Chief Reader Report on Student Responses:

2018 AP® United States Government and Politics Free-Response Questions

- Number of Students Scored 326,392
- Number of Readers 733
- Score Distribution

Exam Score	N	%At
5	43,410	13.3
4	43,253	13.3
3	86,180	26.4
2	79,652	24.4
1	73,897	22.6

- Global Mean 2.70

The following comments on the 2018 free-response questions for AP® United States Government and Politics were written by the Chief Reader, Stephen Meinhold, Professor of Political Science, 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 preparation 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   **Task:**   **Topic:** Parties in Elections
                         Max. Points: 5   **Mean Score:** 2.84

What were the responses to this question expected to demonstrate?

This question expected responses to demonstrate an understanding of how parties behave in elections, the impact of parties and processes on elections, and how the structure of elections impact third party chances of winning elections. Part (a) asked students to identify two activities that political parties do to win elections. Part (b) asked students to describe how third parties affect elections. Part (c) asked students to explain how single-member districts make it difficult for third parties to win elections. Part (d) asked students to explain how electoral competition is affected by gerrymandering.

Skills that students were expected to demonstrate include identifying, describing, and explaining various party behaviors and processes.

How well did the response address the course content related to this question? How well did the responses integrate the skills required on this question?

The different tasks within the question required students to engage in increasingly higher order thinking skills. The responses progressed from a simple identification of party activities used to win elections, which students were generally successful in doing. Students were also generally successful in describing of how third parties affect elections. Fewer students were able explain how single-member districts make it difficult for third parties to win elections. The most frequent error was an insufficient understanding of single-member districts. Another frequent error was explaining a factor that makes it difficult for third parties to win that is not connected to single-member districts. Some students struggled to explain the impact of gerrymandering on electoral competition. The most frequent error was that responses did not demonstrate a correct understanding of gerrymandering.

What common student misconceptions or gaps in knowledge were seen in the responses to this question?

One common misconception in responses was that candidate activities are the same as party activities.

Another common error was that responses that described what a third party is or a challenge that third parties face without actually connecting those to impacting elections.

Many responses were not able to correctly explain how third party candidates' chances of winning elections is affected by single-member districts. While some responses were able to connect single-member districts with a plurality or winner-take-all system, these responses often did not then explain how that system affects the likelihood of a third party candidate winning elections.

Common Misconceptions/Knowledge Gaps	*Responses that Demonstrate Understanding*
Candidate activities are the same as party activities.	"Political parties may hold national party conventions…and run campaign ads for their candidates to win elections." "Two activities that political parties do to win elections are create ads for their candidate…and raise funds for campaigns."

Describing what a third party is or a challenge that third party faces without connecting those to impacting elections.	"Third parties affect elections because they take away voters from the two major parties."
While some responses were able to connect single-member districts with a plurality or winner-take-all system, these responses often did not explain how that system affects the likelihood of a third party candidate winning elections.	"Single-member districts make it hard for third parties to win elections because of the winner-take-all system, forcing third parties to get a majority of votes in a district, which can be hard when they have a wide base of support that is not strong enough in any one specific area to win the district, wasting their votes."

What were the responses to this question expected to demonstrate?

This question examined the characteristics of a reliable scientific poll and how politicians use polls. In addition, students were asked to explain how frequent polling changes media coverage of political campaigns. Part (a) asked students to identify two characteristics of a valid scientific poll. Part (b) required students to describe two ways that politicians use polls. Finally, part (c) asked students to explain how frequent polling impacts media coverage of political campaigns.

How well did the response address the course content related to this question? How well did the responses integrate the skills required on this question?

This question allowed students to scaffold their response. The different tasks within the question required students to engage in increasingly higher order thinking skills. The responses progressed from a simple identification of the characteristics of a reliable scientific poll to an explanation of how polling impacts media. In part (a), students merely had to identify a characteristic of a reliable scientific poll. The responses did not have to describe what that characteristic might look like or explain how that characteristic made a poll reliable. Part (b) increased the level of thinking as the students were asked to describe how politicians used polls. Finally, in part (c), students were asked to explain how frequent polling impacts media coverage of political campaigns. This required students to make connections between polling, the media, and political campaigns.

What common student misconceptions or gaps in knowledge were seen in the responses to this question?

Common Misconceptions/Knowledge Gaps	*Responses that Demonstrate Understanding*
Responses identified political party as a characteristic of representative sampling.	"… and the poll being made up of participants of various ages, instead of being all the same age and having the same background."
Responses did not correctly identify a use of the polling results.	"Polling results can also help a politician decide where they will spend their time campaigning."
Responses focused on how frequent opinion polls impacted voters and/or candidates, not media coverage of political campaigns.	"Public opinion polls impact media coverage by giving the media an idea of what campaigns people are following the most. This in turn cause the media to cover the most popular campaigns which of course change as the polls are updated."

