



Student Performance Q&A:

2016 AP[®] UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT AND POLITICS

The following comments on the 2016 free-response questions for AP[®] United States Government and Politics were written by the Chief Reader, Stephen Meinhold 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?

This question examined the significant role played by linkage institutions in the electoral process. Part (a) asked students to describe one important function of political parties as a linkage institution in elections. Part (b) asked students to describe the influence of media on the electoral process in each of the following roles: gatekeeping/agenda setting and scorekeeping/horse race journalism. Part (c) asked students to describe two strategies that interest groups use to influence the electoral process. Part (d) asked students to explain how, according to critics, interest groups may limit representative democracy.

How well did students perform on this question?

The final mean score was 3.28 out of a possible 6 points. In general, students performed well on this question. Students performed best on the part of the question about political parties as a linkage institution in elections and strategies interest groups use to influence the electoral process. The students recognized that political parties nominate candidates and provide voter cues. The students also recognized that interest groups can form PACs, get out the vote and run advertisements.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students did not seem to know the difference between the influence of the media in the role of gatekeeping and scorekeeping. A common error was the failure to explicitly connect these roles to the electoral process. Another common error was the failure to connect lobbying, as a strategy of interest groups, to the electoral process. Another common error was the failure to understand how, according to critics, interest groups may limit representative government. Students frequently cited criticisms of interest groups but failed to suggest how they limit representative democracy.

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 respond specifically to what is being asked. Student descriptions need to explicitly use the vocabulary found in the prompts. Student responses should use appropriate terminology. Students should not only be able to describe political parties, media, and interest groups as linkage institutions but also to apply them to the electoral process. Students should understand criticisms of interest groups and how interest groups limit representative democracy.

Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

This question examined the student's knowledge of demographic changes in the U.S. population and what political consequences have resulted for the political institutions in the nation. Part (a) asked students to identify a trend depicted in the chart provided. In part (b) students were asked to explain how the trend identified in part (a) is likely to affect the electoral success of either the Democratic Party or the Republican Party. Part (c) asked students to explain how the demographic changes shown in the chart provided are likely to affect the way in which parties operate in Congress. Part (d) asked students to describe two specific actions the presidents can take to respond to the demographic changes depicted in the chart provided.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for this question was 1.77 out of a possible 5 points.

In part (a) students were generally unable to identify a trend in the chart provided.

In part (b) students were generally unable to tie the trend of changing racial demographics identified in the chart to the electoral success of either the Democratic Party or the Republican Party, assuming that the voting patterns of the identified groups remained stable.

In part (c) students were generally more successful in explaining how the demographic changes affect the way in which parties operate in Congress.

In part (d) students were generally able to describe a specific action that presidents can take to respond to the demographic changes in the chart.

What were common student errors or omissions?

In part (a) students often identified absolute changes in the size of the groups depicted in the chart, rather than stating the changing percentages of those groups over time. Often, students misunderstood that the chart did not provide data about voters.

In part (b) many students were not able to explain how the trend identified in part (a) affected the electoral success of either political party. Many of them misidentified a trend from part (a) and, therefore, could not correctly explain how the parties' electoral success changed.

In part (c) many students commonly explained how the party makeup of the Congress changed without explaining how the parties' operations changed as a result of the demographic changes shown in the chart. They also would describe the polarization of the parties or Congress being gridlocked without addressing some specific function of the parties.

In part (d) students were not able to describe two specific actions that presidents can take to respond to the demographic changes in the chart. Generally, students were unable to describe two formal or informal powers of the president. Rather, they used general terms unrelated to such powers.

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 very carefully read the question to avoid missing points. Students should have developed 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 responses when asked to explain a concept or how it relates to other political changes.

Additionally, students need to develop the skills of reading data from a chart, understanding basic units shown in the chart, and how to draw valid inferences from the data. Also, the powers of the president and the ways in which parties operate in Congress need to be reviewed to ensure students possess an accurate understanding of how those political institutions may respond to changes in the political environment.

Question 3

What was the intent of this question?

This question examined the students’ knowledge of the interactions between Congress and the bureaucracy in the policy process. Part (a) asked students to identify the primary role of Congress in the policy process. In part (b) the students were asked to explain how divided party control of Congress can make the policy process difficult. Part (c) asked students to identify the primary role of the bureaucracy in the policy process. In part (d) students were asked to explain how the bureaucracy’s power is increased in the policy process through either rule making or bureaucratic discretion. Part (e) asked students to explain how Congress can limit the power of the bureaucracy through the use of both oversight hearings and the power of the purse.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 2.47 out of a possible 6 points.

