

Chief Reader Report on Student Responses: 2018 AP[®] Comparative Government and Politics Free-Response Questions

• Number of Students Scored	24,675		
• Number of Readers	110		
• Score Distribution	Exam Score	N	%At
	5	5,197	21.1
	4	5,579	22.6
	3	4,841	19.6
	2	5,087	20.6
	1	3,971	16.1
• Global Mean	3.12		

The following comments on the 2018 free-response questions for AP[®] Comparative Government and Politics were written by the Chief Reader, Jennifer Horan, Associate Professor, 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:** Descriptive & Explanatory
Max. Points: 3**Topic:** Political Institutions
Mean Score: 1.53***What were the responses to this question expected to demonstrate?***

The intent of this question was to assess students' understanding of the effects proportional representation has upon a country's political system. The skills tested were explanatory and descriptive. Students had three specific tasks: to identify a country studied within the AP Comparative Government and Politics course that employs a proportional representation system, to explain how legislative seats are allocated under proportional representation, and to describe the impact that proportional representation has upon a party system.

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?

Most responses correctly identified a country within the AP Comparative Government course that uses proportional representation. Many correctly explained how legislative seats are allocated under proportional representation. Most responses correctly described the impact of proportional representation upon a party system.

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

<i>Common Misconceptions/Knowledge Gaps</i>	<i>Responses that Demonstrate Understanding</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The United Kingdom was most commonly chosen as an incorrect response, but Iran and Nigeria were often cited, as well. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Responses demonstrated understanding by identifying Mexico, Russia, or regional assemblies in Scotland or Wales, as having proportional representation systems.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some responses did not adequately explain how legislative seats are awarded in a proportional representation system, or they confused proportional representation with single member district/plurality systems. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> "Legislative seats are allocated according to percent of vote received... seats are allocated to parties comparatively to the percent of votes received."

Based on your experience at the AP[®] Reading with student responses, what advice would you offer to teachers to help them improve the student performance on the exam?

Teachers should emphasize the type of election system used of each of the six core countries. The British House of Commons was commonly misidentified as using a proportional representation system. Teachers should emphasize that British national elections employ a first-past-the-post, single member district, plurality system. Teachers should point out that regional assemblies in Scotland and Wales use a proportional system.

Teachers should encourage students to give specific explanations in describing how seats are allocated in various electoral systems. Teachers should emphasize the impact of a proportional representation or single member district system on the strength and number of political parties that hold legislative seats.

Question #2**Task:** Descriptive and Explanatory**Topic:** Citizens, Society & the State**Max. Points:** 3**Mean Score:** 1.80***What were the responses to this question expected to demonstrate?***

The intent of this question was for students to assess the degree to which gender discrimination exists in Iran and its impact on democratic principles. The skills tested were descriptive and explanatory. Students had three specific tasks: to describe one way in which the Iranian government discriminates against women, to describe one way the Iranian government treats men and women equally, and to explain how gender discrimination undermines democratic principles.

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?

Many responses could describe one way the Iranian government discriminates against women, although some were inaccurate in their description of government actions, including that the government denied women the right to vote or to drive. Most could describe one way the Iranian government treats men and women equally, but some were incorrect in their assessment that the government treats men and women equally under the law. Some did not describe a particular government action but rather indicated a commonality among Iranian citizens, such as all are allowed to follow their religion. Some responses were able to accurately explain how democratic principles are undermined by gender discrimination, but many did not make a connection between gender discrimination and democratic principles. Some mentioned democratic principles, such as political participation or protection of civil liberties, but did not explain how gender discrimination affects those principles. Some responses mentioned gender discrimination, but did not link it to democracy.

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

<i>Common Misconceptions/Knowledge Gaps</i>	<i>Responses that Demonstrate Understanding</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some responses overstated the type of gender discrimination present in Iran. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “The Iranian gov [sic] discriminates against women by not allowing them to drive.”
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some responses inaccurately described a way government treats men and women equally. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “The government treats men and women equally by applying rule of law equally to both genders.”
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Many responses did not explain the connection between gender discrimination and the undermining of democratic principles. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “If women are not allowed equal representation in certain aspects of society or politics, the system that perpetuates this inequality is inherently not adherent to democratic principles of equality, freedom and mainly representation.”

Based on your experience at the AP[®] Reading with student responses, what advice would you offer to teachers to help them improve the student performance on the exam?

