



Student Performance Q&A:

2014 AP[®] United States Government and Politics

Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2014 free-response questions for AP[®] United States Government and Politics were written by the Chief Reader, James Riddlesperger of Texas Christian University, Fort Worth, Texas. 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 the balance of power between the national and state governments. Part (a) asked students to compare the Federalist and Anti-Federalist positions regarding the allocation of power between levels of government. Part (b) asked students to describe two features of the original Constitution that have increased the power of the national government. Part (c) asked students to explain how both the First Amendment and Tenth Amendment addressed concerns Anti-Federalists had about the original Constitution. Part (d) asked students to choose either the Due Process Clause or the Equal Protection Clause and asked students to explain how that clause has altered the balance of power between the national and state governments.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 2.59 out of a possible 6 points.

In part (a) students were generally able to articulate an accurate account of the contrasting preferences of Federalists (who preferred a stronger national government) and Anti-Federalists (who preferred stronger state governments).

In part (b) most students were not able to present features of the Constitution (such as the Necessary and Proper Clause and the Supremacy Clause) that showed understanding of the Constitution's relationship to the evolving nature of federalism.

In part (c) students were more successful in explaining how the First Amendment either protected individuals from government power or preserved individual liberty, which were concerns of the Anti-Federalists. Students were less familiar with the Tenth Amendment's emphasis on reserving governmental power for the states.

In part (d) students were able to identify the Due Process Clause and the Equal Protection Clause as important to the evolution of civil rights and civil liberties. However, students could not explain how the Fourteenth Amendment provides a mechanism for the national government to compel states to comply with national requirements.

What were common student errors or omissions?

In part (a) students who were unable to accurately compare Federalist and Anti-federalist positions regarding the power of the national government often failed to articulate the different levels of government, only discussing preferences for “strong” or “weak” government. Students also discussed the debate over ratification (the Federalists supported ratification and the Anti-Federalists opposed ratification), which does not address the debate over the appropriate allocation of government power.

In part (b) many students discussed the Constitution in broad terms (Article III, “checks and balances,” “vague language,” etc.) rather than discussing more specific features that allow for a discussion of the national government’s expansion of power. Many students also described features of the original Constitution that were added due to inadequacies in the Articles of Confederation (i.e., power to coin money, power to raise an army). While this approach sometimes worked, most students were unable to describe the role that the feature played in the expansion of national government power.

In part (c) students were able to discuss elements of the First Amendment in detail, but they were often not able to go beyond vague generalities when discussing the Tenth Amendment. Some students discussed the Tenth Amendment as preserving citizen rights, which suggests that many cannot distinguish between the Ninth and Tenth Amendments.

In part (d) students were aware of a relationship between the Due Process Clause and civil liberties, and between the Equal Protection Clause and civil rights, and they could often provide an example (i.e., a court case or a narrative about a conflict over civil rights or liberties). Students were unable to explain how the national government relies upon clauses in the Fourteenth Amendment in overturning state-level laws and actions.

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 seem to be more comfortable discussing the founding of the United States, and the debates and decisions made during that period, than discussing the implications those decisions have had on the evolution of the U.S. system of government. Students recognize key concepts such as the Bill of Rights, the Fourteenth Amendment, judicial review, and expansion of congressional authority. But they cannot discuss the timing of adjustments that were not part of the debate over the original Constitution, or explain how those changes have had an impact on the functioning of government in the United States. When discussing the evolution of the relationship between national and state government, it might help to include counterfactuals: how would the Civil Rights movement have been different without an Equal Protection Clause in the Fourteenth Amendment? How would Gideon’s case have been decided in the absence of the incorporation of the Bill of Rights via the Due Process Clause? This would put these examples in context and highlight how the evolution of the Constitution, and constitutional interpretation, have affected the balance of power between national and state government.

Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

This question examined the students' knowledge of how voter turnout is influenced by constitutional provisions, voting laws, and demographics. Part (a) asked students to identify one of three amendments and its effect on the electorate. In part (b) the students were asked to explain how motor voter laws and photo identification laws affected voter turnout. In part (c) the students were asked to describe the relationship between age or education and its effect on voter turnout. Part (d) required students to explain the difference between voting turnouts in presidential vs. midterm elections and primary vs. general elections.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 3.47 out of a possible 6 points.

In part (a) students were most successful in identifying which group in the electorate was given the right to vote.

In part (b) students were most successful in explaining how motor voter laws ease the registration process and photo identification laws create barriers to people voting. Students were less successful in explaining how those barriers affected voter turnout.

