



Student Performance Q&A:

2015 AP[®] United States Government & Politics Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2015 free-response questions for AP[®] United States Government & Politics were written by the Chief Reader, James Riddlesperger of Texas Christian 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?

This question examined the students' knowledge of the president's roles in public policy making as chief legislator and chief bureaucrat and the constraints on those roles exercised by the civil service and the Supreme Court, as well as the influence of divided government on the policy-making process. In part (a) students were asked to describe a power of the president as chief legislator and the power of the president as chief bureaucrat. In part (b) students were asked to explain how civil service employees could constrain the president and how the Supreme Court could constrain the president in the area of public policy making. In part (c) students were asked to describe the influence of divided government on the policy-making process.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 2.5 out of a possible 5 points. In general, students performed well on this question. Students performed best on the part of the question about the Supreme Court's power to limit the president's policy-making power. The students recognized that the Supreme Court could declare presidential actions as unconstitutional.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students did not seem to know civil servants were part of the bureaucracy, nor did they understand their role in policy implementation. Another common error was the failure to understand the role of the president as chief bureaucrat and as chief legislator. Students frequently confused the concept of divided government with the concept of federalism. They also did not convey a clear understanding of the negative impact of divided government on policy-making.

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?

Student explanations should go beyond simplistic or blanket statements to demonstrate an understanding of the nuances of institutional relationships. Responses should demonstrate an understanding of the concepts as well as the implications of the concepts for American politics. Student responses should use appropriate terminology. Students should not only be able to describe presidential powers but also to explain presidential powers in terms of the specific role from which they are derived, e.g., chief legislator, chief bureaucrat, or commander-in-chief. Students should have an understanding of the lawmaking process and the specific role of each branch in the process.

Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

This question examined the students' knowledge of how state sovereignty changed from the Articles of Confederation to the U.S. Constitution, how federal power expanded under the Constitution, and how power has devolved from the national government to the states. Part (a) asked students to compare state sovereignty under the Articles of Confederation and under the Constitution. Part (b) asked students to explain how the Commerce Clause and mandates have been used to expand the power of the federal government over the states. Part (c) required students to explain how block grants and Supreme Court decisions have played a role in the devolution of power from the national government to the states.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 1.84 out of a possible 5 points.

In part (a) students were generally able to correctly compare state sovereignty under the Articles of Confederation (states had more power) and the Constitution (state sovereignty was limited/power was shared).

In (b) most students were not able to explain how the Commerce Clause expanded the power of the federal government over the states. Students were more successful in explaining how mandates expanded the power of the federal government over the states.

In (c) students were more successful in explaining how block grants devolved power to the states from the federal government. Students were less successful in explaining how Supreme Court decisions devolved power to the states from the federal government.

What were common student errors or omissions?

In part (a) students who were unable to correctly compare state sovereignty under the Articles of Confederation and the Constitution often failed to correctly delineate the level of state power under both documents. Many students also described decreased state sovereignty under the Articles of Confederation and/or increased state sovereignty under the Constitution.

In part (b) many students were able to identify or describe interstate commerce, but they were unable to explain how the federal government was dominant in this area. Students who were unable to correctly explain how mandates expanded the power of the federal government over the states conflated mandates with block or categorical grants, which allow the state government to have discretion.

In part (c) many students who were unable to correctly explain how block grants led to the devolution of power from the federal government to the states did not show understanding that block grants are for a broad purpose in which the state has discretion, rather stating that the states can spend the money as they please. Some students failed to understand the definition of devolution and described categorical grants, which are much more restrictive and give power to the federal government over the states. Many students were unable to correctly explain how Supreme Court decisions led to the devolution of power to the states from the federal government. Some students did not recognize that devolution is a power struggle between the federal and state governments, only discussing an increase in state power. Many students who used court cases incorrectly discussed rulings that either showed an increase in federal government power (*Brown v. Board of Ed*) or a decrease in state power (selective incorporation cases).

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 need to carefully read the question to avoid missing points. Students should have a proper understanding of the different *task verbs* such as identify, describe, and explain. Each of these terms requires a different skill, and explanation is a higher order skill than the others. Students need to provide an appropriate elaboration of “how” or “why” within their response when asked to explain a concept.

Emphasize vocabulary as fundamental terms (i.e., devolution, sovereignty, block grants, etc.). Additionally, students need to understand not only the role of the Supreme Court and the other branches, but also how they impact the power structure between state and federal governments. Simply recalling details of relevant cases is not sufficient, but rather students should be able to apply the fundamental concept expressed in each case to question being asked.

Question 3

What was the intent of this question?

