



Student Performance Q&A:
2012 AP® United States Government and Politics
Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2012 free-response questions for AP® United States Government and Politics were written by the Chief Reader, Jim Riddlesperger of Texas Christian University in Fort Worth. 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 five components of the lawmaking process. Part (a) asked students to describe the role in lawmaking of the Senate filibuster, the House Rules Committee, and conference committees. In part (b) students were asked to describe a method by which Congress exercises oversight of the federal bureaucracy. In part (c) students were asked to explain how casework affects attention to legislation by members of Congress.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 1.55 out of a possible 5 points.

In part (a) students were most successful in describing the Senate filibuster and somewhat less successful in describing conference committees. Students were least successful in correctly describing the role of the House Rules Committee. However, students earned points in a wide variety of combinations in part (a).

In part (b) many students were successful in describing a method by which Congress exercises oversight over the bureaucracy, including a variety of descriptions of how congressional control of funding allows for the exercise of oversight.

In part (c) students were far less successful in explaining how casework affects members' attention to lawmaking. They often responded with a discussion of constituency advocacy that provided no linkage to legislation or the legislative process.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students often described the Senate filibuster incorrectly as a method to aid a bill by giving it closer examination. For example, some students said that supporters of a bill filibustered to explain the bill more thoroughly. Students often identified the House Rules Committee correctly but did not describe its role in lawmaking. Students sometimes misidentified conference committees as part of one chamber's deliberations or placed conference committees at the beginning of the lawmaking process rather than near the end.

In part (b) students sometimes did not describe how their identified method exercised oversight of the federal bureaucracy; for example, many students stated simply that Congress has “the power of the purse” without describing the implications of holding this power. Other students seemed confused as to exactly what the term “federal bureaucracy” encompasses. Another common error was students confusing checks and balances between branches of government with congressional oversight of the bureaucracy.

In part (c) students sometimes misidentified casework. This was done in a variety of ways, but most often students expressed it more as an explanation of workload rather than correctly explaining casework as constituency interaction. Other common errors were explaining casework in terms of pleasing constituents without addressing how that affected members' attention to lawmaking, and explaining casework as learning constituency opinion as a guide to voting on legislation.

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 it is important not only to be able to identify or define terms such as Senate filibuster, House Rules Committee, and conference committee; it is also essential to be able to describe these terms' effects on the governmental process.

Emphasize that there are important differences between the more simplistic requirements such as identifying and defining and the more demanding tasks of describing and explaining. Students must be sensitive to the importance of using solid descriptions and explanations. Also, remind students to directly address what is asked in the question.

Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of this question was for students to discuss minority representation in Congress by examining barriers that were removed to aid in minority voting and a barrier that currently exists that impedes minority representation. Students were asked to (a) use a chart to compare minority representation in 1960 and 2010; (b) explain how both the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and the Twenty-fourth Amendment assisted in the removal of barriers to minority voting; and (c) identify one barrier that currently impedes minority representation in Congress and explain why that barrier inhibits minority representation in Congress.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 2.38 out of a possible 5 points.

In part (a) many students were able to compare minority congressional representation in 1960 and 2010. In part (b) many students were successful in explaining how the Voting Rights Act of 1965 assisted in the removal of barriers to minority voting. However, students were less successful in explaining how the Twenty-Fourth Amendment assisted in the removal of barriers to minority voting.

In part (c) many students were successful in identifying a barrier that currently impedes minority representation in Congress. However, many were less successful in explaining why the barrier inhibited minority representation in Congress. Instead, they only explained why it increased minority access to voting.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students often confused the removal of a barrier with the prevention of a barrier when explaining how the Voting Rights Act of 1965 assisted in the removal of barriers to minority voting. For example, some students used preclearance, which is not a barrier but rather a mechanism that prevents the creation of barriers that inhibit minority voting.

Students had difficulty explaining how the Twenty-Fourth Amendment assisted in the removal of barriers to minority voting. They often confused this amendment with other amendments that dealt with the extension of rights, the expansion of suffrage, or other issues.

Some students, when asked to identify a barrier that impedes minority representation in Congress, chose an internal barrier — for example, voter apathy, political efficacy, or trust. The removal of these barriers led to an increase in voter turnout rather than an increase in minority representative in Congress. Often students identified an external barrier, such as education, experience, or other electoral resources, in the context of hindering access for minority voters. Because the question asked students to identify a barrier that currently impedes a member of a minority who is seeking a position in Congress, electoral resources was a correct identification because it is in the context of a minority candidate seeking a position in Congress.

Some students correctly identified a barrier that impedes minority representation in Congress but only linked that barrier to increased access to minority voting rather than explaining why the barrier inhibited minority representation in Congress.

