Student Performance Q&A:

2015 AP® Comparative Government and Politics Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2015 free-response questions for AP® Comparative Government and Politics were written by the Chief Reader, Glenn Hastedt of James Madison University. 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 assess students' knowledge of ethnic minority groups in China, of the protections offered to those groups by the Chinese government, and students' understanding of why special protections were needed. The skills tested were descriptive and analytical. The students had three specific tasks: to identify one of the ethnic minority groups officially recognized in China, to describe a special protection that the Chinese government extends to the group they identified, and to explain why the Chinese government extends special protections to some ethnic minority groups.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score is 1.28 out of a possible 3 points.

Most students could identify an ethnic minority group in China and could describe one of the special protections offered to that group. Some students had difficulty articulating why the Chinese government extends special protections to ethnic minority groups.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students occasionally identified a religious group instead of an ethnic minority group, or incorrectly identified the majority Han ethnic group as a minority group. If students did not correctly identify one of the 55 officially recognized ethnic minority groups in China, then the second part of the question did not earn credit. If students correctly identified one of the 55 ethnic minority groups, then the protection they offered had to apply to that identified group and could not be unique to another group. Another problem students encountered was the concept of autonomous regions and the degree of autonomy in these regions. Some students incorrectly argued that the groups had full autonomy from Chinese authority and were independent.

The most common errors and omissions were in the explanations of why the government extends special protections to ethnic minorities. Students had difficulty explaining how general group dissatisfaction led to action that would constitute conflict, rebellion, or unrest. Students also incorrectly argued the reason the Chinese government was offering special protections was because they wanted to protect the culture and lifestyles of China's ethnic minority groups or wanted to increase the diversity or size of the ethnic minority population.

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 work to help students distinguish between religion and ethnicity. They should also teach students to recognize when questions are linked. In some cases, students were correct in their identification of protections offered to an ethnic minority group, but the protections did not apply to the group they identified. Teachers should also help students recognize when questions ask for the intent of policies, in this case why the Chinese government would offer protections to ethnic minority groups, and to explain the importance of articulating forms of political action as a consequence to general feelings of unhappiness or dissatisfaction.

Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of the question was to assess students' understanding of austerity policies and the political consequences of those measures in Great Britain after 2007. The skills tested were descriptive and explanatory. Students had three specific tasks: to describe why governments adopt austerity measures, to identify an austerity measure adopted by the British government since 2007, and to explain a political consequence of that measure.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score is 0.36 out of a possible 3 points.

Some students correctly connected austerity measures to economic policy. Among those, a good number were able to describe a reason why governments adopt austerity measures, and many could identify an austerity measure that the British government adopted since 2007. Some students could explain a political consequence of that measure.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Many students had difficulty connecting austerity measures to economic policy. Students commonly linked austerity measures to legitimacy, devolution, parliamentary governance, government responses to terrorism, and the formation of the British governing coalition in 2010. Among those students who correctly associated austerity measures with economic policy, some had difficulty describing a concrete reason as to why governments adopt austerity measures. Students also frequently provided a generic political consequence of austerity measures enacted in Great Britain without connecting their responses to specific political circumstances in Great Britain. Additionally, some students inaccurately explained the 2010 election outcome as a political consequence of austerity.

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?

Greater emphasis should be placed on students' understanding of austerity measures as economic policies intended to address excessive debt, budget deficits, and as a response to pressure from supranational organizations.

Question 3

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of this question was for students to identify one method for selecting members of Iran's Guardian Council and to describe two specific functions of the Guardian Council. The skill tested was descriptive: to identify a method for selecting members of the Guardian Council and to describe two functions of the Guardian Council.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score is 1.33 out of a possible 3 points.

Students did well in identifying one of the methods to select members of the Guardian Council. Students were able to accurately identify selection of some Guardian Council members by Iran's Supreme Leader, and selection of some Guardian Council members by nomination of Iran's judiciary head and approval by the Majles.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Frequently, students incorrectly identified the Assembly of Experts and the President as being responsible for the selection of Guardian Council members. Students also often incorrectly described restricting the powers of the Supreme Leader as being a function of the Guardian Council.

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 two methods of selecting Guardian Council members, which include half of the 12 members being appointed by the Supreme Leader and the other half being nominated by Iran's judiciary head then approved by the Majles. Emphasize that students should specifically and accurately describe functions of the Guardian Council in relation to reviewing laws of the Majles, monitoring elections, vetting political candidates, and advising the Supreme Leader on matters related to jurist guardianship in Iran.

