

THE AP UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT EXAMINATION

An Overview

A DESCRIPTION OF THE COURSE

The most important thing to keep in mind as you study the U.S. Government and Politics curriculum is that it is not all about facts. Yes, information about specific government policies, laws, court cases, political tactics, and demographical features of voters can help you to better understand the concepts. However, the course is really all about analyzing concepts that will help you to keep up with government and politics throughout your lifetime no matter how much the particular landscape may change over the years. This analysis may be broken down into six major content areas that you will be responsible for. These content areas are outlined below in the proportion that they will be tested on the examination.

AREA I: CONSTITUTIONAL UNDERPINNINGS OF UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT (5-15%)

This content area is more history based than any of the other areas because it examines the kind of government established by the Constitution, paying particular attention to federalism and the separation of powers. However, don't assume that you know this material already because you have studied it in history class. You do have to know something about the historical situation surrounding the Constitutional Convention, but you also have to understand the ideological and philosophical traditions that shaped the framers' work. For example, theoretical perspectives you will need to know are democratic theory, theories of republican government, pluralism, and elitism.

AREA II: POLITICAL BELIEFS AND BEHAVIORS (10-20%)

This section starts with a study of U.S. political culture – the complex mix of beliefs, values, and expectations that shape our political system. Here you will examine how these political beliefs and values were formed over time, as well as the modern day results. Topics include political socialization, political ideologies, and factors that shape political opinions. You should comprehend and appreciate how political beliefs and behaviors differ, as well as the political consequences of these differences. A second focus of this content area is political participation, including voting behavior. You should understand why individuals engage in various forms of political participation and how that participation affects the political system.

AREA III: POLITICAL PARTIES, INTEREST GROUPS, AND MASS MEDIA (10-20%)

This content area focuses on linkage institutions, or organizations that link citizens to the government, such as political parties, interest groups, and mass media. You should be able to answer these important questions once you study this section: How did our party system evolve historically? What are the functions and structures of political parties, and what effects do they have on the political system? What are the processes and consequences of political campaigns for office, and what reforms have been attempted in recent years? What election systems are used on the state and national levels, and what are their consequences? What roles do interest groups and PACs play in the political process and in shaping public policy? Which people are better represented to government by interest groups, and why? What role does the media play in the political system, and what impact does media have on public opinion, voter perceptions, campaign strategies, electoral outcomes, agenda development, and the images of officials and candidates?

AREA IV: INSTITUTIONS OF NATIONAL GOVERNMENT (35-45%)

This section is by far the longest, and you should study it in proportion to the percentage that it will be represented on the exam. It includes the “branches” of government, including the legislature, the executive, the bureaucracy, and the judiciary. You should be familiar with the organization and powers, both formal and informal, of these major political institutions in the United States. However, it is not enough to understand the institutions individually, but you must know basically how they interact to make public policy. Powers are separated, but they also are shared, checked, and balanced. You should also have a general idea about how their powers and relationships have evolved over time. Additionally, you should understand how these institutions are tied to linkage institutions (Content Area III), such as interest groups, political parties, and the media.

AREA V: PUBLIC POLICY (5-15%)

Politicians and institutions interact with one another to bring about public policy. How are agendas set for policy? In other words, why and how are some issues addressed and not others? The very nature of our political system determines that policies are made by numerous players and institutions. Congress interacts with the President who interacts with the bureaucracy that in turn communicate their wishes back to Congress. Political parties set agendas and run candidates that will give voice to their opinions. Interest groups pressure members of Congress and executive branch bureaucrats to pay attention to their needs. State governments interact with national and local levels to represent their citizens. You should investigate policy networks, iron triangles, and other forms of policy subgovernments in the domestic and foreign policy areas.

AREA VI: CIVIL RIGHTS AND CIVIL LIBERTIES (5-15%)

You probably will find this content area particularly interesting to explore. It focuses on the development of individual rights and liberties and their impact on citizens. Since the courts have been prime shapers of policy in this area, you can put to work your knowledge of Supreme Court procedures (learned in Content Area IV) through examining significant decisions that have defined civil rights and liberties of American citizens. You will need to be able to analyze judicial interpretations of freedom of speech, assembly, and expression (civil liberties); the rights of the accused, and the rights of minority groups and women. At the end of this unit, you should be able to assess the strengths and weaknesses of Supreme Court decisions as tools for social change.