In part (a) students were successful at identifying the primary role of Congress in the policy process as creating legislation.

In part (b) students were not as successful in explaining how divided party control of Congress can make the policy process difficult. They often responded with explanations of divided government between the president and Congress or with party polarization and gridlock and how those make the policy process difficult.

In part (c) students were somewhat successful at identifying the primary role of the bureaucracy in the policy process as implementing policy.

In part (d) students were more successful in explaining how bureaucratic discretion increases the power of the bureaucracy in the policy process. However, they were less successful in explaining how rule making increases the power of the bureaucracy in the policy process.

In part (e) students were somewhat successful in explaining how oversight hearings enable Congress to limit the power of the bureaucracy in the policy process. However, students were more successful in explaining how the power of the purse enables Congress to limit the power of the bureaucracy in the policy process.

What were common student errors or omissions?

In part (a) students would list many things that Congress does but would not identify the primary role of making laws/policy.

In part (b) students confused the concept of divided government with divided party control of Congress. They responded with the president and Congress being of different parties or with the difference in ideologies of Republicans and Democrats.

In part (c) students identified the bureaucracy's role in the policy process as a function of creating legislation and not implementing legislation, e.g., bureaucrats lobbying Congress, create legislation in their favor, or work with interest groups.

In part (d) students discussed both rule making and bureaucratic discretion in the context of the creation of legislation, not implementation. Students discussed making rules and bureaucratic discretion in general without discussing it in the context of enforcing policy.

In part (e) students did not show actions taken by Congress through oversight hearings or the power of the purse that limit the power of the bureaucracy in the policy process. Their responses showed Congress as a passive player in the policy process.

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 the less stringent requirements of identifying and the more demanding task of explaining which requires students to answer "how" something happens or the effect of something on the process or event. Students should analyze the question in a holistic sense as well as break it down into its parts to truly understand what the question is asking.

Question 4

What was the intent of this question?

This question examined the students' understanding about the fact that even though the Constitution limited the power of the national government and restricted popular control of government, citizen participation in government has changed over time. Part (a) asked students to explain how the Constitutional features of checks and balances and federalism provided limitations against the concentration of power in the national government. In part (b) students were asked to select either the Electoral College or the selection of senators before the Seventeenth Amendment and to explain how that Constitutional feature limited the people's ability to influence the national government. Part (c) asked students to describe a constitutional amendment that increased suffrage. Part (d) asked students to describe the effect of one of the following laws on citizen participation in elections: the Voting Rights Act of 1965 or the National Voter Registration Act of 1993 (Motor Voter Act)

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score was 2.93 out of a possible 5 points. In general, students performed well on this question. Students performed best on the part of the question that asked about which constitutional amendment increased suffrage. The students were able to most accurately describe those amendments that allowed women, African-American males, and eighteen-year-olds to vote.

In part (a) students were fairly successful in explaining checks and balances and the limitations it imposed on branches, thus explaining how this limited the concentration of power in the national government.

In part (c) students were successful in describing one of the constitutional amendments that expanded suffrage.

In part (d) students were successful in describing the effect of the National Voter Registration Act of 1993 (Motor Voter) on citizen participation in elections by stating that the law made it easier to register to vote.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Students had difficulties with basic concepts, which were the foundation of this question. Many students were not able to explain federalism and/or the electoral college, thus preventing them from earning a second point in part (a) or a point in part (b). Also in part (a), students failed to effectively show how federalism limited the power of the national government. Students tended to address shared/concurrent powers instead of reserved powers within the context of the answer. Another common issue was the inability of students to understand the meaning of suffrage. In part (d) students also struggled with correctly describing the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Many students believed this act gave African-Americans and women the right to vote.

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 should be able to comprehensively answer questions that require an explanation. This answer can include an example to illustrate knowledge of the concepts being discussed, although an example is not required to earn the maximum score. Across all sections of the question, some students routinely showed a lack of understanding of basic concepts (e.g., federalism, electoral college, suffrage, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965). This lack of foundational understanding hampered students' ability to effectively answer the question as it was asked.

Students need to be reminded that answering an "explanation" question, as opposed to a "description" question, requires a different level of skill. Students should be able to provide a "how" or "why" in their responses when asked to answer an explanation. Also, in addressing an explanation students may find that using concrete examples will help them better illustrate their understanding of the concept(s) and provide a more cogent and clear explanation.