



Student Performance Q&A: 2010 AP® Comparative Government and Politics Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2010 free-response questions for AP® Comparative Government and Politics were written by the Chief Reader, Jean C. 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 intent of this question was for students to demonstrate their understanding of the difference between unitary and federal systems, while providing examples of such systems from the six countries covered in the AP Comparative Government and Politics course. Students had specific tasks: to correctly describe a major difference between a federal system and a unitary system; to identify one country of the six AP Comparative Government and Politics countries that has a federal system; and to identify one that has a unitary system.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for this question was 1.87 out of a possible 3 points. Overall students were largely able to identify correctly one of the six countries in the AP Comparative Government and Politics course that has a unitary system and one that has a federal system. Students who earned a point for a description of a major difference did so by clearly illustrating how the division of power or origins of power in a federal and unitary system differ. Likewise, those responses earning a point for a correct description of a major difference regularly provided substantive examples to demonstrate the difference between the two systems.

What were common student errors or omissions?

While many of the responses indicated that students understood what constituted a federal and a unitary system, respectively, a large number of students struggled to clearly describe a major difference between the two systems. Many students did not earn the point because of imprecise or inaccurate descriptions of unitary systems, while others did not earn the point because of limited or vague assertions about a major difference between the two. Those students who did not earn a point for a correct identification of a country that has a unitary or federal system often mischaracterized

Great Britain as a federal system and Russia as a unitary system, perhaps because of the trends of devolution and centralization, respectively, in those countries.

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 directed task, and students should continue to clearly convey their understanding in their responses. In their descriptions of a major difference between the two systems, students often relied on limited or broad assertions instead of detailing a specific difference.

Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of this question was for students to correctly use the provided data to determine which of the listed hypothetical countries (X, Y) was more economically developed. Students had two specific tasks: (a) to identify which country was more economically developed; and (b) and (c) to select two of the listed indicators and explain how each indicator could be used to support their answer in part (a).

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for this question was 1.67 out of a possible 3 points. Almost all students accurately identified Country X as being more economically developed than Country Y. They experienced difficulty, however, in explaining how a particular indicator could be used to prove their assertion that Country X is more developed. Although many students successfully employed the indicator for percent of workforce in agriculture, use of the GDP per capita and HDI indicators proved more problematic, and a few students incorrectly tried to use population as an indicator of economic development.

What were common student errors or omissions?

The most common error was to simply compare the data for the two countries without explaining how the chosen indicator could be used to determine economic development. For example, students would simply say that the “HDI ranking of Country X is higher than that of Country Y and therefore Country X is more developed” without clearly explaining how a higher HDI ranking is an indicator of economic development. With regard to the indicator for percent of workforce in agriculture, many students mistakenly stated that the indicator is a measure of urbanization as opposed to one of industrialization. Students claimed that “Country X has a higher percentage of people who live in cities and therefore is more economically developed,” which is an incorrect use of the indicator.

The indicator that was used incorrectly most often was GDP per capita. Students often stated that in Country X “people make more money so Country X is more developed,” as opposed to explaining that GDP per capita is a measure of the total value of goods and services produced in a country divided by the population, indicating the domestic wealth per person, not an individual’s salary. In addition, students wrote about GDP as an indicator rather than GDP per capita. The two indicators, GDP and GDP per capita, measure different things, and students who described GDP rather than GDP per capita did not earn a point.

Finally, any student who selected population as an indicator did not earn a point because population is not a direct measure of economic development.

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 provide opportunities for their students to do data analysis. Students must be able to apply their conceptual knowledge to concrete tasks. In this case, students needed to be able to precisely explain how a given indicator can be used to determine level of economic development. It is clear from the results of this question that students knew that Country X was more developed but could not specifically explain how they reached that conclusion.

