



## **Student Performance Q&A: 2011 AP® United States Government and Politics Free-Response Questions**

The following comments on the 2011 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?*

This question examined students' knowledge of judicial review and their understanding of how judicial review empowers the Supreme Court within the system of checks and balances, how the United States Supreme Court grants a writ of certiorari, and how stare decisis and judicial activism influence decisions made by individual justices when deciding cases heard by the Court. The question asked students to (a) define judicial review; (b) explain how judicial review empowers the Supreme Court within the system of checks and balances relative to the other branches; (c) describe the process through which the Court grants a writ of certiorari; and (d) explain how stare decisis and judicial activism influence decisions made by individual justices when deciding cases heard by the Court.

#### *How well did students perform on this question?*

The mean score was 1.57 out of a possible 5 points. In answering part (a) many students were able to define judicial review. In part (b) students were less successful in explaining how judicial review empowers the Supreme Court relative to the other branches within the system of checks and balances. In part (c) many students were successful in describing one step in the process of granting a writ of certiorari but in many cases did not reference anything about a lower court or the rule of four. In part (d) students typically provided definitions of stare decisis and judicial activism, but many could not explain how each of these influences decisions made by individual justices when deciding cases heard by the Court.

***What were common student errors or omissions?***

Students often did not reach the level of explanation required for answering “how” questions successfully. For example, students might say something appropriate about judicial review but could not explain how that activity empowered the Supreme Court within the system of checks and balances relative to the other branches. Some students could describe parts of the process through which the Court grants a writ of certiorari but did not provide an adequate description of the process itself. Students often incorrectly or incompletely explained how stare decisis and judicial activism influence decisions made by individual justices when deciding cases heard by the Court. Not understanding the questions asked and not responding to them carefully hurt student performance.

***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 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 know the basic content required to answer this question successfully but struggled to provide adequate explanations of how when they were required to do so. The question required students to go beyond definition and description and apply their knowledge by responding to specific questions about each.

**Question 2**

***What was the intent of this question?***

This question examined students’ knowledge of scientific public opinion polling, how public opinion influences voting decisions of members of Congress, and how other political factors minimize the influence of public opinion on congressional decision making. The question asked students to (a) identify two characteristics of a valid, scientific public opinion poll; (b) explain why strong public opinion as expressed in polls and competitive reelections enhances the influence of public opinion on the voting decisions of members of Congress; and (c) explain why a legislator’s voting record and party leadership limit the influence of public opinion on the voting decisions of members of Congress. The question required students to demonstrate familiarity with scientific public opinion polls and the connection between public opinion, as measured by those polls, and voting decisions by members of Congress.

***How well did students perform on this question?***

The mean score was 2.31 out of a possible 6 points. In answering part (a) many students were able to identify at least one characteristic of a valid, scientific public opinion poll. In part (b) students were less successful in explaining why strong public opinion as expressed in polling results enhances the influence of public opinion on the voting decisions of members of Congress. However, many students were able to explain why, in competitive reelections, the influence of public opinion on the voting decisions of members of Congress is enhanced. In part (c) many students struggled with the narrow explanation as to why legislators’ voting records limit the

influence of public opinion on the voting decisions of members of Congress. More students, but not all, were able to explain why party leadership limits the influence of public opinion on the voting decisions of members of Congress.

***What were common student errors or omissions?***

Many students did not reach the level of explanation required for answering the “why” parts of the question successfully. Students often could not explain why strong public opinion and competitive reelections enhance the influence of public opinion on the voting decisions of members of Congress. Additionally, an overwhelming number of students were unable to answer *why* a congressperson’s voting record limits the influence of public opinion; they were unable to link the legislator’s voting record with the fact that voters and supporters would perceive the member of Congress to be indecisive.

***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.
- 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 the question required students to go beyond identification and description and explain why public opinion may or may not have an effect on voting decisions by members of Congress. Most teachers would not have taught many of these specific points but would normally have provided all the necessary details for students to draw logical inferences. Students seemed not understand that the “why” portion of parts (b) and (c) required an understanding of the motives of members of Congress and an explanation of why those motives work either to enhance or to limit the influence of public opinion on the decisions of members of Congress in different contexts.

