



Student Performance Q&A:
2005 AP[®] United States Government and Politics
Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2005 free-response questions for AP[®] United States Government and Politics were written by the Chief Reader, Kerry L. Haynie of Duke University in Durham, North Carolina. 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 asked students to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of the complex relationship between public opinion and American political institutions. Specifically, the question asked students to describe ways in which the United States Supreme Court is insulated from public opinion, as well as ways in which public opinion constrains the behavior of the Court.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 2.35 out of a possible 6 points. The vast majority of students appeared to understand the question's intent. It appears that both subjects are widely and well taught in AP courses because most students demonstrated a basic understanding of important features and characteristics of the Supreme Court and public opinion as discrete subject areas.

In general, students were less able to demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between public opinion and the Supreme Court. Many students had some level of knowledge of the Supreme Court and at a minimum were able to identify factors that insulate the Court from public opinion. Students who performed well were able to add information to their essays beyond identifying those factors. Many were also able to identify factors that prevent the Supreme Court from deviating from public opinion. The best students were further able to explain the context in which those factors affect Supreme Court behavior.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Not being able to connect the knowledge they had about the Supreme Court to the knowledge they had about public opinion was students' most common problem. Students also had trouble addressing all of the question's tasks. The question required them to provide factual identifications and then to *explain* or *describe* that which they identified, but many students were unable to move from identification to explanation or description.

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?

Being able to connect and relate information and knowledge about discrete subjects is an important analytical and critical thinking skill for students of government and politics. In lectures, teachers should strive to make explicit the linkages between the different aspects of United States politics and government. Student assignments and class exams can further assist students in developing this analytical skill.

Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

This question was intended to test students' knowledge and understanding of federalism as a dynamic and core feature of the American political system. Specifically, the question was concerned with the expansion of national government powers and the relative increase in federal powers over those of the states. It asked students to indicate their understanding of the growth in national government powers as a consequence of specific constitutional provisions, as well as the growth of national powers at the expense of state authority via enactment and implementation of specific congressional acts.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 2.1 out of a possible 6 points. In general, the responses indicated that students either have limited knowledge about the dynamic qualities of the federal government–state government relationship, or they failed to understand that this is what the question asked them to address.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Many students responded as though the question were simply about national supremacy. However, the question actually asked them to describe the growth in national government powers *over time* as a consequence of the use of specific constitutional provisions, and to explain the growth in national powers at the expense of state authority via enactment and implementation of a particular congressional act. For the most part, students tended to have only general descriptive knowledge of the specified constitutional clauses and a vague and somewhat superficial understanding of the three congressional acts. They were inclined to have difficulty providing explanations of the expansion of federal power over time. In many cases, when students could correctly describe two constitutional clauses and one of the pieces of federal legislation, they were unable to explain how these contributed to an expansion of federal power over time.

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?

Many students had difficulty in moving from description to explanation and in grasping the dynamic aspects of both federalism and the interpretation of the United States Constitution. Teachers may want to incorporate into their syllabi some specific instructions on the skill of writing extended, analytical responses, as well as the different tasks associated with description and explanation. When covering the constitutional foundations of United States government, teachers should develop lectures and student assignments that emphasize changing interpretations of the Constitution and the ramifications of these changes for such political institutions as federalism.

Question 3

What was the intent of this question?

“Selective incorporation” is the United States Supreme Court’s gradual application of the Bill of Rights of the United States Constitution to the states on a piecemeal, case-by-case basis through use of the Fourteenth Amendment’s due process clause. This question asked students to demonstrate their understanding of this concept. Specifically, students were asked to choose two of the following civil liberties and explain how each was incorporated using a specific and relevant Supreme Court decision: rights of criminal defendants, First Amendment, and privacy rights.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 2.08 out of a possible 6 points. Most students seemed to understand the question’s intent. They showed a general understanding of incorporation, that is, that the Bill of Rights has been applied to the states. However, they were less able to demonstrate an understanding that the Fourteenth Amendment was used to apply those rights on a *selective* basis. Most students were able to cite at least one case involving rights that has been incorporated.

What were common student errors or omissions?

While students had a general understanding of incorporation, they usually did not make reference to the Fourteenth Amendment or its due process clause. Furthermore, many seemed to lack the understanding that the Bill of Rights has been applied on a gradual, case-by-case basis. In addition, some students were under the impression that selective incorporation applied to specific groups of people (e.g., minority group members) rather than to civil liberties. A sizeable number of students believed that the states, rather than the Supreme Court, were selectively incorporating the Bill of Rights.

Some students were able to cite the Fourteenth Amendment but were unable to adequately explain how it has been used to apply the Bill of Rights to the states. Many students mixed up case names (e.g., *Miranda v. Wainright*). Some students used inappropriate cases, citing *New York Times v. United States* as an incorporation case, for example, and citing *Mapp v. Ohio* as a privacy case but describing it as a criminal defendant’s case.

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?

Many students exhibited substantial misunderstanding of the role the Fourteenth Amendment’s due process clause has played in expanding the reach of the Bill of Rights; it is important for them to understand that not all rights guaranteed by the Bill of Rights have been applied to the states and that those that have been applied have been done so on a piecemeal, case-by-case basis through the use of the due process clause. The specific dynamics of the evolution of the Supreme Court’s interpretation of the clause also seemed to be difficult for students to fully grasp. When covering civil liberties, teachers should develop lectures and student assignments that emphasize the specific changes in judicial interpretations of the Fourteenth Amendment and their impact on civil liberties.

Question 4

What was the intent of this question?

This question examined students’ knowledge and understanding of major campaign finance reform proposals that have been debated and acted upon by the United States Congress. Students were required to define two of three specified reform proposals—eliminating soft money, limiting independent expenditures, and raising limits on individual contributions—and describe both an argument made by proponents of the proposal and an argument made by opponents of the proposal.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 1.38 out of a possible 6 points. Although students seemed to understand the question’s intent, in general they performed poorly. Many were able to demonstrate general knowledge of campaign finance reform but were not able to define the terms specified in the question.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Many students did not understand that “raising limits on individual contributions” meant that more money could be donated to a candidate. Instead, they seemed to think that raising limits meant that less money could be contributed. Many did not understand that “elimination of independent expenditures” referred to spending by groups or persons unaffiliated with a campaign or candidate. Instead, they seemed to think that this referred to the spending of the candidate’s personal resources. Some students incorrectly wrote that soft money was money donated directly to candidates.

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?

Vocabulary and terminology are important. Political scientists expect students of the subject to know certain core concepts and to be familiar with and understand a subject-specific lingo.

Higher-level thinking and analysis often go hand in hand with adopting a more subject-specific vocabulary. Assignments and classroom activities that require students to apply newly learned vocabulary could greatly strengthen their command of political science lingo and give teachers an opportunity to ascertain poor understanding of the terminology. For topics that generate controversy, such as campaign finance reform, teachers should consider an assignment in which students debate the pros and cons of each policy proposal.