



Student Performance Q&A: 2011 AP[®] Comparative Government and Politics Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2011 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 intent of the question was for students to examine the concept of institutionalized political legitimacy, to consider this in the context of a country in which competing sources of political legitimacy exist, and to consider how tensions can result from the presence of multiple sources of political legitimacy. The skills tested were both descriptive and analytical: to describe sources of political legitimacy and to discuss a relationship driven by competing sources of legitimacy. Students had three specific tasks: to describe a source of political legitimacy established by the constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran; to describe a second, distinct source of political legitimacy established by the constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran; and to discuss one example of how having both of these sources of political legitimacy simultaneously has led to tensions in Iran in the last 15 years.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was a 1.45 out of a possible 3 points. Students seemed to be particularly adept at describing a source of political legitimacy established by the constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran. They were often able to identify two sources of political legitimacy. On occasion students could identify two sources of political legitimacy while only describing one, yet they were still able to discuss one example of how the simultaneous presence of these sources led to tensions. Most students were able to correctly identify tensions in Iran in the last 15 years, though some did not connect this tension to the simultaneous presence of both sources of political legitimacy.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Most often students had difficulty discussing one example of how having both these sources of political legitimacy simultaneously has led to tensions in Iran in the last fifteen years. Many students who did not earn this point discussed a tension but did not connect it to the simultaneous presence of both sources of political legitimacy. Some students had difficulty describing two distinct sources of political legitimacy established by Iran's constitution. A few of these students identified but did not describe one or both of the sources of legitimacy. Others described a source of political legitimacy in Iran that was not established by the constitution.

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?

Emphasize how multiple lines of legitimacy can lead to ambiguity, conflicting claims and potential political conflict, even in a nondemocratic system. Students were stronger at describing constitutional sources of political legitimacy in Iran but weaker at connecting them to their source of origin. Students also appeared to be better at describing sources of legitimacy than at understanding the consequences of how multiple distinct and often opposing sources simultaneously could lead to potential conflict or tension.

Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of this question was for students to demonstrate their understanding of the role of the Supreme Court of the United Kingdom in the British political system. Students had three specific tasks: to describe a major function of the Supreme Court of the United Kingdom; to explain one reason for the establishment of the Supreme Court of the United Kingdom; and to explain how membership in the European Union affects the judicial system in Great Britain.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 0.96 out of a possible 3 points. Overall students experienced difficulty with this question. The task of describing a function of the Supreme Court of the United Kingdom was answered with vague or incorrect responses. Students also often did not acknowledge that Great Britain already had an independent court system, one with the power to check the legislative and executive branches (before the creation of the Supreme Court). On the other hand, they often accurately explained how membership in the European Union affects the judicial system, with a valid answer regarding the need for adjudication of both UK and EU law.

What were common student errors or omissions?

The most common error was to equate the role of the UK Supreme Court with that of the United States Supreme Court in declaring laws unconstitutional. Students often stated that the UK Supreme Court was created because Great Britain needed a court that would have the power to declare laws unconstitutional. Finally, with regard to EU membership, students incorrectly stated that the British judicial system needed to adjudicate using all the laws of all the member countries of the European Union, as opposed to just EU law.

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?

- Emphasize the role of the judicial system in the core countries, including Great Britain, with their students. This is often difficult because most textbooks provide minimal information on judicial institutions, but there are abundant additional resources that can be used to supplement a discussion on this topic.
- Continue to teach the unique role of the European Union as a supranational institution with regard to British policy making.

Question 3

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of this question was for students to examine different types of electoral systems and to consider the implication of different electoral systems for women's representation in national legislatures. The skills tested were both descriptive and analytical: to describe and explain. Students had three specific tasks: to describe the single-member, winner-take-all electoral system; to describe the proportional representation electoral system; and to explain why a proportional representation system is likely to lead to the election of a greater number of women in the legislature.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 1.27 out of a possible 3 points. Students seemed to be particularly able to describe the single-member, winner-take-all electoral system. Many students could describe the proportional representation electoral system. Some could describe both electoral systems. Fewer students were able to explain why a proportional representation system is likely to lead to the election of more women to the legislature.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Most often students had difficulty explaining why a proportional representation system is likely to lead to the election of a greater number of women in the legislature. Many students who did not earn this point had previously erred in their discussion of one of the two electoral systems, and the error was reproduced in their explanation in response to this part of the question. Others discussed but did not correctly explain why a proportional representation system is likely to lead to the election of more women to the legislature. Most of the students who had difficulty in describing single-member, winner-take-all electoral system discussed it as one in which candidates require a majority in order to win a seat.

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?

Emphasize both the features of electoral systems and their comparative consequences for representation beyond party competition for power.