THE EXAMINATION

The AP United States Government and Politics Examination is 2 hours and 25 minutes long. It consists of a 45-minute multiple-choice section and a free-response section that consists of four questions. The time allotted for the free-response questions is 100 minutes, with the expectation that you will spend approximately 25 minutes on each one. You must answer ALL questions; you will have no choices. The multiple choice section is worth 50% of your grade on the exam, and the four free-response questions collectively count for the other 50%. In other words, each free-response question is equally weighted against the others and counts 12.5% of your total grade.

| Time | Type of questions | Number of questions | Percent of grade |
|-------------|-------------------|---------------------|------------------|
| 45 minutes | Multiple choice | 60 | 50% |
| 100 minutes | Free response | 4 | 50% |

SKILLS AND ABILITIES

What do the questions require you to know, and what skills do you need?

- á First, you need to know your facts, concepts, and theories. Content knowledge is very important!
- á Next, you need to understand patterns, principles, and consequences of political processes and organizations. Constantly ask yourself *why* particular behaviors and organizations are important. For example, what consequences do voter patterns have on who gets elected to office? The fact that people with higher levels of education are likely to vote does make a difference on who gets to make policy in this country. Why is it important that each state is represented equally in the Senate and in proportion to population in the House of Representatives? You can memorize those facts, but you also need to be able to consider what effect that organization has on policy decisions.
- á You must be able to analyze and interpret data on charts and tables, and to occasionally interpret political cartoons.
- á Pay close attention to the structure and wording of the free-response questions. Never begin to answer a question until you are absolutely sure what the question is asking. For example, don't read through a question and say to yourself, "This question is about campaign finance reform," and just begin writing. Be sure that you answer *precisely* and *completely* what the question is asking. Answer the whole question and nothing but the question!

THE MULTIPLE CHOICE QUESTIONS

Practice is important, as is a careful reading of the question stem and all choices available. Since you will be penalized (see the next section) for questions you miss, it is usually best to skip questions that you have no idea how to answer. However, if you can eliminate one or more choices, it will usually benefit you to select the best answer from the remaining choices. Most of the questions are straightforward, and all of them have five answer choices. A few questions will be based on charts, tables, and/or cartoons.

FREE-RESPONSE QUESTIONS

For free-response questions, follow this mantra carefully: Answer the whole question and nothing but the question! Spend a minute of your allotted time to literally tear the question apart and take note of *everything* that it asks you to do. If you don't get around to answering part of the question, you will be punished in the score, sometimes severely. A special caution: when a question asks you to explain something, be sure that you do that as thoroughly as possible. Many rubrics give two points for an explanation, and if you cut yours short, you may end up with only one point credit, a frustrating situation, especially if you know the answer.

Each free response question will come from a different content area. In other words, you will not get two questions about political parties, or two questions about Congress. Of course, you probably will not be questioned in all six content areas, although some questions require you to bring together knowledge from two different areas. For example, you may have one question from Constitutional Underpinnings, one from Political Beliefs and Behaviors, one from Institutions, and one from Civil Liberties and Rights. Since the institutions area is so broad, you might have to answer questions about two different branches of government.

In all likelihood, you will be more confident of some questions than others. Most students remember some content areas better than others. Be prepared to expect that, and most importantly, don't panic. Answer each question the best that you can, and don't miss some parts of the question that you know just because you are concerned about a part that you are unsure of.

Writing style matters only in the sense that you need to express your answers clearly, accurately, and completely. You will not be evaluated on the quality of a thesis statement, although including one will often insure that you get some of the points of the question. The most important thing is that you answer *everything* that the question asks as clearly and completely as you have time for. Be sure to keep up with the time and allocate approximately 25 minutes for each question. If you finish before the time limit, be suspicious that your answers might not be as complete as they should be, and go back to fill out any explanations that you need.

HOW YOUR EXAM WILL BE SCORED

You will receive 0 to 60 points in Section I (Multiple Choice), and 0 to 60 points in Section II (Free-Response). You will not see your raw scores in these sections. Instead, your scores will be converted to grades on an AP 5-point scale, with a “5” being the highest.

Multiple-choice section - To adjust for guessing, $\frac{1}{4}$ of the number of wrong answers is subtracted from the number of right answers. This fraction is based on the five-choices that each question has, so that the expected score from random guessing will be zero.

Free-response section - The free-response questions are assigned a certain number of points when they are designed, generally ranging from 5 to 8 points. No matter what the point scale, each question is equally weighted against the others, so that each is worth 12.5% of your total grade (or 25% of the 50% that the free response section is worth.)

The multiple-choice section is graded by a machine, but the free-response questions are graded by real people - faculty members from high schools and colleges from around the country that gather in one place to grade questions in a marathon 7-day effort that takes place in early June after you take the exam in May. Each of your four questions will be graded by a different person, so don't worry that the grader will be influenced by one weak answer when evaluated another question. He or she will only see and grade one free-response question. After the grading of free-response questions is completed, your exam will be shuffled back to the College Board and Educational Testing Service to calculate a composite score. The maximum composite score is 120. Finally, you will receive your grade in the mail sometime in July.