



Student Performance Q&A: 2009 AP[®] Comparative Government and Politics Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2009 free-response questions for AP[®] Comparative Government and Politics were written by the Chief Reader, Jean Robinson of Indiana University in Bloomington. 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 for students to contrast policy in a major area of economics and politics—private property—during two periods in recent Chinese political life. Students had to (1) describe the status of private property in China under Mao and (2) explain one more recent (within the past 30 years) Chinese policy that contradicted the Maoist private property policy. The skills tested were both descriptive and analytical: to describe, identify, and explain.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 1.45 out of a possible 3 points. Most students were able to provide a basic description of Maoist policy toward private property. Students also expressed knowledge of programs that recently have reversed this policy, such as privatization of business, privately owned enterprises, constitutional reform, decollectivization of agriculture (although the term *decollectivization* was rarely used), extended leases for land use, and even Special Economic Zones (SEZs). Students usually correctly identified the more recent policy program; however, they did not always explicitly explain how it contradicted the rejection of private property in the Maoist period. At times, students asserted that the more recent policy contradicted Mao's policy (through statements such as, "This contradicted Mao's policy"), but they did not provide an explanation of the contradiction between the recent and older policies on private property.

What were common student errors or omissions?

In the second part of the question, some students referenced a policy but did not connect it to private property. The policy identified was typically a general economic identification, and no linkage to private property was provided. This inevitably resulted in a more general economic response to the question rather than a specific response dealing with private property, as the question required.

Explaining how the recent policy contradicted earlier Maoist policy was the part of the question that most commonly did not earn a point. While students repeated the language from the question regarding the policy contradiction, they did not explicitly explain the difference in private property policy.

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?

When students' identifications are ambiguous, the response needs to provide a more detailed explanation in order to earn the point. For example, SEZs are not solely about private property, and a response that used this as an example needed to include more detail to demonstrate how SEZs are linked to the question of private property. In contrast, the privatization of communes or collectives needed less elaboration as an identification of a change to private property policy. The response had to explicitly link the identification to the concept in order to earn a point.

Identification and explanation are two separate tasks. Students should approach each task in a way that makes it clear they are completing all parts of the question. In this case, the explanation of a recent policy that contradicts Maoist policy was a separate task. Students should learn that they need to attend explicitly to the tasks given in the prompt.

Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

The overall intent of this question was for students to examine the concept of political ideology and to demonstrate an understanding of the concept by describing a central element of the political ideology held by one of the political parties that participated in the 2006 presidential elections in Mexico. Students had three specific tasks: (1) to define the concept of political ideology; (2) to identify one political party that participated in the presidential elections in Mexico; and (3) to describe one central element of that party's political ideology.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 1.43 out of a possible 3 points. Many students understood the concept of political ideology as a set of beliefs and values about politics, policy, or government. Others also accurately defined it as a system of beliefs about how government should rule or be run. Students earned points when they defined ideology as part of a larger pattern of principles and beliefs held by an individual, group, or party.

A large number of students knew at least one political party that participated in the 2006 presidential elections in Mexico. This indicates most students possessed a strong familiarity with the national political forces in Mexican politics and were cognizant of the recent presidential elections in that country. For the identification task, most students contextualized the identification within a complete sentence, and few simply listed the party.

When describing a central element of the political ideology of the identified party, students were required to go beyond listing a singular policy of the party. Fewer students earned a point for description. Students who identified the PAN or the PRD were more likely to be able to earn a point when describing the central element of those parties' ideologies. Students who identified the PRI had greater difficulty elaborating on that party's adaptable, opportunistic, and centrist ideology.

What were common student errors or omissions?

The scoring guidelines defined political ideology as being part of a broader, coherent set of ideas and values about politics, policy, and government. Students often defined political ideology in a more limited fashion, however, focusing on how one feels about or views politics, or how one stands on certain issues. Likewise, students often implied that a political ideology was synonymous with a party's platform, instead of defining a political ideology as the guiding principles and beliefs that inform a particular party platform.