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 read carefully and to respond to the question that has been asked regardless of subsequent parts of the questions. For example, in parts (a) and (c) the question addressed minority representation in Congress, whereas in part (b) the question asked about access for minority voting. However, in both parts (b) and (c) students were asked to explain barriers.

Students need to learn the constitutional amendments, especially those outside of the Bill of Rights, as well as key legislation in the context of the various subject areas.

Question 3

What was the intent of this question?

This question examined the role politics plays in the appointment and confirmation of federal judges and also legislative and executive checks on the judiciary. It asked students to confront the idea that the Supreme Court is above or separate from politics. Students were asked to (a) describe two political factors that affect presidents' decisions to appoint members of the federal judiciary; (b) identify two political factors that affect the confirmation process and explain how the identified factors complicate the confirmation process; (c) explain how a legislative power serves as a check on court decisions; and (d) explain how an executive power serves as a check on court decisions.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 3.64 out of a possible 8 points.

In part (a) most students were able to identify political factors that affect presidents' decisions to appoint members of the federal judiciary but were less successful in describing the factor. Description points were earned by writing something that was relevant and true after a factor was identified.

In part (b) many students were successful in identifying political factors that affect the confirmation process but were not as successful in explaining how those factors complicate the confirmation process.

In part (c), though students were often able to identify a legislative power that could act as a check on the judiciary, only rarely were they able to show how that power could serve as a check on court decisions.

In part (d) students were often able to identify an executive power that could serve as a check on the judiciary but were less frequently able to show how that power could serve as a check on court decisions.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Many students stated that the president considers the reaction of voters when making judicial appointments. Public opinion or personal popularity concerns were not accepted as political factors that affect a president's decisions in appointing members of the federal judiciary. Additionally, although a large number of students were able to identify political factors that affect presidents' decisions in appointing members of the federal judiciary, they were unable to reach the level of describing those factors by adding something that was true and relevant about the identified factor.

Students many times did not identify the Senate as the confirming body and referred instead to "Congress," the "House," or the "House and Senate." Students rarely mentioned procedural roadblocks in the confirmation process — for example, holds and filibusters — and chose instead to stick closely to the demographic or issue-oriented factors that affect the confirmation process.

Students often fell short when trying to explain how political factors complicated the confirmation process. To earn an explanation point, students had to go beyond the simple identification of a factor and explain how the factor either delayed or doomed a confirmation. Furthermore, students often stated that Congress could simply pass laws to "overturn" or "overrule" judicial pronouncements. In the same vein, many students indicated that the executive branch could "veto" a court decision.

Students often successfully identified a legislative or executive power that could serve as check on court decisions but in the explanation relied on a generic discussion of checks and balances rather than explaining how the power specifically affected decisions made by the courts.

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 carefully consider what the question is asking them to do. Action words like "identify," "describe," and "explain" all carry different thresholds for earning points. In the appointment part of the question, students simply identified political factors when they were asked to describe. Likewise, in the legislative and executive power parts of the question, some students were unable to explain how those the powers of each branch serve as a check on court decisions.

Help students understand that, with the possible exception of a constitutional amendment, there are no direct checks on court decisions from the other branches, but there are methods that other branches can use to minimize or negate the effect of court rulings. That discussion should include not only how the

confirmation power affects court decisions but also how other legislative actions, such as passing new laws, funding and stripping, or changing court jurisdiction, can affect court decisions. Further, the discussion should include not only the appointment power of the executive but also the executive enforcement power and its possible effect on court decisions.

Emphasize that Congress cannot simply pass a new law to directly refute a court decision (legislative veto). Also, reiterate that the president cannot “veto” judicial pronouncements.

Question 4

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of this question was to examine students’ knowledge of how interest groups influence the political processes in ways that benefit the interest group and to examine techniques that interest groups use to influence elections. The question asked students to (a) describe two techniques interest groups use to influence elections; (b) explain how interest groups use issue networks (also known as iron triangles) and amicus curiae briefs to influence government decision making; and (c) explain how the media and pluralism place limitations on interest group influence.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 2.63 out of a possible 6 points.

In part (a) many students were able to describe two techniques interest groups use to influence elections. In part (b) many students were able to explain how interest groups could influence policy making through the use of amicus curiae briefs. In part (c) students were generally able to explain how media limits interest group power.

What were common student errors or omissions?

In part (b) students frequently were unsuccessful in explaining what is exchanged or used to maintain the relationships of an iron triangle/issue network. They were also often unable to explain how interest groups use amicus curiae briefs to influence the court.

In part (c) students were often unable to correctly identify pluralism or explain how it limits interest group influence. Students also often confused pluralism with plurality voting.

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 should fully explain the meaning of their responses. Also, students need to be able to delineate between an identification, a description, and an explanation. When a question asks for an explanation, students need to provide sufficient details on how or why one concept affects another.