Make sure students have a basic understanding of the key components of democratic regimes. Teachers should cover the range of rights afforded to citizens in each of the six AP countries, including why rights and liberties are limited in certain countries. Encourage students to consider how democratic principles can be limited by the government or other actors.

Question #3**Task:** Descriptive
Max. Points: 3**Topic:** Political Economic Change
Mean Score: 1.48***What were the responses to this question expected to demonstrate?***

The intent of this question was to assess students' knowledge of the principal indicators of democracy and when democracies are considered consolidated. The skills tested were descriptive. Students had two tasks: to identify two indicators of democracy and to describe when a democracy is considered consolidated.

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?

- Most responses correctly identified two indicators of democracy.
- Fewer correctly described when a democracy is consolidated.

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

<i>Common Misconceptions/Knowledge Gaps</i>	<i>Responses that Demonstrate Understanding</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Many responses incorrectly equated consolidation of democracy with illiberal democracy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “One democracy that is considered consolidated is the British democracy. It is considered a consolidated democracy because it has been following democratic principles for a long time.”

Based on your experience at the AP[®] Reading with student responses, what advice would you offer to teachers to help them improve the student performance on the exam?

Teachers should draw a clear conceptual distinction between the consolidation of power, which can be for non-democratic purposes (e.g., Putin in Russia), and consolidation of democracy, which refers to the permanent and enduring nature of democracy. Teachers should also familiarize themselves with the multiple terms that comparative political scientists use to discuss the concept of democracy and the consolidation of democracy, such as free and fair elections, transparency, rule of law, and the protection of civil rights and liberties.

Question #4**Task:** Descriptive and Explanatory**Topic:** Political Institutions**Max. Points:** 3**Mean Score:** 1.50***What were the responses to this question expected to demonstrate?***

The intent of this question was to assess students' understanding of the presidential election system in Mexico and the impact of electoral reform on competition in presidential elections. The skills tested were descriptive and explanatory. Students had three specific tasks: to identify a political party that has held the presidency in the past twenty years; to describe the presidential electoral system in Mexico; and to identify a political reform to the Mexican presidential electoral system, then explain why that reform created greater political competition in Mexican presidential elections.

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?

Most responses correctly identified a political party which has held the presidency in Mexico the past 20 years as either PAN or PRI. Most struggled to correctly describe the presidential electoral system as a first-past-the-post system, a pluralist system, a winner-take-all system, or a system in which the candidate with the most votes wins, with many of these students incorrectly describing the presidential electoral system in Mexico as a run-off or majoritarian system. Many responses correctly identified IFE, INE, or the creation of an independent agency to supervise elections as a political reform to the Mexican presidential electoral system. They then correctly explained that this reform increased political competition in Mexican presidential elections by minimizing fraud or by making elections more fair. Some were able to make the connection between the constitutional limit on presidential terms, the *Sexenio*, as potentially increasing the number of presidential candidates, but most students who identified the reform as the *Sexenio* were unable to link this concept to increased political competition in Mexican presidential elections.

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

Some responses incorrectly identified a political party which has held the presidency in Mexico the past 20 years; these either identified the political party as PRD, a political party from another country, used scrambled acronyms unrelated to any political party in Mexico, or simply listed the three largest political parties in Mexico without clarifying which specific party had held the presidency in Mexico in the past 20 years. Many incorrectly described the presidential electoral system in Mexico as requiring a majority, or as a run-off system. Some incorrectly described the legislative electoral system in Mexico rather than the presidential electoral system. Other responses incorrectly identified the elimination of *dedazo*—the tradition of the current president picking the PRI's next candidate and presumed president—as an institutional reform instead of an informal change in candidate selection. Those who identified the reform as the *Sexenio* often incorrectly explained how this term limit decreased the power of the presidency rather than specifically addressing how this reform increased political competition in Mexican presidential elections. Some responses did not identify a specific reform, and instead described an effect of a reform, such as reducing fraud.