Few students incorrectly identified a political party that participated in the 2006 presidential elections in Mexico. Generally, the students who made such an error identified political parties that either were not parties in Mexico or were parties in the United States.

Describing a central element of the political ideology held by one of the political parties in Mexico, however, was a more difficult task for students. While students did not have to explain why the political party they identified possessed that ideology, they were required to do more than just identify a policy that the party held. Similarly, students did not earn a point for identifying the location of that party on the political spectrum. To earn a point for describing the central element of the political ideology, students were required to illustrate an understanding of or provide context for the political party's set of beliefs.

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 concentrating on the task at hand and of providing context to demonstrate understanding. Teachers should also continue to stress key concepts and encourage students to practice defining key vocabulary terms. Teachers should encourage students to provide more detailed and substantive examples to illustrate their description. Recognizing the distinction between an identification task and a description task would greatly help students accrue points on future exams.

Question 3

What was the intent of this question?

The overall intent of this question was for students to describe the impact of colonialism on the colonized and the colonizer. Students had two specific tasks: (1) to describe one example of how colonialism has shaped contemporary politics in Nigeria and (2) to describe two examples of how colonialism has shaped contemporary politics in Great Britain.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 1.01 out of a possible 3 points. Many students clearly understood how colonialism has shaped contemporary politics in Nigeria. They accurately described such things as ethnic and religious cleavages, political structure, dependency relationships, and instability in governance. Explaining two examples of how colonialism has shaped contemporary politics in Great Britain was a much more difficult task for students.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Some students were able to accurately describe one example in Great Britain, such as immigration, resurgent subnationalism in Scotland and Wales, or international influence. But many students could not complete the task related to Great Britain, perhaps in part because they did not provide a sufficient description and were unable to deal with the counterfactual nature of the task (i.e., asking about the impact of colonialism in the colonizing country). Incorrect responses usually discussed Scotland and Wales as colonies and/or discussed the British reluctance to join the European Union as an explanation of colonial influence. Students also sought to complete the task by using historical information to show an impact of colonialism due to the shift in the power of the monarch.

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 to understand the definition of the word *description* as used on the AP Comparative Government and Politics Exam. Many students did not get beyond mere identification of a phenomenon and provided no further elaboration to show the impact of colonialism.

It would be good practice for teachers to integrate into their teaching plans more tasks that require analysis of counterfactual questions. Students need to learn how to use the conceptual knowledge they have learned in the context of one country and apply that knowledge to other countries, cases, and situations. So, for example, on this exam, practice in class on counterfactuals would have helped students to analyze colonialism in colonizing countries or to describe religion as a source of legitimacy in countries other than theocracies. Counterfactual questions test knowledge that is almost always at the students' command. However, students need to employ critical thinking skills to appropriately apply that knowledge.

Question 4

What was the intent of this question?

The overall intent of this question was for students to examine bureaucracies in authoritarian systems and to link the particular features of those bureaucracies to policy implementation. Students had three specific tasks: (1) to describe a feature of a bureaucracy in the context of an authoritarian system; (2) to explain how that feature can help effective implementation of public policy in an authoritarian system; and (3) to explain how that feature can hinder effective implementation of public policy in an authoritarian system.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 0.46 out of a possible 3 points. Some students understood what bureaucracies generally do and knew that they are part of the executive branch, but that was not the question. Many students demonstrated a basic grasp of authoritarian systems, but that too was not the question. Those students who could describe a feature of bureaucracies in authoritarian systems provided descriptions of patron–client relations, patronage, and their country-specific forms (e.g., *nomenklatura* in the former Soviet Union and *guanxi* in China) that often were clear. Many students were also careful to connect the feature described in the first part of their response to the second and third parts of the question.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Although it appeared that many students generally knew the functions of bureaucracies, many did not earn the point for correctly describing a feature that is specific to bureaucracies in authoritarian systems. Incorrect responses usually attempted to describe hierarchical bureaucracies, small groups of political elites, and the subordination of the bureaucracy to the government. Some students described the actions of authoritarian regimes, including examples of control and coercion, but the question asked specifically about bureaucracies in authoritarian systems. Control and coercion are goals of an authoritarian regime and not bureaucracies.