Question 3

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of the question was for students to demonstrate their understanding of three specific changes in Russia during the Putin presidency that constitute evidence that the Russian political system became more authoritarian. The question required students to demonstrate knowledge of more recent events in Russia and apply that knowledge to the concept of an authoritarian system.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for this question was 0.82 out of a possible 3 points. Although the mean score was low, fewer than 7 percent of the students did not attempt the question; many students received only 1 point, for correctly explaining one change made during the Putin presidency.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students tended to list rather than explain their choices. For example, students would list a change made during Putin's presidency such as control of media without relating it to repression of speech, repression of the press, or an attempt to lessen criticism of Putin. Students also listed an outcome without identifying the change made that facilitated the outcome. A common example was saying that Putin strengthened the executive branch but not identifying the specific change that strengthened the executive. Some students skipped the question. We do not know why, but it might be because it asked for more analysis and included no tasks calling for identification or description, so it appeared more difficult.

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 may want to spend time varying the prompts and directions given on the sample short-answer questions to better prepare students for a question such as this one. Using this question as their base, they could go over these types of questions in class to enable students to see that the question was not as complicated as they perceived it to be. By using the scoring guidelines and student samples for this question, teachers could demonstrate how three examples could easily be used to connect the three choices to authoritarianism.

Question 4

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of this question was for students to discuss the concept of rentier state and its impact on economic development. Students were asked to define a rentier state; to identify one rentier state; and to describe a problem that a rentier state typically faces that has an impact on economic development. The skills tested were both descriptive and analytical: to define, identify and describe.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score of this question was 1.66 out of a possible 3 points. Overall the responses indicated that most students had received instruction on the concept of rentier state. Although students had knowledge of the concept, they were not always able to provide an accurate definition of this kind of state.

What were common student errors or omissions?

A common error was to associate rentier state with direct foreign investment in a country's resources. In many cases students demonstrated the knowledge that Iran, Nigeria and Russia are rentier states. Generally they were also able to provide a good description of a problem that a rentier state typically faces that has an impact on economic development.

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 if teachers emphasized the importance of definitions of concepts, as well as how to explain information or details that relate to definitions. It is also important for teachers to continue to utilize all six countries in the AP Comparative Government and Politics course when presenting general concepts to students (both similarities and differences).

Question 5

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of this question was for students to demonstrate their understanding of parliamentary systems and illustrate their knowledge of the challenges to the sovereignty of Great Britain's parliament. Students had specific tasks: to define the concept of a parliamentary system and to explain two distinct challenges to the sovereignty of Great Britain's parliament.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 0.80 out of a possible 3 points. Some students provided succinct and clear definitions of the major components of a parliamentary system. Those students who earned a point for a correct definition illustrated their understanding of the concept by elucidating the relationship between the chief executive and legislature. Responses that earned a point for a definition consistently conveyed specific and distinct elements of parliamentary systems, including the process by which the chief executive is selected or removed by the legislature and the fusion of power and authority between the executive and legislative branches. A large number of responses indicated a familiarity with more general challenges to the parliamentary sovereignty of Great Britain. Yet many

students did not earn the point for an explanation as they did not fully explain *how* the challenge they provided curtailed or limited parliament's sovereignty. Many students who earned 1 point for an explanation generally did so by explaining how internal challenges, such as the devolution of authority to the parliaments in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, affect the sovereignty of Great Britain's parliament.

What were common student errors or omissions?

When attempting to define "parliamentary system," many students merely described the structure of a parliament, specifically the parliament of Great Britain, and did so without illustrating fundamental concepts of a parliamentary system. Likewise, many students struggled to explain two distinct challenges to the sovereignty of Great Britain's parliament. While demonstrating a clear understanding of how Great Britain's parliament functions, students incorrectly described the partisan nature of British politics as well as the powers of the prime minister, for instance, as challenges to the sovereignty of parliament. Students clearly understood that external forces, such as the European Union and other supranational institutions, present challenges to Great Britain and the sovereignty of its parliament. They had greater difficulty, however, in explaining *how* these external examples challenge the sovereignty of parliament.

