



Student Performance Q&A: 2009 AP® United States Government and Politics Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2009 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 intent of this question was to examine students' knowledge of how the framers sought to deal with the power of factions—both majority and minority—in government and of how two of three specific twentieth-century developments have made the United States a more democratic system. The questions asked students: (1) to identify the part of the national government that was originally most closely tied to citizens and explain how that tie was accomplished; (2) to explain two ways the U.S. Constitution limited majority rule; and (3) to explain how democratization in the United States has been promoted by two of three developments—primary elections, the Seventeenth Amendment, or the expansion of suffrage. This question required students to understand how philosophies of government are implemented through institutional arrangements (mechanisms of popular control of government), how these arrangements can be manipulated to make government more or less responsive to the people, and how the United States has become more democratic across its history.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 2.83 out of a possible 6 points.

In answering part (a) many students were able to identify the House of Representatives (or, more generally, Congress) as the institution closest to the people, but they often were not able to explain why it is. In part (b) students were less successful in explaining how the framers limited majority rule; they frequently wrote generally about separation of powers or checks and balances but didn't tie them to limited majority rule. In part (c) students were most successful discussing the expansion of suffrage.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students often failed to reach the level of explanation required for answering *how* or *why* questions successfully. For example, they frequently identified the part of government originally closest to the people without providing an explanation of how frequent elections, direct elections, or small constituencies make the House close to the people; or they identified constitutional features or principles (e.g., separation of powers or checks and balances) without explaining how those limited majority rule. Also, too many students failed to differentiate between the House of Representatives and the Senate.

Few students revealed any knowledge of the Seventeenth Amendment.

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 must respond to the question that has been asked, and they must be particularly sensitive to the importance of providing solid explanations. This question required students to integrate content across several areas of the curriculum and to understand causal relationships. Numerous students revealed substantial knowledge about American politics but never provided the explanations asked of them in the question. Students need to be pushed to develop higher-order thinking skills.

Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of this question was for students to discuss the linkage institutions that connect citizens to government, such as elections, interest groups, political parties, and media. Students were asked: (1) to describe how both age and education are related to the likelihood of voting; (2) to identify a current government electoral requirement that has the effect of decreasing voter turnout and to explain how that requirement serves to decrease voter turnout; and (3) to identify a linkage institution other than elections and explain two ways that it connects citizens to government. The first two parts of the question required basically factual answers, but the explanation needed in the second part raised the expectations for students. The third part of the question required students to draw from a separate part of the U.S. Government and Politics curriculum.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 4.58 out of a possible 7 points.

When answering part (a) students were usually able to describe the relationship between age and the likelihood of voting, as well as the relationship between education and the likelihood of voting. Students were also able to identify a governmental electoral restriction on voting (part [b]), but they often failed to explain how the restriction created obstacles for potential voters. In part (c) students frequently failed to identify a linkage institution other than elections; they would describe a particular example of how citizens influence government without making reference to any linkage institution(s).

What were common student errors or omissions?

In part (a) students often discussed how age and education were related to citizen characteristics other than voting behavior, such as voter apathy, knowledge, and efficacy.

Another common error occurred in part (b), where students identified nongovernmental obstacles to voting, such as cynicism or distrust in the political system.

The most common student error occurred in part (c), where students frequently identified citizen activities that take place independently of a linkage institution, such as participation in public opinion polls, individual letter writing to representatives, and jury duty. Many students didn't seem to understand the concept of a linkage institution.

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 were very comfortable discussing issues surrounding voter turnout—teachers are clearly covering this topic effectively—but they were less comfortable with the expected higher-order thinking involved in providing explanations, and they were less successful when asked to integrate content across the curriculum. As a result, students often went off task, discussing, for example, links between citizens and government that do not involve voting and elections. They frequently used key words like “lobbying,” “campaign donations,” and “polling” but without explaining how linkage institutions use such activities to provide citizens with a method of influencing government or provide government with a method of informing and connecting with citizens.

Question 3

What was the intent of this question?

This question asked students: (1) to describe advantages of the majority party in the House of Representatives (beyond numerical superiority); (2) to describe differences between House and Senate rules that may make it likely that legislation passes in one chamber but not in the other; and (3) to explain how the rules differences can lead to passage of legislation in one chamber but not the other. Students needed to have a factual knowledge of the U.S. Congress and an understanding of how rules structure can facilitate political conflict in order to do well on this question.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 1.75 out of a possible 6 points: about one-third of students earned a score of 0 or didn't even attempt a response.