When explaining how a particular feature could help or hinder policy implementation, some students identified a facilitating and/or obstructing factor without providing more description of its effect on policy implementation. For example, some students identified corruption as a problem for effective policy implementation but did not briefly describe how that is the case. In addition, some students did not place their answers in the context of policy implementation as specified by the question. Instead, some made several references to passing policy rather than implementing, executing, or carrying out policy.

In their explanation of how a particular feature could help policy implementation, some students incorrectly described policy cohesion as “all” bureaucrats (instead of most) implementing policy because they share the ruling party’s ideology, or the students claimed there would be “no” opposition (rather than little opposition). Frequent assertions of such absolute statements resulted in students not earning points, because even in authoritarian systems, bureaucrats do oppose, undermine, and even overtly sabotage policy implementation.

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 reading the exam questions carefully so that students answer the question at hand and complete all its tasks. For example, if a question asks students about effective policy implementation, the students should be sure to address policy *implementation* and not formulation, passage, and so on. Additionally, the tasks of *describing* and *explaining* demand more of students in demonstrating their understanding of concepts and causal connections than the task of simply identifying. Teachers can help students be attuned to recognizing the tasks of a question and carrying out those tasks fully in their responses.

More work on distinguishing bureaucracies in authoritarian systems would help students understand a very important institution of systems in which power is so heavily concentrated in the executive branch and where other horizontal institutions are comparatively less important and less endowed with decision-making authority.

Teachers should ensure that students understand that although a goal of authoritarian regimes may be to establish control, such domination is not absolute. This feature of authoritarian systems is commonly misunderstood to mean that there is never opposition, that everyone—citizens, bureaucrats, and even the core autocrats—shares the same goals, follows the dictates of the regime, and never disagrees, which is not the case in many autocracies. In general, students should learn to avoid absolutes and instead practice more careful and nuanced writing, even on timed exams.

Question 5

What was the intent of this question?

The overall intent of this question was for students to analyze political legitimacy by identifying and describing examples of how religion serves as a source of political legitimacy within the context of two appropriate cases in the AP Comparative Government and Politics course. The question also asked students to respond to these tasks using countries other than the most obvious case, Iran. Thus it forced students to think about how religion confers political legitimacy across a range of cases not normally associated with that relationship. Students had to (1) identify two countries in the AP Comparative Government and Politics course—other than Iran—where religion serves as a source of political legitimacy and (2) describe how religion confers political legitimacy in each of those two countries.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 0.81 out of a possible 3 points. Many students were able to correctly identify two countries in the AP Comparative Government and Politics course—other than Iran—where religion serves as a source of political legitimacy. The task to “identify” was appropriate for this part of the question. Very few students simply used a two-word response or a list; the vast majority put the countries that they identified in context with the question and used complete sentences to identify the countries.

Students who did not get the first point because they had not correctly identified two appropriate countries were still able to earn a point if they could correctly describe how religion confers political legitimacy in at least one country. Describing how religion confers political legitimacy was the most difficult task. Most students who did this successfully were able to correctly describe how religion confers political legitimacy in one of the countries they identified. Fewer were able to earn the final point in the question by correctly describing how religion confers political legitimacy in the second country.

This question distinguished between students with more basic knowledge (those who could identify two examples) and students who truly understood *how* religion confers political legitimacy in those cases. The question also distinguished between students with country-specific knowledge (those who could describe how religion confers political legitimacy in one case) and students with more extensive cross-national knowledge and/or stronger comparative analytical skills (those who could describe how religion confers political legitimacy in two cases).