<i>Common Misconceptions/Knowledge Gaps</i>	<i>Responses that Demonstrate Understanding</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some responses incorrectly identified a political party which has held the presidency in Mexico the past 20 years as PRD. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Over the past 20 years, many elected Mexican presidents have been from the party, PRI.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Many responses described the Mexican presidential electoral system as a run-off or majoritarian system. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Presidents in Mexico are elected democratically by a first-past-the-post vote. The candidate does not have to get a majority and there is no second round of voting.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some responses incorrectly described the legislative electoral system in Mexico rather than the presidential electoral system. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The electoral system used to select Mexico's president is whichever candidate wins a plurality of the popular vote.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some responses incorrectly identified the elimination of <i>dedazo</i> as an institutional reform. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> One electoral reform was the establishment of an independent Federal Election Institution that oversees elections to ensure they are fair.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Those who identified the reform as the <i>Sexenio</i> often incorrectly explained how this term limit decreased the power of the presidency rather than specifically addressing how the reform increased political competition in Mexican presidential elections. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Limiting the president's term to one <i>Sexenio</i> allows for new candidates to be elected every six years. This makes presidential elections more competitive because it eliminates the incumbency advantage which usually allows for the same person to get elected over and over.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some responses did not identify a specific reform, and instead described an effect of a reform, such as reducing fraud. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> One electoral reform is allowing all candidates to have equal access to use media to self-promote and gain support which creates more competition between different candidates for president.

Based on your experience at the AP® Reading with student responses, what advice would you offer to teachers to help them improve the student performance on the exam?

It is important to clearly identify the political parties and differentiate between the electoral systems in each of the core countries. Often, role-playing and re-enacting the different types of elections with the students while studying specific core countries helps to reinforce the connection between each country, its political parties, and its electoral system. Distinguishing between formal and informal changes in political systems can be emphasized through a discussion of school rules versus school traditions—and having students then apply this skill to the institutions and expectations of the core countries.

Question #5**Task:** Descriptive and Explanatory**Topic:** Sovereignty, Authority & Power**Max. Points:** 3**Mean Score:** 0.59***What were the responses to this question expected to demonstrate?***

The intent of this question was to assess students' understanding of coercion, how democratic and authoritarian regimes use coercive strategies, and why these regimes seek alternatives to coercion. The skills tested were conceptual and analytical. Students had three specific tasks: To describe why regimes use coercion; to describe alternatives to the use of coercion; and to explain why authoritarian regimes do not rely exclusively on coercive strategies.

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?

Most responses were unable to describe why regimes used coercion. Many students were able to describe alternatives to coercion. Most responses were unable to explain why authoritarian states do not rely exclusively on coercion.

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

<i>Common Misconceptions/Knowledge Gaps</i>	<i>Responses that Demonstrate Understanding</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> It seemed as if many students did not understand the word "coercion," and consequently were not able to successfully answer most of the question. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> "...[b]oth democratic and authoritarian regimes have a need to enforce law & public order, and both must resort to coercion in order to do so."
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Responses often seemed to struggle to identify alternatives to coercion adopted by both democratic and authoritarian regimes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> "...[a]lternatives to coercion include the gifting of financial incentives such as tax credits."

Based on your experience at the AP® Reading with student responses, what advice would you offer to teachers to help them improve the student performance on the exam?

Teachers need to make sure students understand the terminology and concepts used in the course description. Teachers should emphasize that both authoritarian and democratic regimes rely on a set of core coercive strategies in order to uphold law and order and maintain state authority, and explain how both types of regimes use the implicit threat of force to maintain their positions.

Question #6**Task:** Descriptive and Explanatory**Topic:** Citizens, Society & the State**Max. Points:** 5**Mean Score:** 2.46***What were the responses to this question expected to demonstrate?***

The intent of this question was to assess students' understanding of how states manage and respond to social and economic cleavages among their citizens. The skills tested were descriptive and explanatory. Students had five specific tasks: to identify one social cleavage and one economic cleavage that commonly occur in societies; to explain how leaders can use cleavages to strengthen a government's hold on power; to explain how cleavages can undermine regime stability; to describe one action governments take to address the negative consequences of the social cleavage they identified; and to describe a different action governments take to address the negative consequences of the economic cleavage they identified.

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?

Most responses were able to identify a social cleavage and an economic cleavage. Frequent responses were ethnicity and religion for social cleavages and wealth and urban-rural for economic cleavages. Most were able to explain that cleavages undermine regime stability by causing conflict which can lead to rebellions, coups, or revolution. Some responses explained how cleavages can undermine a sense of national identity or create polarization which challenges the legitimacy of the state. Many were able to describe one government action taken to address the negative consequences of a social cleavage by describing how ethnic cleavages could be handled by the government devolving power to the ethnic groups or that the government could reserve seats in the legislature for religious groups. Many responses described one government action taken to address the negative consequences of an economic cleavage by describing how a progressive tax system could be used by the government to decrease the division between the rich and the poor or how subsidizing farmers and building infrastructure could be used by the government to diminish the urban-rural cleavage.