Question 4

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of the question was for students to examine the link between an independent judiciary and democracy and to consider how authoritarian systems can undermine the independence of the judiciary. The skills tested were explanatory and descriptive: to explain and describe. Students had three specific tasks: to explain how an aspect of an independent judiciary strengthens democracy and to describe two actions an authoritarian system could take to undermine the independence of the judiciary.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 1.72 out of a possible 3 points.

Most students correctly identified at least one method by which an authoritarian system could undermine the independence of the judiciary. Some students successfully explained how an aspect of an independent judiciary strengthened democracy.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Many students correctly defined or described an independent judiciary, but did not explain how an independent judiciary strengthened democracy. Some students described the consequences of a weakened independent judiciary rather than actions taken by authoritarian systems that cause a weakened independent judiciary. A few students correctly described one action an authoritarian system could take to undermine an independent judiciary, but then rephrased the same description rather than describing another, different action authoritarian systems could take to undermine an independent judiciary.

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 clarify the difference between free response directive words "define," "describe," and "explain," and have students practice correctly, completely, and clearly answering these types of questions. Also, an emphasis should be placed on differentiating between cause and effect in political relationships.

Question 5

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of this question was to assess student understanding and application of normative and empirical perspectives. The skills tested were conceptual and analytical: to apply theoretical concepts and to distinguish between normative, or value-related, statements and empirical, or factual statements. The students had three specific tasks: to write an empirical statement using the data in the graph, to write a normative statement using the data in the graph, and to identify which type of statement a political scientist would use when making a factual argument.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score is 1.57 out of a possible 3 points.

Most students were able to write an accurate empirical statement using the data in the graph. Some students were able to write normative statements using the data in the graph. Most students were able to identify that political scientists use empirical statements when making factual arguments.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Many students wrote empirical statements when attempting to write normative statements. Some students incorrectly wrote statements that reflected a cause-effect relationship when attempting to write a normative statement. Some students also failed to clearly indicate which statements were empirical and which were normative. Some students incorrectly used the data or did not use it at all when writing empirical and normative statements.

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?

Instruct students to clearly indicate which task they are completing in their responses.
Emphasize the definition and application of core concepts from political science throughout the AP Comparative Government and Politics course, pointing out normative (subjective) and empirical (objective) viewpoints.

Question 6

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of this question was for students to define the concept of sovereignty and describe how different actors and dynamics — international organizations, multinational corporations and new information technologies — challenge state sovereignty, as well as how states maintain sovereignty in the face of challenges. The skills tested were conceptual and descriptive: to define, identify, and explain. Students had six specific tasks: to define sovereignty, to identify an international organization and explain how it challenges sovereignty, to describe how multinational corporations and new information technologies challenge sovereignty, and to describe a method states use to maintain sovereignty.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 2.15 out of a possible 6 points.

Most students understood that sovereignty involves the power of the state, but many of them did not include the other elements of sovereignty in their definition: supremacy (or independence), territory or population, or recognition by other actors. Almost all students could identify an international organization, and most could describe how it challenges sovereignty. Many students could describe how multinational corporations have substantial leverage that enables them to push states to adopt policies that are beneficial to the multinational corporation but not necessarily the state. Most students could describe how new information technologies enable citizens to circumvent state controls over information, which undermines state legitimacy or popular support. Many students also were able to explain that states have a number of ways they can maintain sovereignty, depending on which challenge they were facing (leaving international organizations, imposing regulations on multinational corporations, or censoring the Internet, for example).

What were common student errors or omissions?

While students did seem to understand sovereignty in a general way, as noted above, many of them did not describe the state as being supreme over, or independent of other institutions. Sometimes they did not note that the state has authority over a particular population or territory, or that the state is recognized by other actors. Often students would describe one of these elements (usually supremacy or independence), but not one of the others. A few students did not understand that NAFTA is not an international organization. Many students confused globalization or the influence of corporations as interest groups for a challenge to political sovereignty. Another common error was failing to connect the access to information to a consequence that would challenge state sovereignty. Many students also confused methods the state would use to increase its legitimacy (holding elections, for example) or methods the state would use to decrease opposition (suppressing dissent, for example) for methods the state would use to maintain sovereignty.