What were common student errors or omissions?

Although many students were able to identify at least one country in the AP Comparative Government and Politics course—other than Iran—where religion serves as a source of political legitimacy, some incorrectly identified a country where religion does not confer legitimacy, and a few identified a country that is not in the AP Comparative Government and Politics course. Many students who correctly identified two cases did not earn points because their response did not accurately describe how religion confers political legitimacy in those cases.

In the AP Comparative Government and Politics curriculum outline, belief systems (including religion) as a source of political legitimacy are clearly linked to issues of sovereignty, authority, and power in political systems; yet many students described how religion increases support for individual leaders or political parties, rather than how it serves as a source of political legitimacy. Other students described how religion or religious cleavages *detract* from political legitimacy instead of describing how religion confers political legitimacy. Still others described the role of religion in society, made broad generalizations, or did not link religion to legitimacy.

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 tie concepts and relationships together across cases, in addition to discussing them within the context of the countries in which they are most evident. This will enable students to think more comparatively and more analytically across cases. Teachers should also emphasize better understanding of fundamental concepts like political legitimacy and focus on factors related to them (e.g., causes, effects, correlations).

Question 6

What was the intent of this question?

Observers of democratic transition processes around the world have concluded that full liberal democracy is difficult to achieve. A recent contribution to our understanding of democracy has been the idea of the limited or illiberal democracy. Question 6 asked students to demonstrate their knowledge about the similarities and differences between liberal and illiberal democracies and what institutional changes would be necessary to facilitate a shift to a more liberal democracy. This question sought to determine students' conceptual knowledge outside of country-specific contexts.

The question asked students to (a) describe one similarity and one difference between illiberal democracy and liberal democracy; (b) identify an institution that would need to be changed to make an illiberal democracy more liberal; (c) describe a change to the institution identified in (b) that would facilitate a shift from illiberal to liberal democracy; and (d) explain why the change described in (c) would lead to a more liberal democracy.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 2.48 out of a possible 5 points. While students demonstrated a broad conceptual knowledge of democracy, in part (a) they struggled with delineating similarities between illiberal and liberal democracies. Students understood that a liberal democracy has both procedural and substantive elements, and they did a good job of communicating this on the exam for the difference task in part (a). They also did a good job of explaining differences between liberal and illiberal democracies, and they were generally proficient at identifying institutions that, if changed, would lead to a more liberal democracy (part b).

Parts (b), (c), and (d) had a number of standout answers that were factually accurate, substantively important, and particularly well done. Many students correctly identified, for example, the judiciary as an institution that, if changed, could help an illiberal democracy transition to a liberal democracy. Most of the students who correctly identified the judiciary then went on to give excellent responses in parts (c) and (d) about the need for an independent judiciary fully able to act as a check on the other branches of government and how, if this were the case, civil rights and liberties of citizens could be significantly expanded, moving the entire system toward liberal democracy.

Other commonly and correctly identified institutions included the executive branch, election systems, party systems, the media, and the legislative branch. Students who correctly identified election systems or the media in part (b) gave outstanding answers in part (c) about political competition (election systems) and the importance of unbiased political information (media) that is free from government control, and then they were very skilled at linking these changes to a transition to liberal democracy.

What were common student errors or omissions?

In part (a) students wanted to identify the economy as an institution that could be changed and to cite economic liberalization as a cause of political liberalization. These errors did not receive a point. Students also frequently had problems clearly delineating the status of procedural frameworks for illiberal and liberal democracies. Students were often unable to earn the similarity

point because they would write something like, “Liberal and illiberal democracies both have free, fair, and competitive elections.” Such a statement is imprecise and fails to communicate the frequent problems with elections in illiberal democracies.

