



Student Performance Q&A:

2016 AP[®] Comparative Government and Politics Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2016 free-response questions for AP[®] Comparative Government and Politics were written by the Chief Reader, Jennifer Horan of the University of North Carolina Wilmington. 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' understanding of the referendum process and their understanding of an example of a referendum and a political consequence of that referendum in Great Britain. The skills tested were descriptive. Students had three specific tasks: to define referendum, to describe a referendum that took place in Great Britain in the last twenty years, and to describe a political consequence of the referendum result.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score is 1.19 out of a possible 3 points.

Many students were able to define a referendum and accurately described the Scottish independence movement and its political consequence. A number of students also accurately described the alternative vote referendum in 2011 and its political consequence. Fewer students described the devolution referendum in Scotland or Wales, but those who did also tended to accurately describe its political consequence.

What were common student errors or omissions?

A number of students did not earn the point for defining a referendum because they failed to clearly indicate that a referendum vote is by the citizens or that the vote is on an issue as opposed to for a leader. Some students seemed to confuse a referendum with an opinion poll. Other students thought that a referendum was a change in government or policy. Many students were aware of issues about political changes in Great Britain such as House of Lords reform, fixed terms or membership in the European Union, but since those questions were not addressed through the referendum process (or in the case of the EU question, the BREXIT vote had not yet occurred), students did not earn the point for describing a specific referendum, nor did they

earn a point for describing its political consequence. A number of students confused the referendum on Scottish independence with the consequences of the devolution referendum and so did not earn the political consequence point. Additionally, a number of students referred to an independence vote in Ireland or North Ireland, and so did not earn the point for describing a referendum. Finally, some students identified increased anger as a political consequence of the Scottish independence referendum, without linking the tension to something political and so did not earn the political consequence point.

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 an understanding of the process of political change as well as the issues surrounding, and the consequences of, political change. Students also need to be clear and complete in providing definitions. For example, in defining a referendum, students were asked to recognize three elements: citizens (as opposed to legislatures); vote (as opposed to merely giving their opinion); on an issue (as opposed to for a leader). Students should also be taught that if they are asked to provide ONE description or consequence and they provide two, and one is wrong, the reader will not guess which one to award points to and so the student will fail to earn a point. Although it is not necessary to teach every political change in all six countries, students should be familiar with the issues surrounding major changes (or proposed changes) such as devolution or the alternative vote or Scottish independence.

Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of this question was to assess students' understanding of the 2011–2012 Russian protest movement, and the reasons why those protests had a limited impact. The skills tested were descriptive and explanatory. Students had three specific tasks: to describe one cause of the protests that occurred in Russia in 2011 and 2012 and to give two explanations (two tasks) for why those protests had limited political impact.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score is .80 out of a possible 3 points.

Many students correctly described a cause of the protests that occurred in Russia in 2011 and 2012. Many students also gave at least one correct explanation of why the protests had a limited political impact, although few students gave two correct explanations.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Many students offered incorrect or incomplete descriptions of the causes of the protests, often mistaking the 2011-12 protests for other instances of political upheaval in Russia, including the Chechen War, the annexation of Crimea, and a variety of economic recessions. Many students gave vague explanations for the limited impact of the protests, including reasons that did not specifically apply to the 2011-12 protests, or that did not apply to Russia at all. Students often over-emphasized the repressive nature of the Russian government response to the protests, or misunderstood the position and influence of Vladimir Putin within the Russian government.

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?

Discuss the differences between various cycles of protest and repression in Russia. Emphasize that each cycle represents a different political coalition, with different interests, tactics, and concerns. Describe the position of Vladimir Putin in sophisticated terms, not simply as a dictator. This includes a description of the

coalition that he has assembled within government, as well as the broader social groups that support the regime. Explain the various tools that repressive regimes have on hand for defeating, deflecting, or ignoring protests.

Question 3

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of this question was to assess student understanding of the methodology used by political scientists in comparing relationships between two variables. The skills tested were conceptual and analytical. The students were provided with four statements and had three specific tasks: to identify the statement that describes a correlation, to identify the statement that describes a causal relationship, and to explain the difference between causation and correlation.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score is 1.96 out of a possible 3 points.

Most students were able to identify which of the statements described a correlation and which of the statements described a causal relationship. Many students were able to explain the difference between correlation and causation.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Many students reversed the statements and asserted that Statement B was the correlation and that Statement C was the causal relationship. A few students tried to combine statements to form a correlation or causal relationship. Many students failed to explain the difference between correlation and causation by either reversing the meaning of the terms or by not explicitly stating a difference.

