



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

The following comments on the 2010 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 Constitution protects the rights of individuals who try to promote their interests in a representative democracy, the methods used to accomplish this, and governmental regulations restricting these attempts. The question asked students to (a) explain two provisions in the Bill of Rights that protect individuals who try to influence politics; (b) explain how interest groups use grassroots mobilization, lobbying of government institutions, and litigation to exert influence over policy; and (c) describe one specific federal governmental regulation of interest groups. This question required students to demonstrate an understanding of individual protections in the Bill of Rights, interest group activity, and federal governmental regulations that control or restrict interest group activity.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 2.47 out of a possible 6 points. In answering part (a) many students were able to explain two provisions in the Bill of Rights and the kinds of individual activity they protect. Students rarely confused other portions of the Constitution for the Bill of Rights. In part (b) students were less successful in explaining how grassroots mobilization, lobbying of government institutions, and litigation are used to exert influence over policy. They frequently were able to describe the activity of the interest group but failed to explain how interest groups use the activity to exert influence over policy. Students were most successful in explaining one specific federal governmental regulation of interest groups in part (c).

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students often failed to reach the level of explanation required for answering "how" questions successfully. For example, students might say something appropriate about grassroots mobilization (or the lobbying of governmental institutions, or litigation) but could not explain how the activity

exerts influence on policy. Some students could explain how interest group activity exerts influence but did not provide an adequate description of the activity itself. Students frequently showed no understanding of litigation (e.g., describing litigation as lobbying or legislating). Some students failed to differentiate between campaigning for votes and the grassroots mobilization efforts of interest groups.

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?

- Remind students that they must respond to the question that has been asked, and they must be particularly sensitive to the importance of providing solid explanations.
- Offer students practice in developing the higher-order thinking skills required by this and other questions on the exam. Students appeared to have the basic content to answer this question successfully but struggled to explain the relationship between interest group activity and its impact on policy. The question required students to go beyond identification and description and apply their knowledge about interest groups and policy. This higher level of analysis was difficult for many students.

Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of this question was to assess students' knowledge of the federal bureaucracy. Specifically, students were asked about the merit system, factors that lead to bureaucratic independence, and Constitutional provisions that can be used to check the bureaucracy.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 2.28 out of a possible 6 points. Most students had a general understanding of the merit system, and a significant number could connect the merit system to hiring or promotion. Of the three parts of the question, students did best on the section asking them to explain Constitutional provisions that Congress, the courts and interest groups could use to check the bureaucracy. Still, the answers were often too brief and did not include sufficient supporting details.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Although students could often describe the bureaucracy in general terms, they were frequently unable to describe ways in which the structure of the federal bureaucracy and the complexity of public policy problems contribute to bureaucratic independence. Students often incorrectly used "checks and balances" as a way of describing how the structure of the bureaucracy contributes to bureaucratic independence. They also tended merely to acknowledge the complexity of public policy problems instead of describing a way in which such problems contribute to bureaucratic independence. Regarding the merit system, students often used vague phrases such as "best person" or "hardest worker" rather than describing how federal agencies rely on more specific, demonstrable qualities such as expertise and qualifications. Finally, many students could identify ways in which the Congress, courts and interest groups could check the bureaucracy but did not go beyond mere identification.

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?

Remind students to pay close attention to what the question is asking. All too often students “identified” instead of doing what the question called for, namely, “describe” and “explain.” As a result, answers were often vague and lacked sufficient supporting detail. Responses that required a developed explanation, for example, were often insufficiently addressed with a single sentence.

Question 3

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of this question was to evaluate two aspects of students’ performance: their ability to read a figure and apply the information from the figure in a meaningful way to answer a substantive question, and their knowledge about how the composition of the Democratic and Republican parties has changed in important ways over the last several decades. The question asked students to (a) identify a trend based on information in a figure; (b) explain two reasons why southern voters from 1948 to 2000 were electing Democratic candidates to Congress more frequently than they were choosing Democratic candidates for the presidency; and (c) explain ways in which the composition of parties has changed over the past few decades. This question required students to understand how partisanship changes over time; incumbency advantage, gerrymandering, and differences between state and national parties; and how party composition has changed with respect to Catholics, labor union members, women, and social conservatives.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 1.87 out of a possible 6 points. In answering part (a) many students were able to identify that the percent of House seats held by Democrats has trended down or that the percent of electoral votes for Democratic presidential votes has trended down. In part (b) students were less successful in explaining how incumbency advantage, gerrymandering, or state and national parties relate to why Democratic candidates for Congress were more frequently elected than Democratic candidates for the presidency. In part (c) students were less successful in explaining how each group (Catholics, labor union members, women, social conservatives) changed party composition.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students often failed to reach the level of explanation required to successfully answer “explain why” or “explain how” questions. For example, they frequently defined incumbency advantage or gerrymandering without providing an explanation of how it relates to electing Democratic candidates to Congress more frequently than choosing Democratic candidates for the presidency. Also, too many students failed to differentiate between partisanship and ideology in explaining how party composition changed with respect to the four groups (Catholics, labor union members, women, social conservatives), and too many students confused the respective parties’ policy positions with party composition.