What were the responses to this question expected to demonstrate?

This question examined the relationship between Congress and the president, and their respective legislative powers. Part (a) asked students to describe the constitutional principle of checks and balances. Part (b) asked students to describe two presidential powers in the legislative process: the veto and the State of the Union address. Part (c) asked students to describe the relationship between the number of presidential vetoes and the number of congressional overrides based on the data presented in a chart. Finally, part (d) asked students to explain how Congress can reduce the likelihood of a presidential veto.

Skills that students were expected to demonstrate included reading data from a chart and using that data to describe a relationship between two variables (presidential vetoes and congressional overrides).

How well did the response address the course content related to this question? How well did the responses integrate the skills required on this question?

The different tasks within the question required students to engage in increasingly higher order thinking skills. The responses progressed from description of Constitutional principles to interpreting data in a chart to explaining how Congress can reduce the likelihood of a Presidential veto.

What common student misconceptions or gaps in knowledge were seen in the responses to this question?

- Students need a better understanding of the Constitutional principle of checks and balances.
- Students need a better understanding of the Constitutional role of the State of Union address in the legislative process.
- Students need a better understanding of how to correctly interpret and analyze data presented in a chart.
- Students need a better understanding of the role of politics in the interaction between Congress and the President.

Common Misconceptions/Knowledge Gaps	*Responses that Demonstrate Understanding*
Students need a better understanding of the Constitutional principle of checks and balances.	"Checks and balances make sure one branch does not have more power over another branch."
Students need a better understanding of the Constitutional role of the State of Union address in the legislative process.	"The State of the Union address is very important in the President's agenda setting. Here, he/she announces their plan for what legislation they hope to pass during that year. This raises Congress' awareness of what is to happen, and sets their agenda of what to write legislation about."
Students need a better understanding of how to correctly interpret and analyze data presented in a chart.	"There are very few times that a Presidential veto is overridden by Congress."

Students need a better understanding of the role of politics in the interaction between Congress and the President.	"Congress can work together with the President during the legislative process and have good communication about what to and not include. The President uses his/her veto when they disagree. Therefore, if Congress attempts to write legislation that follows the President's agenda, they can avoid the likelihood of a presidential veto."

Question #4 **Task:** **Topic:** Public Policy
Max. Points: 5 **Mean Score:** 2.42

What were the responses to this question expected to demonstrate?

The question examined public policy in the United States. Part (a) asked students to explain how interest groups reduce the influence of public opinion on policy. Part (b) asked students to explain how a newly elected president and a national crisis increase the likelihood of policy change. Finally, part (c) asked students to describe the role of the courts and the media in the policy process.

How well did the response address the course content related to this question? How well did the responses integrate the skills required on this question?

Students were required to know the role that the courts and the media play in the policy process, as well as explain how a newly-elected President and a national crisis make policy changes more likely and how interest groups sometimes persuade policy makers to make policy that benefits the interest groups. Students were generally able to describe the role of the courts and the media in the policy process. Most students were also able to explain how a national crisis increases the likelihood of policy change. Those who did not, often failed to mention a policymaking instituion or individual. Fewer students were able to explain how interest groups reduce the influence of public opinion, with the most common error being a failure to recognize that interest groups must rely on policymaking institutions or individuals to affect the policies. Finally, only a small number of students were able to correctly explain how a newly-elected President affects policy change. Many students understood that a newly-elected President means a new ideology, but failed to connect the changing ideology of the President with other policy-making instutions, individuals, executive orders, or appointments.

What common student misconceptions or gaps in knowledge were seen in the responses to this question?

Common Misconceptions/Knowledge Gaps	*Responses that Demonstrate Understanding*
How interest groups reduce the influence of public opinion	"Interest groups can be very influential through lobbying and contributions…Even if the public wants stricter gun laws, many legislators will support laws that the NRA supports as opposed to the public because the NRA donates money to their campaign."
How a newly-elected President increases the likelihood of policy change	"Newly-elected Presidents often get elected alongside a majority of their party in Congress which allows for more bills to be passed more swiftly without party polarization and gridlock holding them up."
How a national crisis increases the likelihood of policy change	"National crisis… has a similar effect as a fresh election. Public support is increased as the President attempts to create a sense of national unity and healing, and so his agenda is more likely to be pushed through."