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 of the most important skills that an AP Comparative Government and Politics student needs to acquire is the ability to analyze typical patterns of political processes and behavior. In order to do this, the student must understand the methodology used by political scientists in comparing relationships between two variables. Consequently, teachers need to not only introduce the terms correlation and causation in their first unit, but also provide opportunities for students to apply the terms in their analysis of country specific political processes and behavior throughout the course.

Question 4

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of this question was to assess students' knowledge of domestic factors and international considerations that have an effect on policy choices in China, specifically changes to the one-child policy. The skills tested were descriptive. The students had three specific tasks: to describe two distinct domestic factors and one international factor that influenced the Chinese government to make a change in the one-child policy.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score is .72 out of a possible 3 points.

Most students could identify at least one domestic factor and offer sufficient description of that factor. Some students had difficulty describing how the international factor actually influenced the relaxation of the policy.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students occasionally identified the fact that China currently has more males than females, but did not adequately describe this as a domestic factor that influenced the relaxation of China's one-child policy. Some students identified an earlier relaxation of the one-child policy, such as allowing families that lost a child to have a new one, but did not describe a domestic factor that influenced this relaxation. Another problem that students encountered was not adequately describing the pressure that other states or non-governmental organizations placed on China as an international factor. Some students wrote that other states argued against the policy or did not like the policy, but did not describe a proactive action taken to influence the Chinese government.

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 might help students better distinguish between the domestic factors that influence policy changes and the policy changes themselves. Some students identify the policy change, but never describe the factor behind that change. Teachers might also emphasize the types of international action that influence China. In most instances, other countries and non-governmental organizations merely voicing their opinion on a particular issue is unlikely to influence Chinese policy. However, such actors deciding to actually apply pressure to China may lead China to at least re-consider the policy.

Question 5

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of this question was to assess students' knowledge of executive term limits. The skills tested were descriptive and analytical: to describe and explain. Students had three specific tasks: to describe the executive term limit rule in Mexico and the executive term limit rule in Nigeria (two tasks) and to explain why many former authoritarian countries adopt executive term limits.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 1.64 out of a possible 3 points.

The vast majority of students were able to correctly describe Mexico's one term rule for the executive. Most students correctly described Nigeria's executive term rule limiting presidents to two terms. Many students were able to explain the reason why countries emerging from authoritarian rule would use a term limit rule.

What were common student errors or omissions?

In the last part of the question, students frequently defined an executive term limit instead of explaining why regimes emerging from authoritarianism would adopt this device. Students needed to clearly show that term limits for presidents are intended to limit executive power. Fewer students incorrectly described the executive term limit in Nigeria as only allowing consecutive terms in office.

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?

In teaching about Nigeria, emphasize that the executive term limit rule allows for non-consecutive terms in office. Also, emphasize that countries that experienced authoritarian rule choose to use executive term limits because it is the time constraint that can serve to limit presidents from gaining too much power.

Question 6

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of this question was to assess how political participation differs in authoritarian and democratic regimes, why people participate in these regimes, and why authoritarian regimes allow political participation and democratic regimes restrict political participation. The skills tested were conceptual and analytical: to describe and explain. Students had seven specific tasks: to describe how political participation in elections, social media, and civil society differ in democratic and authoritarian regimes (three tasks); to explain why people participate politically in democratic and authoritarian regimes (two tasks); to explain why participation is allowed in authoritarian regimes; and to explain why democratic regimes restrict political participation.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score is 4.37 out of a possible 7 points.

Most students could explain why people participate in democratic and authoritarian regimes. Most students could explain why authoritarian regimes allow participation and why democratic regimes restrict participation. Some students could describe how participation differed in democratic and authoritarian regimes in elections, through social media and in civil society.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Many students incorrectly described participation in civil society. Some students failed to describe participation in elections, through social media and in civil society. Some students failed to indicate which form of participation they were describing. Some students failed to indicate a difference in participation between democratic and authoritarian regimes. Some students incorrectly explained why democratic regimes restrict participation and instead explained why they allow political participation.

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 the students to read the question very carefully. Remind students to respond completely and succinctly to the question and include the language in the question or synonymous language. Make sure that students understand the different forms of participation, in particular civil society. Encourage students to think about how democratic and authoritarian regimes are similar and different.