**Question 3**

***What was the intent of this question?***

This question assessed students’ knowledge of the presidential primary process, including issues related to delegate selection procedures, differences between the two major parties, and strategic shifts between the primary and general election processes. Students were asked to (a) provide definitions of both open primaries and caucuses; (b) describe a consequence of winner-take-all primaries in the Republican Party; (c) explain why the use of superdelegates increases the influence of Democratic Party leaders in the nomination process; and (d) explain why a candidate’s strategy differs when he or she is running for the nomination as opposed to running in the general election.

***How well did students perform on this question?***

The mean score was 1.67 out of a possible 5 points. In answering part (a) students were better at defining open primary than caucus. Parts (b) and (c) were particularly challenging for students.

More students were able to explain in part (d) why a candidate’s strategy changes between the primary process and the general election.

***What were common student errors or omissions?***

Students often understood that “open primary” means that anyone can vote, but they were not aware that the voting has to do with delegate selection. Several students also thought that the open primary system allows voters to vote in more than one primary. “Caucus” was frequently discussed in the context of party legislative leadership meetings, rather than being open to rank-and-file party members. Students were able to discuss consequences of a winner-take-all election rule but were likely to point out that it is unfair to third parties or used other examples that are unrelated to the Republican nomination process. Students were generally familiar with superdelegates as voting delegates at the Democratic convention, but very frequently they thought that they are chosen by party leaders, that their votes count more, or that they are people who have the ability to convince other delegates to support particular candidates. Several students said that winning primary elections involves winning the support of party leaders rather than of voters, and that during primaries competing candidates have no disagreements on substantive issues so they have to rely simply on increasing their name recognition and popularity before the general election begins.

***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?***

- Take care with synonyms that occur in United States government.
- Identify the general meaning of the word “caucus” before explaining how caucuses work in the legislative process and in the party nomination process.
- Help students learn to be able to apply the general concept of winner-take-all to different contexts. Winner-take-all (and other election rules) has general implications, but also specific ones in different circumstances. To be able to discuss specific consequences, students should be asked to discuss those implications in various contexts, such as the electoral college, representation in Congress, and presidential primaries.
- Remind students to read the questions carefully. The winner-take-all part of the question asked for a consequence for the Republican nomination process. Saying that it hurts third parties or is unfair does not address how it influences the process.

**Question 4**

***What was the intent of this question?***

This question examined students’ knowledge of how presidential powers affect congressional decision making and how congressional powers affect presidential decision making. The question asked students to (a) explain one way that congressional decision making is affected by the president’s veto power, power to issue executive orders, and power as commander in chief; and (b) explain one way that presidential decision making is affected by Congress’s legislative oversight power, Senate advice and consent power, and budgetary power. The question required students to

explain how the institutional powers of one branch of government affect the decision making of another branch.

***How well did students perform on this question?***

The mean score was 0.98 out of a possible 6 points. In answering part (a) many students defined or described the specific power but were unable to explain how the powers of the president affect congressional decision making. Students were more successful in explaining the effect of the veto power than they were in explaining the effect of the president's power to issue executive orders or power as commander in chief. In part (b) many students defined or described the specific powers of Congress but were unable to explain how the congressional powers affect presidential decision making. Students were more successful in explaining the effect of the Senate's advice and consent power and the budgetary power on presidential decision making than they were in explaining the effect of the legislative oversight power. Although students understood the concepts of separation of powers and checks and balances, as well as the fact that a struggle often exists between the president and Congress, they were unable to provide an explanation of how the institutional powers of one branch of government affect the decision making of another branch.

***What were common student errors or omissions?***

Although students could often define or describe, they often could not explain how the institutional powers of the president (veto, executive orders, commander in chief) affect congressional decision making. The most common error in part (a) was to presume that the definition or description of a power was a satisfactory explanation.

Although students could often define or describe, they often could not explain how the institutional powers of Congress (legislative oversight, Senate advice and consent, budgetary power) affect presidential decision making. The most common error in part (b) was to presume that a definition or description of a power was a satisfactory explanation.

Students often focused on the institutional power without connecting that power to the decision making of the other institution, or they confused which institution utilized the power and which institution was making the decision.

***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 face the challenge of 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 politics in the United States.
- Remind students to pay close attention to what the question is asking. This question asked students to go beyond the definition or description of the term and apply their knowledge. All too often, students only defined or described the terms listed instead of doing what the question called for, namely, "explain." As a result, answers were often vague or lacked the explanation altogether.