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 direct their students to identify the tasks of each question carefully, and students should illustrate their understanding with substantive responses and examples. Students would likewise benefit from paying more careful attention to definitions and avoiding imprecise and vague assertions. Teachers should continue to stress the fundamental concepts of the course, while providing increased attention to defining the key elements of those concepts. When directed to explain a concept, challenge or example, students should address *how or why* the response they provide addresses the question and not limit their response to brief identifications or descriptions. Recognizing the distinction between an explanation task and identification or description tasks would greatly help students accrue points on future exams.

Question 6

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of this question was for students to demonstrate an understanding of the concept of civil society and to explain the conditions that enable civil society to thrive, for which democracy is a necessary precondition. Students had three distinct tasks: (a) to define civil society; (b) to identify a specific condition within a political system that enables civil society to thrive and explain how that identified condition promotes civil society; and (c) to identify another specific condition within a political system that enables civil society to thrive and explain how that identified condition promotes civil society.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 1.44 out of a possible 5 points. Students had difficulties defining civil society but were able to identify conditions needed for civil society to thrive. The conditions students commonly identified as necessary for a democracy largely included free and fair elections, freedoms (speech, assembly, press), political efficacy, and political transparency. The explanations

of free and fair elections, freedoms and political efficacy posed fewer challenges for the students than many of the other identifications.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Overall the responses indicated that most students were unfamiliar with the concept of civil society and had difficulties defining it accurately. Many students provided definitions of political parties or features of a democracy but did not demonstrate an understanding that civil society is separate from government or not necessarily political. A common error was for students to identify voting or representation as conditions necessary for a civil society to thrive, neither of which is accurate or exclusive to democracies. Students also had trouble providing the linkage that explained how their identified condition allowed civil society to thrive.

Some conditions, such as freedoms of speech, assembly and press, were easier than others for students to master. One problem involved the explanations students provided for the identification of “freedoms.” In some cases students would offer unique identifications of freedom of assembly and freedom of speech but provide only one explanation or use the same explanation for each identification. In these cases, because the explanations in parts (b) and (c) were not distinct, they could only earn 1 point for explanation. Only when they were able to provide unique explanations for these conditions were they able to obtain a second explanation point.

Finally, another common error involved political transparency: Students had difficulty making an explicit link to how transparency could facilitate civil society. Many students simply defined the term rather than explain the causal relationship.

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?

Definitions are difficult for students to master, and more work is needed to help students understand the elements necessary for an effective definition. In addition, students struggle with making the appropriate connections between their explanation and their identification. Exercises that ask students to develop explanations linking concepts or to derive more abstract explanations from specific political events or practices will help students to develop better analytical skills. Finally, using past exam questions and returning to the course outline will remind students that some concepts are examined almost every year: Civil society has been asked about in one form or another on the AP Exam over the past several years, so it is surprising that students seem unfamiliar with the concept.

Question 7

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of this question was for students to compare types of political participation, including conventional forms and violence. Using information from a table, students had to (a) identify and explain a difference between the types of conventional forms of participation in Nigeria and those in Great Britain; (b) identify and explain a second difference between conventional forms of participation in Nigeria and those in Great Britain; (c) describe one specific incident of violent political activity in Great Britain in the last fifteen years and one specific incident of violent political activity in Nigeria in the last fifteen years; and (d) explain why citizens of both countries might choose violent acts over more conventional forms of political participation. The skills tested were both descriptive and analytical: to interpret a table, describe, identify and explain.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score on this question was 3.38 out of a possible 7 points. Students demonstrated on the whole that they understood the concept of participation, could use data presented in tabular form, and were able to derive meaningful explanations for differences in participation on the basis of some concrete knowledge of the two countries. Most students were able to identify differences in the levels of participation, and many were able to explain reasons for these differences. Still, some students had difficulty linking their explanation to the identification. Many students accurately explained why citizens of both countries might choose violent acts over more conventional forms of participation. Common explanations focused on the lack of viable alternatives, the belief that the government does not hear citizens' voices, and the idea that violence attracts the attention of the government and news media.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Some students did not describe the nature of the difference in levels of conventional participation, simply indicating that there was a difference. Students often failed to give an accurate explanation for the greater rate of political discussion in Nigeria. Responses tended to focus on the problems facing Nigeria rather than the political culture that encourages discussion. Students often mentioned ethnic tension and corruption in Nigeria without linking them to voter turnout or signing petitions.