Question 4

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of this question was for students to demonstrate an understanding of a major social cleavage in China. Students were expected to apply this concept to the specific context of public policies adopted in China after 1990. The skills tested were both analytical and descriptive. Students had three specific tasks: to describe a major social cleavage in China; to discuss a policy adopted by the Chinese state after 1990 in response to that cleavage; and to discuss a second policy adopted by the Chinese state after 1990 in response to that same cleavage.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 0.70 out of a possible 3 points. Overall students were able to describe a major social cleavage in China. Although many were able to discuss one policy adopted by the Chinese state in response to that cleavage since 1990, most could not discuss a second correct policy.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Many students described social issues — ideological and political differences — instead of social cleavages. Others described a troubled place (Tibet) but did not demonstrate an understanding of social cleavage by indicating that there is a division, gap or conflict between two social groups. Although many students were able to discuss a policy that addressed the cleavage, most struggled to discuss a policy adopted by the Chinese state since 1990. Very few students were able to discuss a second policy that was adopted since 1990. A common mistake was to discuss policies adopted in the early reform period, such as the one-child policy or the Household Responsibility System. Another common error was to discuss a policy or process that was in place before 1990, such as marketization or liberalization.

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?

- Continue to stress that concepts are as important as facts. Knowing that Tibet is a troubled area in China is not enough; students also need to understand the general concept of social cleavage that allows for comparison across time and country.
- Continue to help students understand what a policy is generally, and that a policy is different from a process or an incident.
- Because China is a moving target, it is important to update the study of the Chinese political system and help students understand the differences across time and make comparisons between the early reform period and the post-Deng Xiaoping period by providing key examples of domestic policies or institutional changes dating from the post-Deng period.

Question 5

What was the intent of this question?

This question evaluated both conceptual understanding and country-specific knowledge. The question required a definition of economic globalization, a description of one of the Mexican government's policy responses to economic globalization, and a description of an organized response of Mexican citizens to economic globalization.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 0.98 out of a possible 3 points. Overall students experienced difficulty in providing correct definitions of economic globalization but were largely able to correctly describe a Mexican government policy response to economic globalization. Students also experienced difficulty with a correct description of an organized citizen response to economic globalization.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Common student errors were to limit the definition of economic globalization to a country opening to free trade, omitting the idea of a complicated network of economic relationships that flows from the national to international level and from the international to the national level. Students also repeated the question and included an *identification* but not a *description* of a policy response; for example, "One policy response of the Mexican government to economic globalization was to join NAFTA."

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?

Help students understand and analyze macrolevel actions of citizens so that they can discriminate between individual behavior and organized group behaviors. Students did not clearly understand the concept of "organized citizen response." Simply because many individuals are making similar life decisions based on their economic circumstances does not constitute an "organized response." Many students answered that Mexican citizens were immigrating to the United States or were taking jobs in the illegal drug business. However, students were unable to describe how these individual behaviors should be viewed as "organized."

Question 6

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of this question was for students to examine the various arrangements of power in executive-legislative relationships. The skills tested were both descriptive and analytical: to describe and compare. Students had five specific tasks: (a) to describe the process for the selection of the executive in a parliamentary system; (b) to contrast the process for the selection of the executive in such a parliamentary system with the process for the selection of the executive in a presidential system; (c) to describe the process for the removal of the executive in a parliamentary system; (d) to describe the process for the removal of the executive in a presidential system and to contrast the

processes for the removal of the executive in parliamentary and presidential systems; and (d) to describe a check, other than the removal process, on the executive in a parliamentary system.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 2.49 out of a possible 5 points. Most responses explained that the executive in a parliamentary system is a member of the legislature.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Most responses demonstrated understanding that members of the legislature select the executive in a parliamentary system. However, many responses did not mention that the executive is chosen from the majority party or majority party coalition. Some mentioned elections generally without reference to a direct election by the citizens. Many responses provided identifications rather than descriptions. In describing the removal process for the executive in a parliamentary system, for example, responses often mentioned a “vote of no confidence” without describing the process or indicating that it is initiated by the legislature. Similarly, in describing the removal process for the executive in a presidential system, many responses mentioned impeachment without describing the process or indicating that it is initiated by the legislature.

Many responses did not articulate a contrast between the removal process in parliamentary and presidential systems. In describing a check, other than removal, on the executive in a parliamentary system, many responses gave identifications, such as “judicial review,” without adequate descriptions. In addition, some gave examples related to removal of the executive, but the process for removing the executive was expressly excluded in the language of the question.

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?

- Continue to focus on training students to carefully examine the language in the question. Many responses gave correct terminology, such as “vote of no confidence,” but because the question required descriptions rather than simple identifications, they did not earn a point for content the students may have known but did not expressly convey.
- Continue to focus on how institutions of government interact within various systems.
- Give students frequent opportunities to contrast systems of government. This can be done through conceptual lessons that require comparisons across countries.

