



Student Performance Q&A: 2014 AP® Comparative Government And Politics Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2014 free-response questions for AP® Comparative Government and Politics were written by the Chief Reader, Glenn Hastedt of James Madison University in Harrisonburg, Virginia. 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 the students' understanding of the change in Russia's control over natural resources since 2000 and the political consequences of the change. The skill tested was descriptive. The students had three specific tasks: to identify one natural resource on which the Russian economy depends, to describe how the Russian government's control over natural resources has changed since 2000, and to describe one political consequence of the change in the Russian government's control over natural resources since 2000.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 1.46 out of a possible 3 points.

The majority of students could identify a natural resource on which the Russian economy depends. Fewer students, but still most, were able to correctly describe that the Russian government has gained greater control of natural resources since 2000. Many students had difficulty describing a political consequence of this greater control over natural resources.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students commonly described the change in Russian control since 2000 in the opposite direction, by claiming that the government had decreased its control over natural resources. Also, students frequently provided an economic consequence of greater Russian control of natural resources, rather than a political consequence.

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?

Make sure students pay attention to the time frame referred to in the question. Reiterate the importance of reading the question carefully.

Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of this question was to assess student knowledge of the professional background, educational background, and ideology of past and current leaders of China, and evaluate student ability to explain how the differences in background and ideology influenced economic policy in China. The skills tested were descriptive and analytical. The students had two specific tasks: to describe two differences in the professional background, educational background, or ideology of leaders under Mao Zedong and current leaders of China, and to explain how one of the differences between past and current leaders influenced economic policy in China.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 1.00 out of a possible 3 points.

Most students could describe at least one difference in background between leaders under Mao and current leaders in China. Most students correctly described a difference in background between leaders under Mao and current leaders in China as either the level of education or the level of ideological purity. While most students recognized that China has opened the economy to trade, privatization, or the free market, some did not link the change in economic policy to one of the differences they described.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students often described the educational or professional background or ideology of one group (leadership under Mao or current leadership) without referencing any difference from the other group. Students described specific policies of leaders under Mao or current leaders in China rather than backgrounds or ideological beliefs. Students also described historical circumstances or chronology in China rather than the backgrounds or ideological beliefs of Chinese leadership. While students could describe a change in economic policy in China, they did not explain how the change in economic policy was linked to one of the differences they described. Students identified social policy changes resulting from the difference in the background of Chinese leadership rather than economic policy changes.

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?

Make sure that students are aware that the prompt explain requires more detailed answers than a simple description, involving a link or comparison between concepts, facts, or data. Make sure that students clearly understand the difference between politics and economics. Focus on emphasizing cause and effect relationships, particularly how the backgrounds or beliefs of political leadership can influence policy choices, and specifically generational leadership transitions in China.

Question 3

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of this question was for students to describe the role of the state in Great Britain's health care system, describe the changing age structure in Great Britain, and explain how this changing age structure is affecting Great Britain's health care system. The skills tested were descriptive and analytical: to describe Great Britain's provision of nationalized and universal health care, to describe how the age structure is changing, and to explain how Great Britain's aging population has impacted the state's provision of health care services.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 1.93 out of a possible 3 points.

Students did well in describing the role of the state in Great Britain's health care system and its changing age structure. Students were able to describe Great Britain's provision of nationalized and universal health care. Many students accurately described the aging of Great Britain's population. Students did well in explaining how the changing age structure is affecting Great Britain's health care system.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Frequently, students referred to Great Britain's health care system but did not describe the state's role in the health care system. Students also attempted to describe Great Britain's age demographics but did not describe how Great Britain's age structure is changing. Many students also attempted to explain how this changing age structure is affecting Great Britain's health care system but did not specify the effect on Great Britain's health care system.

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 that Great Britain's health care system is state directed and that the state has nationalized its universal health care system. Make sure students understand the term "age structure" and that the skill of describing a change in age structure should include a description of changing demographics over time. Emphasize that students should explain changes in policy by specifying a cause and effect relationship. Students should be familiar with how significant changes in population and age structure affect major policies in the six countries of the AP Comparative Government and Politics course.

Question 4

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of this question was for students to identify a country studied in the AP Comparative Government and Politics course that utilizes a run-off electoral system for its chief executive, then describe the system used in the country identified and then explain why any country might establish a run-off election system. The skills tested were identification, description and analysis: to identify either Russia, Iran, or Nigeria, to describe the run-off system chosen (they do vary), and to then analyze the concept of run-off systems. The question was both country-specific, student's choice, and conceptual in nature.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 0.98 out of a possible 3 points.