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

<i>Common Misconceptions/Knowledge Gaps</i>	<i>Responses that Demonstrate Understanding</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In part (a), some responses identified divisive social and economic issues such as abortion and nationalization of industry instead of identifying cleavages. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> "A common social cleavage which occurs in society is an ethnic cleavage. A common economic cleavage is wealth (rich and poor)."
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In part (b), most responses described that the leaders appeal to the cleavage for support but did not adequately explain how this tactic strengthens the government's hold on power. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> "Appealing to the larger side of the cleavage can result in more seats won in office which strengthens the government's hold on power."
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In part (c), some responses claimed that cleavages cause disagreements and anger toward the government, without explaining how the cleavage can undermine regime stability. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> "Cleavages can undermine regime stability because they may cause a revolution or a movement for independence from the state."

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• In parts (d) and (e), some responses claimed that the government could address the negative consequences of the cleavage by making everyone equal.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• “Governments can provide civil rights protection to religious or ethnic minority groups and expand welfare programs to help close the income gap.”
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Based on your experience at the AP® Reading with student responses, what advice would you offer to teachers to help them improve the student performance on the exam?

It is important that teachers help students understand that politics hinges on the interactions between a state and society. A country’s political patterns are influenced by the characteristics and demands of its population. Institutions can take actions to reduce or exacerbate cleavages in society. An important concept for students to grasp is how states manage and respond to deeply held divisions among their citizens.

Students need practice in identifying the major cleavages in each of the six core countries. A graphic organizer can help establish a country-by-country comparison. Teachers are encouraged to provide opportunities for students to learn about current events, taking note of how governments respond to cleavages. Students need to be able to distinguish between public policies and civil society responses. For example, a government action to address the negative consequences of cleavages could be to pass a law protecting the right for groups to assemble, whereas citizens forming interest groups around the cleavages is a civil society response.

Question #7**Task:** Descriptive and Explanatory**Topic:** Political Institutions**Max. Points:** 6**Mean Score:** 1.68***What were the responses to this question expected to demonstrate?***

The intent of this question was to assess students' understanding of differences between federal and unitary systems, reasons why Nigeria and Russia adopted federal systems, disadvantages of federalism in Nigeria, institutional changes that have limited federalism in Russia since 2000, and reasons why the Russian government limited federalism since 2000. The skills tested were descriptive and explanatory. Students had five specific tasks: to describe one difference between a federal system and a unitary system; to explain why both Nigeria and Russia adopted a federal system; to describe two disadvantages of federalism in Nigeria; to describe an institutional change in Russia that has limited federalism in Russia since 2000; and to explain why the Russian government has limited federalism since 2000.

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

Many responses successfully described one difference between federal and unitary systems as power-sharing between different levels of government in federal systems, whereas unitary systems concentrate power in the central government. Some did not adequately describe a difference between federal and unitary systems and omitted crucial comparison information about either federal or unitary systems. Many responses successfully explained the accommodation of ethnic, religious, or regional diversity to allow for regional representation as a reason why both Nigeria and Russia adopted federal systems. In most responses, students correctly explained how ethnic and religious diversity drove both Russia and Nigeria to allow for regional representation and/or autonomy. Some responses, however, did not connect ethnic or religious diversity with the regional autonomy inherent to federalism. Some responses correctly described two disadvantages of federalism in Nigeria by referring to how states' authority discourages national unity and exacerbates regionally-based ethnic or religious differences. By pointing out differences in laws across states and regions, some merely described how federalism functions and did not connect these differences to a particular disadvantage of federalism. Many responses correctly described an institutional change that has limited federalism in Russia since 2000, most notably the cancellation of gubernatorial elections and the creation of federal districts (or super-districts). Some responses successfully explained why the federalism has been limited since 2000, most notably the desire to concentrate presidential powers, consolidate United Russia's power, and curb secessionist tendencies. Many students described how the Russian government has limited federalism since 2000 instead of explaining the reasons why the government limited federalism.

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

<i>Common Misconceptions/Knowledge Gaps</i>	<i>Responses that Demonstrate Understanding</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In part (a), responses often described a difference between unitary and federal systems as federal systems having multiple levels of government, while unitary systems have only one central level of government. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “In a federal system, power is divided among the central and regional governments. In contrast, power is concentrated at the national level in a unitary system.”
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In part (c), many responses described a problem of governance in Nigeria and not a disadvantage of federalism in Nigeria. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> One disadvantage of federalism in Nigeria concerns how “many legislators in the government are corrupt and have more interest in helping their individual region or village than the entirety of Nigeria.”
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In part (e), responses often described how the Russian government has limited federalism since 2000 instead of offering an explanation as to why the Russian government sought to limit federalism. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Russian government has limited federalism since 2000 “in order to concentrate more power in the office of the presidency.”

