?

In part (a) many students confused redistricting with reapportionment. In addition, while in part (c) they may have *identified* a goal of politicians when politicians gerrymander, students often did not explain *how* or *why* it was a goal. Furthermore, when answering part (d), students did not seem to understand that while race can be taken into account as a factor during congressional redistricting, it cannot be the *sole* factor.

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 need to emphasize to students that different parts of a question may call for different tasks. For example, part (c) asked students to *explain*—not merely *identify*—a goal of politicians when they gerrymander. Part (d) asked students to *describe*—not merely *identify*—a limit that the United States Supreme Court has placed upon congressional redistricting.

Teachers should also reinforce with students that redistricting occurs as a *consequence* of reapportionment; once House seats are reallocated to the states, *then* congressional redistricting takes place.

Further emphasis is also needed on the limits that the Supreme Court has placed on congressional redistricting. Many students did not seem to know that congressional districts must be as nearly equal in population as possible; others seemed to have a vague sense about this requirement but were unable to articulate it in a coherent manner.

Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

The overall intent of this question was to examine the relationship between the president and Congress in the area of domestic policymaking. The question focused on specific aspects of domestic policymaking by asking students to (1) describe two formal, enumerated powers of the president; (2) define two of three possible limits to the president's ability to influence domestic policymaking in Congress; and (3) explain how those two limits affect the president's influence over domestic policymaking in Congress.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 2.39 out of a possible 6 points. Students were usually able to describe at least one formal, enumerated power that enables the president to exert influence over domestic policy. However, they were often unable to correctly define or provide explanations of limits on the president's ability to influence domestic policymaking in Congress.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students were typically unable to correctly describe a formal, enumerated power, other than the power to veto legislation, that enables the president to exert influence over domestic policymaking. They were often unable to define mandatory spending as anything more than required spending in

the budgetary process, and they often incorrectly defined party polarization as divided government. Few students were able to construct an explanation of how a limit affects the president's ability to influence domestic policymaking in Congress.

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 the differences between domestic and foreign policymaking as well as the formal and informal powers of the president. Students understand that presidential power is limited, but they were unable to explain how specific limitations affect the relationship between the president and Congress in the area of domestic policymaking.

Question 3

What was the intent of this question?

The overall intent of this question was for students to distinguish between fiscal and monetary policies. In addition to defining fiscal policy (1), students were asked to describe how both the executive (2) and legislative (3) branches influence fiscal policy, as a way of assessing their knowledge of how these branches share policymaking responsibility. Students were also asked to (4) define monetary policy and (5) explain two reasons why the major institution making monetary policy, the Federal Reserve Bank, would be independent. This question linked the topics of public policy and major governmental institutions.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 2.68 out of a possible 6 points, and scores spanned the full range. Most students earned scores of 2–4, indicating some level of knowledge. The different aspects of the subject addressed by the question allowed many students to score points even if they did not have a clear understanding of fiscal and monetary policies.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Significant numbers of students did not clearly distinguish between fiscal and monetary policies, naming monetary policy instruments as examples of fiscal policymaking and vice versa. Others provided detailed discussions of the legislative process and fiscal federalism, which were not responsive to the question. Finally, a significant number of students accurately described the organization and activities of the Federal Reserve Board but failed to address the question of why Congress and the president might have been motivated to create it as an independent 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?

The policymaking process is a significant part of the United States Government and Politics curriculum and must be part of the course instruction. Fiscal and monetary policies are among the most important policies made by the federal government and must be understood if one is to

grasp the intersection of politics and economics. Students also need to be given tools to help them integrate content across the curriculum. In particular, public policy can be effectively taught by integrating it into much of the course content instead of considering it a special topic to be covered at the end of the semester.

Question 4

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of the question was to show how voting rights of African Americans were abridged and how alternative political action overcame barriers to the attainment of civil rights. The question asked students to (1) explain how Southern states used legal methods to discourage African American participation in the electoral process; (2) describe alternative modes through which the civil rights movement led organized efforts to affect policy change even though voting was an avenue often closed to African Americans; and (3) explain how one of the alternative forms of participation resulted in policy change in the arena of civil rights.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 2.82 out of a possible 5 points. Clearly, the question addresses a topic about which most students have some level of basic knowledge. Most students were able to identify one or more barriers to African American voting, though a smaller group actually showed the ability to offer an explanation of how the barriers impacted African American participation. Most students were able to describe alternate forms of participation used in the civil rights movement (protest behavior or civil disobedience and interest group behavior were usually mentioned); these descriptions seemed the easiest points for students to earn. Fewer students were able to explain how an alternative participation mode effectively pressured government into formally acting to address civil rights issues.

What were common student errors or omissions?

As would be expected, some students could not identify barriers to voting in part (a) or alternative modes of participation in part (b). However, the more common error was not successfully explaining or describing the concepts identified.

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?

This question was really gratifying in many ways, since a high proportion of students were conversant with the concepts it addressed. However, issues of content knowledge, writing style, and intellectual maturity prevent many high school students from performing at a level consistent with attaining high scores on the AP United States Government and Politics Exam. Offering students frequent opportunities to write and giving consistent feedback on effective writing would help many to perform better on the free-response section of the exam.