It was very common to see students earn the point in part (b) for a correct identification of “the legislative branch” but fail to earn the points in parts (c) and (d) because they then began discussing election reform instead of reform to either the legislative or the executive branch. In part (c) students had difficulty distinguishing between election changes and institutional changes to the legislative and executive branches of 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?

Students need to practice how to discern similarities in addition to recognizing contrasts. Students also need to grasp the concept of institutions and discern the ways in which economic liberalization is distinct from political liberalization.

Students need to learn to remain consistent and pay attention to the concept they are discussing. Careful use of words would enhance the clarity of students’ writing and performance. In the case of this question, students lost points when they got sidetracked into describing a change itself instead of how that change relates to the institution they identified.

Question 7

What was the intent of this question?

The overall intent of this question was for students to examine past and current electoral systems in Russia and Mexico, focusing on changes to the electoral system and impacts on the Russian and Mexican party systems. The question asked students to (a) describe Russia’s electoral system before the 2007 Duma elections and explain how the electoral system shaped the pre-2007 Russian party system; (b) describe a specific change to the Russian electoral system that was designed for the 2007 Duma elections and explain its impact on party competition; (c) describe Mexico’s current electoral system; and (d) describe one electoral reform made in Mexico in the 1990s and explain how that reform affected Mexico’s party system.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 2.30 out of a possible 7 points. Overall, students did better on parts (c) and (d), which focused on Mexico, than on parts (a) and (b), which focused on Russia. Many students correctly described Russia’s electoral system before the 2007 Duma elections; however, they had more problems *explaining* how the electoral system shaped the pre-2007 Russian party system. Likewise, it was not uncommon for students to correctly describe a specific change to the Russian electoral system designed for the 2007 Duma elections but then have problems *explaining* the impact of the change on party competition. Thus students experienced difficulty with moving from a simple descriptor to a deeper understanding of how it shaped the party system.

For part (c) many students correctly described Mexico's current electoral system. They found it more difficult to correctly describe one electoral reform made in Mexico in the 1990s. Students generally had few problems explaining how a reform affected Mexico's party system; most students were able to explain which Mexican political parties gained or lost power. Thus students were able to describe and explain the electoral system and party system in Mexico, but they missed the specific electoral change that resulted in a change to Mexico's party system.

What were common student errors or omissions?

The majority of the students who did not earn the points for parts (a) and (b) did not correctly explain how Russia's electoral system shaped the pre-2007 party system and/or had an impact on party competition. Many students correctly identified Russia's change from a mixed-party system to one with only proportional representation. However, describing the impact of the change on the parties was more challenging; students generalized that increased proportional representation leads to increased representation of diverse types of parties. Although this is true for some countries, in Russia just the opposite occurred. In contrast, students who described Russia's shift from a 5 percent to a 7 percent threshold were more likely to correctly explain the lessening of smaller-party representation.

Most students could clearly describe Mexico's current electoral system and the results of electoral reforms made in the 1990s. Students were less clear about what specific electoral change affected Mexico's party system. Rather than discussing an electoral reform, students would describe a general result of the reforms. For example, students would note that there was "less corruption" rather than describing a reform, such as the legalization of foreign electoral observers, that limited the corruption.

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 were able to correctly identify the types of systems that existed and that currently exist in Russia and Mexico, but making linkages between those systems and change was more difficult for them. Teachers might emphasize not only what changes took place in a system as a whole but also which reforms institutionalized those changes. In addition, teachers might discuss the general concept of proportional representation and then look at specific examples showing how it can create different outcomes in different countries or in different types of government systems. A comparison of the impact of proportional representation on party competition in Great Britain and Russia would help students see how the same type of electoral system can create different results.

It appears that students learn about many changes in the Mexican system but do not have the same level of understanding of the changes to the 2007 Russian elections. One reason for this may be that the Russian changes happened recently and thus may not be covered in some textbooks. Elections and other political occurrences that have taken place up to two years before the AP Exam may be included in the exam. Thus it is important that teachers include coverage of recent major political events as a supplement and complement to the textbook.