When answering part (a), many students were able to discuss advantages of the majority party in the House, most commonly describing the Speaker of the House and the Rules Committee, but many mentioned the Speaker or the Rules Committee without explaining how either provides an advantage to the majority party. Students had greater difficulty describing differences in rules in the two chambers in part (b). When they did, they most commonly described the filibuster in the Senate and the Rules Committee in the House. Students also often failed to differentiate between constitutional differences between the two bodies and the rules of each chamber (part [c]). This part

of the question required a higher order of understanding, and most students were unable to explain how the concepts mentioned in part (b) could lead to passage of a piece of legislation in one chamber but not the other.

What were common student errors or omissions?

In part (a) students sometimes did not go beyond the numerical advantage of the majority party; they often merely identified an advantage without describing it. For example, students would write that the majority party chooses the Speaker of the House, but they did not describe any power held by the Speaker.

In part (b) students at times described constitutional differences between the House and the Senate (e.g., a two-year term versus a six-year term) rather than chamber rules.

In part (c) students had difficulty explaining how House–Senate differences might lead to a bill passing in one chamber and not the other. They often discussed a characteristic of one chamber at length without explaining that the other chamber has no such process and without tying this difference to the possibility of legislative success. For example, students often described the Senate use of filibusters without also explaining that there is no such process in the House, which means that a minority might block passage of a bill in the Senate but could not do so in the House.

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 read the exam questions more carefully and understand the difference between terms such as “identify,” “describe,” and “explain.”

Students often lacked substantive knowledge of rules and procedures of Congress. This year’s mean score for a question that covers a key governmental institution is much too low, but it accurately reflects students’ limited information and their subsequent erroneous answers.

Question 4

What was the intent of this question?

This question was designed to evaluate several aspects of students’ performance: their ability to read a table and apply information from a table in a meaningful way to a substantive question; their understanding of the policy agenda and of the national media and the media’s role in the agenda-setting process; and their knowledge of how presidents and the Congress use the media. The question asked students: (1) to define the policy agenda; (2) to explain how the national news media engage in agenda setting; (3) to explain the primary reason the president tends to have an advantage over Congress in gaining media attention; (4) to describe the difference in nightly news viewing patterns of older and younger age-groups and the change from 1974 to 2002 in viewing habits that exists for all age categories; and (5) to describe one implication for presidents in their use of the media to promote their political and policy objectives to the American public.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 2.64 out of a possible 6 points.

Many students did not understand the policy agenda (part [a]), often confusing it with party platforms. Most of those students also were unable to provide an explanation of how the national media influence the policy agenda (part [b]), since it is hard to explain what one does not understand. Overall, most students had some general knowledge of the other aspects of the question, and they usually read the table appropriately.

What were common student errors or omissions?

The most glaring error occurred in part (a), where many students could not give a correct definition of policy agenda. They often confused it with party platforms, issue positions, or views held by individuals rather than a shared sense that an issue should be addressed by government.

In part (b) students often did not link agenda setting by the media to the government. They would more often explain the connection between media attention and citizens' attention but not connect this to why political or policy leaders then focus on the issue.

In part (c) students seemed to have a general sense of why the president has an advantage, but very often they failed to construct a complete explanation. They provided the primary reason but no explanation, or they provided an explanation (or several explanations) without the primary reason(s).

In part (d) most students earned both points, but those who earned only 1 point often misread some of the data in the table.

In part (e) students often did not describe one implication for presidents in their use of the media to promote their political and policy objectives to the American public. Instead, many students wrote generally about candidates and elections and the role of the media.

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 media, their linkage to the institutional actors and the policy process, and their role in agenda setting should be covered more thoroughly, especially in connection with the president and Congress.

Students should be taught how to read data in a table; they should understand the distinction between columns and rows and the importance of the title of the data presented.

This question identified shortcomings in the way students respond to the questions the exam asks. Students should be reminded to provide only *one* answer when a question asks for something like the "primary" or "most important" reason. If a student offers two primary reasons, the response does not receive a point. Additionally, students need to pay close attention to the language used in a question. On this question, many students equated "nightly news" with the media overall and therefore gave answers that were wrong or failed to address the question.