



## **Student Performance Q&A:**

### **2013 AP<sup>®</sup> United States Government and Politics**

### **Free-Response Questions**

The following comments on the 2013 free-response questions for AP<sup>®</sup> US Government and Politics were written by the Chief Reader, James W. Riddlesperger, Jr., 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 political representation. Part (a) asked students to define direct democracy. Part (b) asked students to define republican form of government. Part (c) asked students to describe why the framers chose a republican form of government over a direct democracy. Part (d) asked students to describe the trustee model (attitudinal view) of congressional representation and the delegate model (representational view) of congressional representation. Part (e) asked students to explain why a member of Congress might sometimes act as a trustee rather than a delegate.

##### ***How well did students perform on this question?***

The mean score was 2.16 out of a possible 6 points.

In part (a) students were less successful in defining a direct democracy. They often responded with a partial definition that did not fully express citizens' participation in all governmental decisions and/or participating in all government decisions without elected representation.

In part (b) many students were successful in defining a republican form of government. The most common response correctly defined republicanism as a government with elected representatives.

In part (c) students were less successful in describing why the framers of the United States Constitution chose a republican form of government over a direct democracy. While students were often successful in identifying a reason for the choice of a republican form, they often had trouble describing the idea that they had identified.

In part (d) many students were successful in describing a Trustee model (attitudinal view) and a Delegate model (representational view). The most common response correctly described a trustee as a

representative who uses their own personal views in congressional decision making. The most common response correctly described a delegate as a representative who mirrors their constituents' views.

In part (e) students were less often successful in explaining why a member of Congress might sometimes act as a trustee rather than a delegate compared to their ability to describe the two models of representation. Students were often successful in identifying a reason but had trouble explaining what they identified. Additionally, students often confused partisanship with the trustee model.

***What were common student errors or omissions?***

In part (a) students often defined direct democracy too narrowly. One of the most common ways students incorrectly defined direct democracy was by citing referendums and initiatives.

In part (c) students were often successful in identifying a reason but had trouble describing what they identified. Often descriptions lacked appropriate detail.

In part (e) students were often successful in identifying a reason but had difficulty explaining what they identified. Students often confused partisanship with the trustee model. Additionally, students incorrectly argued that trustees acted for personal gain.

***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?***

Teachers should emphasize that there are important differences between the less rigorous requirements such as defining and the more demanding tasks of describing and explaining. Students must be sensitive to the importance of using solid descriptions and explanations. Also, teachers should remind students to directly address what is asked in the question.

## **Question 2**

***What was the intent of this question?***

This question examined the students' knowledge of political parties and their various roles in elections and government. Part (a) asked students to describe the functions of political parties in elections. In part (b) students were asked to describe the role of political parties in Congress. In part (c) students were asked to explain how direct primaries and candidate-centered campaigns weakened political parties. In part (d) students were asked to explain how party polarization strengthened political parties in Congress.

***How well did students perform on this question?***

The mean score was 1.90 out of a possible 6 points.

In part (a), students were most successful in describing roles such as candidate nomination, party platforms, support for candidates' campaigns, and fundraising for candidates' campaigns. Students were least successful describing voter cues and voter mobilization.

In part (b), students were most successful in describing how political parties facilitate legislative policy priorities or majority party leaders' control of Standing Committees, calendar, and floor debates.

In part (c), students were most successful in explaining that candidate-centered campaigns weakened political parties because candidate appeal directly to voters. The students were least successful in explaining how direct primaries weakened the political parties.

In part (d), students were most successful explaining how party polarization has strengthened political parties in Congress by not voting across party lines.

***What were common student errors or omissions?***

In part (a) students commonly identified, but did not describe, two functions of political parties in elections. Some students attempted to describe functions, but did not do so clearly.

In part (b) students commonly focused on political parties having a majority in Congress rather than an activity that political parties engage in to promote the party's public policy agenda.

In part (c) students commonly discussed either a blanket or open primary instead of a direct primary. Some students correctly defined a direct primary, but did not explain how the direct primary weakened the political party control over nominations. Students commonly focused on candidate characteristics in candidate-centered campaigns, but did not show how focusing on those characteristics weakened the political party's power.

In part (d) students commonly focused on political parties having a majority in Congress. They did not convey an understanding of concept of party polarization in Congress and how party polarization has strengthened the political party's influence in Congress through party-line voting.

***Based on your experience of student responses at the AP<sup>®</sup> 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 it is important to assess what the question is asking them to do. When asked to describe a role or function, students must go beyond simply identifying a role or function. When explaining, students must be able to answer the "how" or "why" of the question. Explaining questions requires the students to go into further detail in order to earn credit.