Question 8

What was the intent of this question?

The overall intent of this question was for students to examine the concept of population growth policies in a comparative context and to link the purposes of such policies with their social or economic consequences. The question was accompanied by a chart comparing the population growth rates of China and Iran from 1970 to 2009; thus the question also tested students' ability to read and interpret a relatively simple graph.

Students had four specific tasks: (a) to describe one trend in the provided graph for Iran and one trend for China; (b) to explain one policy used to address population growth issues in Iran and one policy in China; (c) to explain why both Iran and China pursued population growth policies; and (d) to describe one social or economic consequence of manipulating population growth rates.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 3.62 out of a possible 7 points. Performance on this question was mixed. Many students clearly understood how to identify trends from the provided graph. Students accurately described the overall decrease in the population growth rates for both Iran and China in the given time period, 1970–2009. Additionally, most students could minimally explain China's population growth policy as the one-child policy, which limits many Chinese couples to having one child.

Very few students, however, could identify an Iranian population growth policy. Those students who did explain an Iranian policy did so in two ways, either by discussing family planning laws and the availability of contraceptives or by discussing the accessibility of educational opportunities for women. Some students even chose to explain the pronatalist policies of the Khomeini regime that were intended to increase the size of the army during the Iran–Iraq War. Furthermore, many students were able to present a partial explanation for why Iran and China pursued population growth policies, and most students could identify gender imbalance as one social consequence of manipulating growth rates.

What were common student errors or omissions?

The majority of students who did not earn points in part (a) for describing population growth trends for Iran and China made one of two common errors. The first was mixing up the country trends. For example, students often wrote statements such as, "Iran's growth rate steadily declined since 1970 whereas China's growth rate increased until 1980 before declining." The second error was that students confused the concept of population growth rate with population. Statements claiming that "Iran's and China's populations have decreased from 1970 to 2009" were obviously inaccurate. Both countries' populations have, in fact, increased during this time period.

In part (b) students who did not receive a point for a Chinese population growth policy usually did not explain the policy; they simply identified it as "one child policy." Most students could not identify, much less explain, an Iranian population growth policy. Students often ignored that part of the question, or they stated that Iran was just like China, claimed that Islamic law prohibited births outside of marriage, or asserted that Iran had lowered the voting age to 15. Additionally, students who attempted to explain an increase in population growth rate did not clarify the time period they were discussing, and therefore they did not earn a point.

In part (c) many students simply said that the goal of population growth policies was “to reduce the size of the population.” This answer was insufficient because it did not explain why having too many people is a problem. Alternatively, students who offered a combined response for why both Iran and China had pursued population policies often only identified the problem that the countries were trying to address and failed to explain how changing population growth trends would affect the problem. Another way that students answered part (c) was to try to explain the different reasons for Iran and China’s pursuit of population growth policies. In this case, students often answered correctly for one country but not the other, thereby earning only 1 point.

In part (d) most students who did not earn a point for a description of a social or economic consequence of manipulating population growth rates made one of several errors. They often described what happened if population growth rates were *not* manipulated or discussed population growth policies as “how the government takes away freedoms and rights.” Finally, students made inaccurate statements about the economic consequences of population growth policies.

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?

Students need opportunities to compare concepts. Information on population growth policies in Iran, China, and the other countries in the AP Comparative Government and Politics course is available in many places, although not in all textbooks. Teachers are reminded that population is one of the public policies enumerated in the *AP Government and Politics Course Description* and that briefing papers and additional substantive materials and resources must be used to ensure that students are aware of policy issues. Developing students’ ability to compare policies on a broad level does not require in-depth expertise.

Teachers also need to emphasize the mastery of chart- and graph-reading skills. Students need to practice graph and chart reading and to learn what a trend is and how to describe trends from provided data in order to explain those trends in a comparative context.