Question 7

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of this question was for students to demonstrate their understanding of federalism and electoral systems and to apply these concepts to the issue of resolving ethnic and religious tensions in Nigeria. Students first had to describe federalism in Nigeria. They also needed to explain one way Nigeria’s federal structure accommodates different religious groups, as well as one way the federal structure accommodates different ethnic groups in the country. Students were

asked to identify what type of electoral system is used in Nigeria and explain two ways that Nigeria's electoral system accommodates different ethnic groups. Finally, students were asked to explain why Nigeria's federal structure has failed to resolve tensions in the Niger River delta. The question tested students' conceptual knowledge, analytical skills and knowledge of an array of issues related to contemporary Nigerian politics.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 1.54 out of a possible 7 points. Question 7 was a complex question that asked students to complete a number of different tasks. They needed to demonstrate an understanding of federalism, electoral systems, and ethnic and religious cleavages, as well as substantive knowledge of the regional problems of the Niger River Delta. Many students seemed to know that shari'a law is a choice in Muslim states, and that states were created to accommodate ethnic groups. They seemed to be aware of oil-related problems in the Niger Delta region, but most did not convey how federalism may help to explain or address the Niger Delta region's political and economic problems.

What were common student errors or omissions?

There was a widespread, recurring answer that Nigeria has a proportional representation electoral system. While different aspects of Nigeria's system are variously single-member-district plurality or presidential majority, Nigeria's electoral system is not based on proportional representation. One facet of Nigerian politics showed up in numerous responses but was incorrectly tied to aspects of federal structures or electoral systems. The "gentlemen's agreement" on rotating the presidency between Muslim and Christian, is neither part of a federal structure nor part of the electoral system per se, nor does it address ethnic tensions directly.

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?

- Highlight the difference among the words "identify," "describe," "define" and explain. Some responses defined federalism but without describing it in the Nigerian context, as required. Some provided brief identification buzzwords or descriptions without an explanation.
- Clarify that Nigeria's national electoral system is not a proportional representation (PR) system. The recurring answer that Nigeria is a PR electoral system was widespread. Whether texts or teachers are mistakenly identifying Nigeria as PR, or whether students are misapplying the term, revisiting the complex of Nigeria's electoral system is recommended.

Question 8

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of this question was for students to consider the concepts of civil liberties, political rights and regime type within the context of Mexico and Russia over the last decade and a half. The skills tested required description and definition as well as higher-order skills of explanation and assessment. Students had eight specific tasks, divided into four parts: (a) to define civil liberties and explain the difference between political rights and civil liberties; (b) to describe one example each of the decline of political rights and civil liberties in Russia between 1995 and 2010; (c) to describe one

example each of the increase of political rights and civil liberties in Mexico between 1995 and 2010; and (d) to assess the regime type in Mexico and Russia in 2010.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 3.31 out of a possible 8 points. The question gave students a variety of opportunities to demonstrate both conceptual and contextual information. Many students were able to assess the regime types, illustrating understanding of the key concepts of democracy, illiberal democracy and authoritarianism. Others were able to define civil liberties and differentiate between political rights and civil liberties. And many students demonstrated knowledge of Russian and Mexican politics, albeit with more trouble choosing examples that fit the time period and the definitions of civil liberties and political rights. Earning all points proved quite difficult for almost all students, but the few who did demonstrated superior knowledge and analytical ability.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Student errors occurred fairly equally across all parts of the question, but students were more likely to have difficulty with parts (b) and (c) in which they had to apply the concepts of civil liberties and political rights to their knowledge of Mexico and Russia within the time frame. They would sometimes choose examples but identify them as political rights when they were actually civil liberties. Others would mention changes in the political system, such as the PRI losing elections, but not link these changes back to a decline in political rights, such as by describing the increased electoral competition now that the dominant party system has been disbanded.

For Mexico students also had some trouble choosing examples that fit the required time frame. For example, they would describe the introduction of the proportional representation system and allowing priests to vote — reforms that occurred before 1995 — as examples of increases of political rights.

Students also had difficulty differentiating political rights from civil liberties in part (a). Most troubling was that a significant minority did not seem to understand what constitutes a regime type, giving vague statements about Mexico being “good” and Russia “bad.”

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?

- Most important is that all students should be able to assess regime types — or at least know from their course what kind of regime each country has. Using the lens of political rights and civil liberties can help students differentiate between the many regimes that exist in the gray zone between democracy and authoritarianism. Application — not just discussion — of the concepts is essential.
- In terms of test-taking skills, remind students to identify which task they are answering in their response.