Most students had difficulty describing specific incidents of violence in either Great Britain or Nigeria in the last fifteen years and did not provide enough context for their responses. For example, many students discussed violence caused by the Irish Republican Army but did not mention a specific incident, event or time frame. This is an example of ongoing violence rather than a specific incident or event. Similarly, many responses described ethnic violence in Nigeria without providing a context for the discussion, such as a date, location, type of incident or event, or description of those targeted. In discussing why citizens might choose violence over more conventional forms of participation, some responses inaccurately stated that violence is more effective in accomplishing citizens' goals than more conventional means.

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 becoming more precise and more substantive in their analyses. For instance, in this question, responses needed to directly compare countries by providing comparative substantive information about the two countries; a simple statement that the rates were different was not sufficient. Furthermore, students need to learn how to link identifications with explanations. For example, a comparative statement that Nigeria is more rural than Great Britain, while correct, is insufficient unless the student explains why being more rural has an impact on participation or going to the polls.

Students should avoid making general imprecise statements and instead demonstrate a historical awareness of the political timelines of the countries covered in the AP Comparative Government and Politics course. For example, responses that mentioned general violence by the Irish Republican Army or ethnic violence in Nigeria did not describe specific events or time periods and therefore did not provide the necessary context to earn points. Finally, it is very important that students study recent material not included in the textbooks in order to stay informed about comparative government and politics. This would help them provide specific examples in their responses.

Question 8

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of this question was for students to examine the concepts of political competition and transparency, the roles of a key institution in the electoral process in two different countries, and how these institutions affect electoral systems' political competition and transparency in a comparative context. The skills tested were both descriptive and analytical: to describe, explain and compare. Students had four specific tasks: (a) to describe each of the two concepts — political competition and transparency; (b) to explain the functions of a key institution in each of two different electoral processes — the Guardian Council in Iran and the Institute of Federal Elections (IFE) in Mexico; (c) to compare transparency in the electoral process in post-1979 Iran with transparency in the electoral process in post-1985 Mexico; and (d) to compare political competition in the electoral process in post-1979 Iran with political competition in the electoral process in post-1985 Mexico.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score on this question was 3.49 out of a possible 8 points. The scores were well distributed along the scoring scale. Students seemed to be particularly adept at explaining the functions of the identified institutions in the electoral process in Iran and Mexico. Students were better able than in previous years to accurately describe transparency in the context of politics. They were often able to compare political competition and transparency in the electoral processes in Mexico and Iran. Some students were able to accurately describe political competition. A few students were able to elaborate on their comparisons of political competition and transparency in the electoral processes in post-1985 Mexico and post-1979 Iran.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Most often students had difficulty elaborating on their comparison of transparency in both Mexico and Iran. Many students who did not earn this point discussed corruption or fraud without linking it to transparency. Many students correctly noted that political competition involved multiple actors competing but did not make clear that these actors were competing in meaningful competition (with fair chances to win) and therefore did not earn a point. Some students had difficulty making accurate comparisons, often incorrectly identifying Iran's levels of transparency or political competition relative to those of Mexico (which were more often correctly identified). Some students who had trouble with this point compared changes in each country over time but did not compare across countries.

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?

Based on this year's AP Reading, it has become clear that students are stronger at identifying political institutions and their functions, are a bit weaker at clarifying more complex concepts, and are weakest at connecting concepts and facts about politics in a comparative context. This suggests that teachers should emphasize both concepts and their application in the analysis of politics in comparative perspective. This is not surprising since analysis and conceptual development are higher-order cognitive skills than identification, description and explanation, but teachers should continue to work with students on these more challenging tasks to help them develop and practice abstract skills and understandings.