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 have a more detailed understanding of sovereignty. Many students seemed to understand the elements of sovereignty based on their discussion of how international organizations challenge sovereignty, so they should be encouraged to be sure a definition they provide on the exam is consistent with the discussion that follows. Students also need to more clearly recognize the difference between the impact of a multinational corporation on state sovereignty and the impact of a corporation as an interest group on a government. Teachers could also remind their students, especially in response to a long question with multiple prompts, that they need to make sure their answer is directed to the issue the question is raising (in this case state sovereignty vs. political legitimacy).

Question 7

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of the question was for students to examine party systems in Mexico and Russia and consider how a dominant party system impacts political legitimacy. The skills tested were conceptual, descriptive, and explanatory: to identify, describe, and explain. Students had six specific tasks: to identify Mexico's historically dominant party and its current type of political party system, to describe two reforms since 1980 that facilitated Mexico's transition away from a dominant party system, to identify Russia's current dominant party, to describe two reforms since 2000 that allowed Russia to establish a dominant party system, to explain how a dominant party system can promote political legitimacy, and to explain how a dominant party system can hinder political legitimacy.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 2.55 out of a possible 8 points.

Most students correctly identified the historically dominant party in Mexico as the PRI and the country's current party system as multiparty. Most students also correctly identified the dominant party in Russia as United Russia. Most of students were able to describe at least one reform since 1980 in Mexico that facilitated the transition away from a dominant party system but few students were able to correctly describe two reforms that facilitated this process. Most students were able to describe at least one reform since 2000 that allowed Russia to establish a dominant party system, but very few students were able to describe two reforms that aided in the process. Some students provided a correct explanation for how a dominant party system can promote political legitimacy. Some students provided a correct explanation for how a dominant party system can hinder political legitimacy.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Many students were unable to provide a second reform that facilitated the transition away from a dominant party system in Mexico. Many students were also unable to provide a second reform that allowed Russia to establish a dominant party system. One common error was student misinterpretation of what a reform is. Students often discussed the results of a reform rather than the reform itself. A few students discussed reforms that occurred prior to 1980. Another common error was students conflating United Russia with Vladimir Putin. In addition, some students confused a dominant party system with a one-party system in explaining how the dominant party system hinders political legitimacy.

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?

Encourage students to read the question very carefully. Remind students to pay attention to the timeline in answering the question. Make the distinction between dominant party systems, one-party systems, and multiparty systems. Emphasize that a reform implies an institutional change, not an outcome. Additionally, make sure students are aware of developments in each of the six countries.

Question 8

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of this question was for students to compare how the governments of both Great Britain and Nigeria have responded to domestic terrorism in the last twenty years. The skills tested were descriptive and analytical. Students had six specific tasks: to identify one group that has engaged in terrorism in Great Britain and to describe its major demand, to describe one policy response the government of Great Britain adopted to address domestic terrorism, to identify one group that has engaged in terrorism in Nigeria and describe its major demand, and describe one policy response the government of Nigeria adopted to address domestic terrorism.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 2.76 out of a possible 6.

Most students could identify one group that has engaged in domestic terrorism in Nigeria in the last twenty years as well as describe the major demand of the group. Students had more difficulty in identifying one group that has engaged in domestic terrorism in Great Britain and the major demand of the group. Many students were able to describe policy responses adopted by the governments of Great Britain and Nigeria to address domestic terrorism.

What were common student errors or omissions?

One common student error was to name a demographic or religious group (for example, "Irish" or "Muslims and Christians") instead of identifying a group that has engaged in domestic terrorism.

Another common student error was for students to overstate the demands of the domestic terrorist groups in Great Britain to be the creation of an independent Northern Ireland state or an Islamic state.

Finally, students often accurately described British and Nigerian government policies but these policies were not adopted to address domestic terrorism. For example, devolution to a Scottish Parliament or the Nigerian Presidential election process are actual policies but were not developed in response to domestic terrorism.

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 be precise in their writing and not make exaggerated claims. "The Irish," for example, are not a group of domestic terrorists. Teachers can help students to understand this by including frequent writing opportunities. Most of these can be formative in nature and quickly assessed by having students read their answers aloud to each other or the use of some other kind of peer-feedback method.

In addition, teachers need to help their students make connections between concepts and current events. Successful students could have answered this question with information from the last twenty years; however, almost all students identified Boko Haram as one group that has engaged in domestic terrorism in Nigeria and then correctly described its demand and Nigeria's response. The rise of Boko Haram in Nigeria is too recent to have been included in most textbooks, yet students accurately made the connection in the question because of the relevance of the topic and its extensive coverage in the media. Incorporating current events along with textbook study helps students build a body of country-specific examples that they can use to help explain political concepts.