Most students were able to correctly identify either Russia, Iran, or Nigeria as a country that uses a run-off electoral system for its chief executive. Some students found it difficult to describe the system used in the country, particularly if they chose Nigeria as their example. Nigeria has two elements to its run-off system and students who lost that point usually only noted one characteristic. Many students were able to explain the reason a country might use a run-off system by utilizing the general reason that the system provides for majority support of the people or provides a second vote for voters whose candidate did not proceed to the second round. A significant number of students incorrectly named Mexico and Great Britain. By incorrectly naming Mexico or Great Britain students automatically could not earn the point for the second part of the question which required students to link the description of the run-off system to the country identified in the first part. Students who made this mistake could earn no more than 1 point for an explanation of a reason a country, any country, may want to use a run-off system.

What were common student errors or omissions?

The most common error was choosing the wrong country; Mexico, Great Britain, China, and even the United States, were identified by students for the first part of the question. In the second part of the question students who did not earn the point traditionally left out the reason for the run-off election, such as no one gaining a majority of the vote. In many cases the student wrote as if the runoff was an automatic situation in all cases and could not be avoided by a first-round majority vote of one candidate. The other most common error with Nigeria was that students only described one element of its run-off system, either majority vote or the 25 percent of two-thirds of the states — not both. For the third part of the question students were too generic and did not really explain as the prompt required. Simply stating legitimacy with no explanation as to how it was improved through a run-off system was a common omission. Some students were too focused on the country chosen and explained why the run-off system was chosen in that country rather than being more generally conceptual with the response.

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 may need some direction or practice in reading questions to be sure they are able to answer correctly and completely. Students may need to practice identifying the country-specific parts of questions versus the conceptual elements of questions. Teachers may also need to aid students in reading the question completely so that they understand linkages, as in the first and second parts of this question, before making their choice. Nigeria, which has two elements required in its system, may not have been the ideal choice. Teachers will also want to be sure that they connect run-off systems, not just to the countries that use the system, but to the reasons for a system and the problems it may solve in choosing chief executives.

Question 5

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of the question was for students to describe how the Nigerian armed forces undermined the stability of the Nigerian state between 1960 and 1999, to identify who is stipulated by the 1999 Constitution to serve as commander-in-chief, and to describe how the Nigerian armed forces have strengthened the stability of Nigeria since 1999. The skills required were descriptive: how the Nigerian military frequently intervened in politics from 1960 to 1999, how the President has been the commander-in-chief of the armed forces since 1999, and the ways the military has strengthened stability since 1999.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 1.39 out of a possible 3 points.

Most students could describe how the Nigerian military intervened multiple times from 1960 to 1999, thereby undermining stability. Most students could also identify the president as the commander-in-chief as stipulated by the 1999 constitution. While most students could describe how the military was engaged in activities that were no longer disruptive, such as no longer intervening, they had a harder time describing new stabilizing activities that were specific to the Nigerian military.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students did not make clear the difference between an intervention by the military and a military regime, which would not necessarily represent instability. Students sometimes failed to note the office or position that was made commander-in-chief and instead referred to the individual, Obasanjo. Students either would offer the absence of intervention as a new “use,” which it is not, or they would describe generic military uses instead of ones that were unique to Nigeria.

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?

Make sure that students are aware that they need to use language and examples that are specific to the countries covered by the AP Comparative Government and Politics course when they are asked about those countries. Make sure that students understand the differences among stability, legitimacy, and unity. Students also need to know the difference between a regime change and a military intervention.

Question 6

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of this question was for students to comparatively analyze the function of a legislature in both authoritarian and democratic regimes. The skills tested were descriptive and analytical. Students had five specific tasks: to identify a function of a legislature that is common to both democratic and authoritarian regimes, to explain how a function of a legislature can strengthen democracy, to describe two ways a legislature can be controlled in an authoritarian regime, and to explain why authoritarian regimes maintain legislatures.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 3.16 out of a possible 5 points.

Most students accurately described at least one way that an authoritarian regime uses to control a legislature. Students also effectively explained that authoritarian regimes maintain legislatures in order to earn political legitimacy. Many students were able to identify representation or passing laws as a function of a legislature common to both authoritarian and democratic regimes. The most difficult task for students was to explain how a function of a legislature strengthens democracy because they often failed to make the connection between the legislative function and how it bolsters democracy.