Few students revealed any knowledge of how state and national parties are largely independent of each other and why Democratic congressional candidates and Democratic presidential candidates respond to different constituencies.

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?

- Remind students that they must respond to the question that has been asked and be particularly sensitive to when the question requires a contrast.
- Stress the importance of providing solid explanations. This question required students to integrate vocabulary knowledge with knowledge of the institutions that affect the composition of political parties.
- Help students to develop higher-order thinking skills. To answer part (b) students needed to argue a series of logical or empirical connections as well as contrast congressional elections and presidential elections. Students often had some elements of the explanation, but most were not prepared to offer a full explanation. For example, numerous students revealed knowledge about congressional incumbency advantage and gerrymandering but never provided the contrast asked of them in the question.
- Some work on cause and effect and the elements necessary to make a causal claim would benefit many students. On this question and at other points in the exam, students often confused cause with effect or consequence. For example, students would explain the causes of the incumbency effect but not the consequences of it.

Question 4

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of this question was to have students evaluate limitations on the powers of government in three different contexts: the national executive, the national government and state governments. For the national executive, the question asked for limitations on powers provided by federalism and by checks and balances. For the national government, the question asked for limitations provided by the establishment clause and the guarantee of a public trial. For state governments, the question asked for limitations provided by either the citizenship clause of the Fourteenth Amendment or the selective incorporation of the Bill of Rights.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 1.92 out of a possible 5 points. Students showed a wide variety of understandings on this question. In part (a) they frequently were unable to explain how federalism limits the power of the national executive. Though they understood that a separation of powers affects the national executive, they often were unable to provide an explanation of how checks and balances limited the executive.

In part (b) although most students knew that the establishment clause had to do with limiting the relationship between government and religion, they often could not specify the distinction between establishment and free exercise or how establishment limits government. Most frequently, students confused public trial with specific due process requirements of the Bill of Rights rather than the transparency required by the public trial provision of the Sixth Amendment.

In part (c) many students discussed citizenship in general but often could not explain how national citizenship standards preclude states from denying citizenship. They often discussed incorporation generally but could not successfully elaborate on how that limits states.

What were common student errors or omissions?

The most glaring errors across the whole question were a lack of understanding of basic terminology necessary to explain how those concepts limit the powers of the various governments or public officials.

In part (a) students were often not able to differentiate between federalism and checks and balances, and they often confused federalism with either separation of powers or a “strong federal government.” As a result students who made these errors could not explain how federalism limits the national executive. Some students did not differentiate between the national executive and the national government in general. Checks and balances were more frequently identified correctly, though explanations often specified limits on the national executive but offered only a general statement that checks and balances keep any branch from becoming too powerful.

In part (b) there were too many cases in which students had no inkling that establishment is related to religion; instead they argued that the clause gives governments the right to establish something else. Even when students knew that establishment relates to religion, they often wrote in terms of free exercise of religion rather than establishment. With regard to guarantee of public trial, students often wandered into a general discussion of “fairness,” trial by jury, and due process issues without ever specifically mentioning the direct meaning of “public trial.” As a result they missed a direct explanation necessary for receiving a point.

In part (c) students needed to explain how either citizenship or selective incorporation limits state governments. In the case of citizenship, there were often historical references to the adoption of the Fourteenth Amendment after the Civil War or to the right to vote. Students rarely mentioned that national citizenship standards limit state authority. With regard to selective incorporation, many students discussed their understanding of what the word “incorporation” means without reference to its specific meaning in political science and law. As a result they could not receive a point for an explanation of how this limits state governments. Even those students who could say that incorporation limits state governments often did not explain that this means that states have to respect the rights of citizens.

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 addressed how well students understand basic concepts — federalism, checks and balances, the Establishment Clause, public trial, citizenship, selective incorporation — and their ability to relate those concepts to consequences. As is usually the case, teachers face the challenge of first conveying technical terminology to students and then developing the higher-order thinking skills necessary to provide explanations of how the concepts affect other components of American politics. And of course, there are students who probably knew the material but did not read the question carefully or express their knowledge effectively in a free-response format.