Question 7

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of this question was for students to examine the legislatures in Iran and Mexico and consider how their legislatures are similar, formal constraints on Iran's legislature, how these constraints affect the level of democracy in Iran, and how independent legislatures can strengthen democracy. The skills tested were conceptual, descriptive, and explanatory. Students had seven specific tasks: to describe a similarity in the

way legislators are selected in Iran and Mexico, to describe one formal constraint on the way that legislators are selected in Iran that does not exist in Mexico, to explain how this formal constraint of selecting Iran's legislators affects the level of democracy in Iran, to describe one power that the legislatures of Iran and Mexico share, to describe one formal constraint on the power of the legislatures in Iran that does not exist in Mexico, to explain how this formal constraint of the power of Iran's legislature affects the level of democracy in Iran, and to explain how an independent legislature strengthens democracy.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score is 2.84 out of a possible 7 points.

Most students correctly described a similarity in the way legislators are selected in Iran and Mexico as legislators in both countries are elected in direct elections. Most students also correctly described one power that the legislatures of Iran and Mexico share. Most students also correctly explained how independent legislatures can strengthen democracy. Some students correctly described a formal constraint on the way that legislators are selected in Iran as the vetting of legislative candidates by the Guardian Council. Fewer students were then able to explain how this formal constraint of selecting Iran's legislators reduced the level of democracy in Iran. Some students correctly described a formal constraint on the power of the legislatures in Iran. Fewer students were then able to explain how this formal constraint of the power of Iran's legislature affects the level of democracy in Iran.

What were common errors or omissions?

Some students could correctly describe the Guardian Council's vetting of legislative candidates as a formal constraint on the selection of the legislature in Iran. Fewer students were able to explain how this constraint affects the level of democracy in Iran. Some students could correctly describe the Guardian Council's review of legislation passed by Iran's legislature as a formal constraint on the power of the legislature in Iran. Fewer students were able to explain how this constraint affects the level of democracy in Iran.

Based on your experiences 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 that the Guardian Council is a direct formal constraint on the selection of Iran's legislators and on the power of Iran's legislature. Also, an emphasis should be placed on explanations that include full causal statements that respond to the prompt in the question.

Question 8

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of this question was to assess students' understanding of corruption in regimes with different levels of civil liberties and political rights. The skills tested were descriptive and explanatory. Students had six specific tasks: to describe the difference between the levels of perceived corruption in China and Great Britain, to describe the difference between the levels of political freedom in China and Great Britain, to explain how political freedoms affect the ability of democracies like Great Britain to fight corruption, to describe one way that China is attempting to limit corruption, to describe one shared political reason why China and Great Britain seek to limit corruption, and to describe one shared economic reason why China and Great Britain seek to limit corruption.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score is 3.49 out of a possible 6 points.

Most students correctly interpreted the table and successfully described the difference between the levels of perceived corruption as well as the difference between the levels of political freedom in China and Great Britain. Some could explain how political freedoms affect the ability of democracies such as Great Britain to fight corruption, yet a good number of students found connecting political freedoms more concretely to combatting corruption a bit difficult. Many accurately described how China is attempting to limit corruption, and many also provided a good description of a shared political reason why China and Great Britain seek to limit corruption. More struggled to describe one shared economic reason why China and Great Britain seek to limit corruption, although a good number could describe a shared economic reason.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Many students did not adequately link political freedoms in democratic countries such as Great Britain to combat corruption in that they either wrote generically about political freedoms or failed to make an explicit link to how particular freedoms can promote or hinder anti-corruption efforts. In their descriptions of how China is attempting to limit corruption, some provided a description of political or economic reforms that were not intended to limit corruption, while others described developments that were inadequately connected to anti-corruption efforts in China. As for describing one shared political and one shared economic reason why China and Great Britain seek to limit corruption, some students did not provide a shared economic and a shared political reason for both countries, while others did not clearly differentiate the two reasons. Additionally, some students provided economic reasons that glossed over the fact that economic growth and trade can flourish in countries with severe corruption challenges.

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 teach students about political corruption, taking care to connect corruption with bribes, embezzlement, and theft of government revenues. In a related manner, be sure to show students how both democratic and authoritarian regimes struggle with corruption and undertake efforts to fight corruption. In terms of China's anti-corruption endeavors, be sure to clarify how the processes of economic and political liberalization in recent decades should not be equated with a campaign to diminish corruption and in fact were not aimed at reducing corruption. Teachers should also emphasize the nature of specific political freedoms people in democracies are more likely to enjoy. Additionally, having students practice how to implement the different task verbs such as describe and explain would be very helpful for successfully answering question such as this one. Finally, continue to emphasize to students that clarity is key for a successful description, particularly in differentiating between political and economic reasons for a particular phenomenon.