What were common student errors or omissions?

One common student error was to confuse legislative and executive functions, either by only describing executive actions instead of legislative ones (for example, a legislature implements laws) or by combining functions in a list (for example, a legislature passes laws and implements laws).

Another common error was vagueness in descriptions and explanations.

In describing a way in which an authoritarian regime controls a legislature, some students would simply state that the legislature has to do what the leader wants but not provide a description of a strategy that the leader uses to make the legislature comply.

Explanations require the student to answer how or why an action occurred. Many students simply stated that a function of the legislature is to strengthen democracy by providing a voice to the people. They failed to make a link between representation and fair, competitive elections or the passage of laws that reflect the will of the people because lawmakers are accountable to their voters.

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 about the functions of the branches of government. Verbs matter in discussions about power, and students need to be reminded to be careful about the words that they use to identify, describe, or explain what legislatures do in comparison to the executive position. A word wall or matching game with action verbs for all the branches could be helpful for practice.

Students need to think critically about the differences between democratic and authoritarian regimes. Oftentimes students know the features of each but have difficulty in explaining the links between institutional behavior and sources of authority. Teachers can help students by requiring them to make the explicit association between the regime type and the specific powers of government institutions for each of the core countries. Although student responses often earned a point without specific country examples, many students who were successful with this conceptual question used a specific country example to illustrate their point.

Question 7

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of the question was for students to examine unitary and federal systems and to consider how they may decentralize power. The skills tested were conceptual, descriptive, and explanatory: to define, describe, and explain. Students had six specific tasks: to define a unitary system, to describe how Great Britain has decentralized power since 1997, to define federalism, to explain how Mexico's political system limited the decentralization of power prior to 2000, to explain one advantage of decentralization for public policy, and to explain one disadvantage of decentralization for public policy.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 2.38 out of a possible 6 points.

Students were particularly good at defining describing how Great Britain has decentralized power since 1997. Many could define unitary systems and federalism, and many could explain an advantage and a disadvantage of decentralization for public policy.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students had difficulty defining unitary system. Many connected it to geographical or territorial concentration of power. Defining federalism was also difficult for some students, who characterized it as decentralization and not a system of power sharing between national and subnational governments. A large number of students had particular difficulty with explaining how Mexico's political system limited the decentralization of power prior to 2000. Many described the dominance of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), but did not explain how the PRI's dominance limited the decentralization of power prior to 2000.

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 emphasize the differences between unitary systems and federalism, particularly how they both can decentralize power but in different ways. Also, teachers should underscore the differences between vertical decentralization of power between levels of government and horizontal checks and balances between branches of government. Finally, continue to emphasize, practice, and develop various strategies to help students develop the skill of explaining particular phenomena and that explanation requires greater connection to the phenomenon at hand than mere description.

Question 8

What was the intent of this question?

The intent of this question was for students to compare the powers and sources of authority of Iran's supreme leader and China's head of state. The skills tested were descriptive and analytical: to describe two formal powers of the supreme leader in Iran, to identify two official positions that China's head of state typically holds today, and to describe one similarity and one difference in the sources of authority of Iran's supreme leader and China's head of state.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 2.21 out of a possible 6 points.

Students did well in describing at least one formal power of Iran's supreme leader and identifying at least one position typically held by China's head of state today. Many students had difficulty in describing a similarity in the sources of authority of Iran's supreme leader and China's head of state. More students were able to describe a difference in the sources of authority of Iran's supreme leader and China's head of state.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students had trouble distinguishing between the formal and informal powers of Iran's supreme leader. A related error was that students tended to overstate the amount of formal power held by Iran's supreme leader. Some students had difficulty in describing a similarity in the sources of authority of Iran's supreme leader and China's head of state. More students were able to describe a difference in the sources of authority of Iran's supreme leader and China's head of state. Several students confused the authority of the executive with the legitimacy of the state. Other students discussed the executive's power, rather than the sources of executive authority.

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 difference between formal and informal powers of government officials and institutions. Continue to emphasize vocabulary, including the difference between authority and legitimacy. Provide opportunities for students to practice direct comparisons of the formal powers and sources of authority among the six countries studied in the AP Comparative Government and Politics course. Emphasize that students need to read the question carefully and provide only the number of responses required.