**Question 3**

***What was the intent of this question?***

This question examined students' knowledge of how politics affects the judicial appointment process. In part (a), students were asked to use data provided on a chart to describe a similarity between the judges appointed by President George W. Bush and President Barack Obama. Part (b) required the use of the chart again to describe two differences between judges appointed by President George W. Bush and President Barack Obama. Part (c) asked students why party affiliations of presidents explain differing characteristics of judicial appointees. Finally, part (d) required students to describe a strategy presidents can use to increase the chances of having their judicial nominees confirmed to the federal courts.

***How well did students perform on this question?***

The mean score was 1.82 out of a possible 5 points.

Students were often able to identify a similarity between the two presidents' judicial appointments in part (a), but were often unable to provide specific supporting data available to them in the chart. Most of the similarities that students pointed out were similarities that could be assumed to exist without utilization of the chart (i.e., "most judicial appointees are white" or "few appointees are Asian American").

Students could provide general differences between the two presidents' judicial appointments in part (b) and were able to provide specific supporting data from the chart more frequently in part (b) than they were

in part (a). Often, however, students made statements about differences that did not explicitly rely on the information in the chart.

In part (c) students were most successful when their explanations were tied to presidential concerns about the judicial rulings of future appointees, or to the electoral concerns of the president. Students were less successful when they discussed the demographic patterns that differentiate Democrats and Republicans, and assumed that judicial appointments simply reflect those differences.

Students were successful in part (d) when they discussed appointing moderates or making use of senatorial courtesy when choosing judicial nominees. Many students also used the vetting process successfully. Less successful approaches included appointing judges who were in the same party as the majority of the Senate, using the public to pressure the Senate to confirm nominees, and choosing nominees who are likeable or personally appealing to Senators. Often students only identified a way presidents can increase the chances of Senate confirmation, without elaborating enough to receive a description point.

### ***What were common student errors or omissions?***

In part (a) and part (b), a surprising number of students did not read the chart carefully and assumed that the numbers referred to election results rather than judicial appointments.

In part (c) students discussed the role of party affiliation in appointing party members to the federal judiciary, and often only made general statements about how the president was interested in appointing judges who would “support” the party or “be in alignment with” the president.

In part (d) students were very likely to discuss the challenges that a “divided government” creates for the confirmation of presidential nominees. While divided government is a contextual factor that a president must deal with, it is not a strategy a president can use to ease the confirmation process for his nominees. Students also identified several strategies, none of which included a description, suggesting that they were not aware of the differences between identifying and describing concepts.

### ***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 first be reminded to be careful to identify the correct information the chart provides. Many students quickly saw columns with percentages and demographic categories and assumed that they were reading voting data. Students should also be aware that specific information from charts should be used to give evidence to support the patterns they identify, rather than relying on general statements.

Students should have 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 sufficient details when describing, as well as an appropriate elaboration of “how” or “why” when asked to explain a concept within their response.

## **Question 4**

### ***What was the intent of this question?***

This question examined students’ knowledge of three aspects of the policy process. Part (a) asked students to explain the importance of the media and elections in the formation of the policy agenda. In part (b) students were asked to describe the role of congressional committees and executive orders in the enactment of public policy. Part (c) asked students to explain the importance of bureaucratic discretion

and issue networks OR iron triangles in the implementation of public policy.

***How well did students perform on this question?***

The mean score was 2.13 out of a possible 6 points.

In part (a) students described the importance of the media and elections in the formation of the policy agenda with similar success.

In part (b) many students were successful in describing the role of congressional committees and the role of executive orders in the enactment of public policy.

In part (c) students were more successful at explaining the importance of bureaucratic discretion in the implementation of public policy and less successful in explaining the importance of issue networks or iron triangles in the implementation of public policy.

***What were common student errors or omissions?***

In part (a) students often correctly described media behavior, but failed to connect the behavior to the formation of the policy agenda. Most students addressed the issue of elections, but many wrote about the policy agenda only in terms of a campaign platform and failed to explain the importance of the election in the formation of the policy agenda. Students often described the process of “getting elected,” but failed to state the importance of elections in the formation of the policy agenda.

In part (b) students sometimes failed to describe the role of the Congressional committees’ actions in the enactment of policy. The most common error was a general description of Congressional behavior or organization. The most common errors in describing the role of executive orders in the enactment of policy were: 1) students confused executive orders with executive agreements, or 2) students indicated that executive orders needed Congressional approval, or 3) students indicated that executive orders were part of the legislative process.

In part (c), students sometimes described bureaucratic discretion, but failed to explain its importance in the implementation of policy. The most common error was students’ failing to state that discretion involves choices by the bureaucrats or bureaucracy. Students often described or defined issue networks and/or iron triangles, but failed to explain the importance of iron triangles or issue networks in the implementation of 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 the less stringent requirements of identifying and defining and the more demanding tasks of describing or explaining. 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.