Based on your experience at the AP® Reading with student responses, what advice would you offer to teachers to help them improve the student performance on the exam?

Teachers should continue to emphasize the differences between federal and unitary systems, taking care to show how both systems can have multiple levels of government, emphasizing that the differences lie in the constitutional protections of central and regional governments’ powers, the levels of autonomy afforded to regional governments, and power-sharing between different levels of government. When teaching about Nigeria, focus on the sources of different problems related to governance and how federalism in particular generates advantages, as well as disadvantages. Similarly, when teaching about Russia, help students distinguish between different kinds of institutional changes since 2000 and their impact on federalism, as well as other institutional features such as party competition or the general power of the legislature vis-à-vis the executive. Continue to discuss the ways in which institutional changes have limited federalism in Russia, and prepare students to recognize the difference between actions that limit federalism and reasons behind the Russian government’s steps to limit regional governments’ autonomy.

Question #8**Task:** Descriptive and Explanatory
Max. Points: 8**Topic:** Public Policy
Mean Score: 3.80***What were the responses to this question expected to demonstrate?***

The intent of this question was to assess the students' ability to interpret data, their understanding of the relationship between economic development and the environment, and their knowledge about environmental policy in China. The skills tested were descriptive and explanatory. The students had several specific tasks: to identify the country with the poorest environmental performance in 2014 from a table summarizing World Bank data for four countries; to describe the apparent relationship between economic development and environmental performance based on the data in that table and a possible cause of that relationship; to explain why a country could have a high score on the Environmental Performance Index and yet have little improvement over the last 10 years; and to describe both a political response by Chinese citizens and a policy response by the Chinese government to environmental problems.

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

Most responses were able to correctly identify Nigeria as the country with the poorest environmental performance in 2014. Many were able to correctly describe that increasing economic development corresponds with increasing environmental performance. In a few instances, responses incorrectly described the causal relationship as increasing environmental performance causing increasing economic development. Many correctly described the causal relationship as economic development which allows countries to spend more money on the environment. However, some responses reversed the causal relationship, arguing that increasing environmental performance causes economic development by encouraging foreign direct investment in the country. Some correctly explained that Great Britain had a lower improvement score because it already had secured a high EPI score and it had little room to improve. Some only explained why Great Britain had a high EPI score but did not follow up with an explanation for the low improvement score. Many responses correctly described that the Chinese public protests for environmental change. However, a few offered too vague of a description, such as that Chinese citizens have "requested" environmental change. Many correctly described the Chinese government as regulating air emissions out of factories. A few incorrectly assumed that the Chinese government has not responded to environmental problems.

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

<i>Common Misconceptions/Knowledge Gaps</i>	<i>Responses that Demonstrate Understanding</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">In part (c), responses describe environmental performance as a cause of economic development, rather than vice versa.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">“More economic development usually means the economy is service-based, which means there are less factories to cause pollution in that country.”
<ul style="list-style-type: none">In part (d), responses explain why Great Britain has a high EPI score, but not why it has a low improvement score.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">“So while they do have the highest EPI score of 2014, they have protected the environment well for more than just the last decade and have had less need to improve.”
<ul style="list-style-type: none">In part (e), responses describe Chinese citizens as having requested environmental solutions without specifying the tactics used or the type of change desired.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">“Chinese citizens have begun protests against the government as they no longer wish to live in a very polluted country.”

Based on your experience at the AP[®] Reading with student responses, what advice would you offer to teachers to help them improve the student performance on the exam?

This question is intended to assess how well students comprehend data, as well as knowledge about the sources of environmental problems and current responses in China. Many responses that did not receive the point in part (d) did not fully answer the question. They explained why Great Britain’s environmental performance score was so high rather than the reason for the difference between the two different scores in the table. The lesson for students might be to carefully read the question multiple times, and confirm what is being asked. In many other instances, responses that failed to receive a point were too vague. For example, in part (e), some replied that Chinese citizens have requested change without specifying the tactics used or the type of change. Similarly, in part (f), some responded that the Chinese government was seeking to regulate pollution, without specifying who is being regulated or what type of pollution is being targeted. Students might be coached to avoid generalities in their responses.