In part (c) students were most successful in correctly identifying that as one's age increases one's voting increases. Students were less successful in focusing on academic education instead of political education in regard to increasing voter turnout.

In part (d) students were most successful in explaining why voter turnout was different in presidential elections versus primary elections. Students were less successful in explaining why voter turnout was different between primary and general elections.

What were common student errors or omissions?

In part (a) students lacked correct knowledge of the amendments.

In part (b) students misidentified motor voter laws and photo identification laws. Students also did not explain how these laws affected voter turnout.

In part (c) students focused on political education instead of formal education. In regard to age, students focused on how people vote ideologically as they age instead of how voter turnout rates change based on age.

In part (d) students did not understand the differences among the elections and therefore could not accurately explain why there was a difference in voter turnout.

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 assess what the question is asking them to do. When asked to explain, the student must go into further detail to answer the question. There must be a clear answer to the "how" or "why" of the question. Additionally, teachers should make sure students know the amendments to the Constitution.

Question 3

What was the intent of this question?

The question examined students' knowledge of foreign policy powers held by the Congress and the president. Part (a) asked students to describe two enumerated foreign policy powers held by Congress. Part (b) asked students to describe two expressed foreign policy powers held by the president. Part (c) asked students to explain how the use of executive agreements expands the president's ability to implement foreign policy. Part (d) asked students to explain how either elections or presidential approval ratings limit the president's ability to implement foreign policy.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 3.21 out of a possible 6 points.

In part (a) students were most successful in describing enumerated powers of Congress in making foreign policy such as declaring war and confirming ambassadors. Students were less successful in describing Congress' enumerated power in the treaty-making process.

In part (b) students were most successful in describing expressed powers of the president in making foreign policy, such as appointing ambassadors, negotiating treaties, or deploying troops through the expressed power of commander-in-chief.

In part (c) students were most successful in explaining how executive agreements expand the president's ability to implement foreign policy by indicating that the president can act unilaterally. Students were less successful in explaining that executive agreements are international in nature.

In part (d) students were most successful in correctly explaining how elections limit the president's ability to implement foreign policy. Students were less successful in explaining how presidential approval ratings limit the president's ability to implement foreign policy.

What were common student errors or omissions?

In part (a) students commonly identified "making" or "negotiating" treaties as an enumerated power of Congress. Students commonly confused "enumerated" powers with implied or informal powers.

In part (b) students commonly identified commander-in-chief as an expressed power of the president but failed to describe an action taken by the president as commander-in-chief that would impact foreign policy. Students commonly confused "expressed" powers with implied or informal powers.

In part (c) students commonly discussed executive agreements, but they did not link executive agreements with foreign policy and/or explain how executive agreements expand a president's ability to implement foreign policy.

In part (d) students commonly discussed elections but did not explain how elections could limit the president's ability to implement foreign policy. Students commonly discussed presidential approval ratings but did not explain how presidential approval ratings could limit the president's ability to implement foreign policy.

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 there are important differences between powers that are "enumerated" or "expressed" and those that have been informally granted to the president and Congress. Emphasize that executive agreements are international in nature and allow the president to act unilaterally. 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 4

What was the intent of this question?

This question examined students' knowledge of party polarization. Part (a) asked students to define party polarization. Part (b) asked students to identify a trend in the provided graph. Part (c) asked students to describe two causes of party polarization in Congress. Part (d) asked students to describe one effect of party polarization on congressional policymaking.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 2.28 out of a possible 5 points.

In part (a) students were successful in defining party polarization as the ideological distance between the parties.

In part (b) many students were successful in identifying a trend in the graph.

In part (c) students were successful in describing at least one cause of party polarization in Congress.

In part (d) many students were successful at describing one effect of party polarization on congressional policymaking.

What were common student errors or omissions?

In part (a) students referred to a difference between the House and Senate or between Democrats and Republicans but failed to define party polarization as ideological distance between the parties.

In part (b) students sometimes failed to identify a trend. Instead they referenced a difference between the House and Senate or between Democrats and Republicans without including a directional change shown in the graph.

In part (c) the most common error was students describing differences between the House and Senate or the Democrats and Republicans rather than factors that polarized parties in Congress. For example, students frequently described "divided government" as different parties controlling branches of government without any description of polarization. Students also erred by simply stating that Democrats are different from Republicans without describing a cause of party polarization in Congress.

In part (d) students incorrectly described party polarization as more efficient Congressional policymaking, instead of causing gridlock or lack of compromise or both. For example, students described the effect of party polarization on Congressional policy as making it easier to pass laws.

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 definitions require precise statements. Students need to be able to identify a trend in a graph. Also, remind students to directly address what is asked in the question.