This question examined the students’ knowledge about the creation of the electoral college and how this system influences the campaign strategies of presidential candidates. Part (a) asked students to describe one reason the framers chose to use the electoral college as the method to elect the president. Part (b) asked the students to describe the message the cartoon conveys about presidential elections. Part (c) asked the students to explain why California, Texas, and New York do not appear prominently in the cartoon. Part (d) asked the students to describe two campaign tactics presidential candidates use to win the key states identified in the cartoon.

How well did students perform on this question?

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

In part (a) students were successful in describing a reason why the framers chose the electoral college for selecting the president.

In part (b) students were somewhat successful in describing the message the cartoon conveys about presidential elections.

In part (c) the students were somewhat able to explain why California, Texas, and New York do not appear prominently in the cartoon.

In part (d) students were not as successful in describing two campaign tactics presidential candidates use to win the key states identified in the cartoon.

What were common student errors or omissions?

In part (a) the students who were unable to describe a reason the framers selected the electoral college to choose the president oftentimes described unrelated items. Many students described how the process works and not why the framers selected this method. Many students described the electoral college as an easy method of election because electoral votes are easier to count than the popular vote.

In part (b) students used the term “swing state” and/or “battleground state” but failed to describe the concept and why these states are important to presidential candidates as they campaign during an election season. Many students discussed the population of these key states but did not describe why these states are important to presidential candidates. Some students also described these key states in terms of “conservative” and “liberal” but never linked these states to a shift in party support from election to election and why these states are important to presidential candidates.

In part (c) the students who were unable to explain why California, Texas, and New York did not appear prominently on the map focused on the issue of ideological support (liberal and conservative) and not party support (Democratic and Republican). Some students failed to explain the constant party support these three states maintain over time in presidential elections. Some students explained the lack of prominence of these states by providing false information claiming these states are not a part of the electoral college process.

In part (d) many students who did not describe two campaign tactics presidential candidates use to win the key states oftentimes described campaign tactics in general terms; they did not describe the tactics in terms of how the tactics are used differently in the key states. Many students also used the word “campaign” as the tactic rather than a specific tactic. In addition, a number of students described pork-barrel spending as a campaign tactic; this is a concept associated with the legislative branch.

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 sure to read the question carefully in order to understand what the question is asking them to do and to ensure they are answering all parts of the question. Teachers should caution students about using buzzwords, such as “swing states,” as a standalone answer when the question is asking the student to describe or explain a phenomenon. Students need to know the different campaign tactics available for use by all presidential candidates and remember “campaigning” is not a specific tactic. In addition, teachers should remind students of the need to clearly articulate how a general campaign tactic is used differently in a key state.

Question 4

What was the intent of this question?

This question examined the students’ knowledge of the Fourteenth Amendment’s protection of civil rights and civil liberties. Part (a) asked students to describe the difference between civil rights and civil liberties. In part (b) the students were asked to identify the primary clause of the Fourteenth Amendment that is used to extend civil rights. In part (c) the students were asked to describe specific legislative actions that extended civil rights to women and persons with disabilities. Part (d) required students to identify the primary clause of the Fourteenth Amendment that is used to extend civil liberties. In part (e) the students were asked to explain how civil liberties were incorporated by the Supreme Court in two of the following three cases: *Gideon v. Wainwright*, *Mapp v. Ohio* and *Miranda v. Arizona*.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 2.42 out of a possible 7 points.

In part (a) students had difficulty describing the difference between civil rights and civil liberties.

In part (b) students were somewhat successful identifying the primary clause of the Fourteenth Amendment used to extend civil rights.

In part (c) students were somewhat successful describing legislative actions that extended civil rights to women. Students were less successful describing legislative actions that extended civil rights to persons with disabilities.

In part (d) students were somewhat successful identifying the primary clause of the Fourteenth Amendment used to extend civil liberties.

In part (e) students had difficulty explaining how civil liberties were incorporated by the Supreme Court. Students often correctly identified the court cases, but were unable to understand how the court used those cases to incorporate civil liberties.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students confused the differences between civil rights and civil liberties. The students also often misidentified the primary clauses of the Fourteenth Amendment. Often the students merely identified a legislative act versus describing a specific legislative action. They also mistook a judicial action for a specific legislative action. Students misidentified the details of the Supreme Court cases as well as inadequately explained how these cases were incorporated by the Supreme Court.

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?

One cannot stress enough the importance of the Fourteenth Amendment, not only its particular clauses but its impact on civil rights and civil liberties. Equal protection and due process are fundamental concepts in the study of American Government and Politics. In addition, students need to be able to identify how civil rights and civil liberties are affected by the Fourteenth Amendment. General details of landmark Supreme Court cases are an important component of this course. The understanding of incorporation is an essential element that students must be able to apply. Students need to be aware of identifiers in the question and how to answer each type — identify, describe, and explain.