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The Complete Guide to AP US Government FRQs

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Posted by [Samantha Lindsay](#) | Jul 8, 2016 8:00:00 PM

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Free-response questions on the AP US Government exam are more straightforward than those on some other AP tests, but they can still be tough if you're not ready for them. In this guide, I'll lay out a step-by-step method for answering AP Government FRQs, go through a real example, and tell you where you can find additional practice resources.

AP Government Free-Response Section Format

The free-response section has **four questions total**, each of which is worth an equal percentage of your score. You'll have **an hour and 40 minutes** to answer these questions, which means you should spend no more than 20-25 minutes on each of them. **Each question is typically worth between 5-7 raw points, and the free-response section as a whole makes up 50 percent of your score.** All the free-response questions have pretty much the same format, so it's one of the simpler AP free-response sections overall.

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- Free-response questions on this exam will ask you to integrate your knowledge of the various content areas covered by the course. This includes analyzing political events in the US, discussing examples, and demonstrating your understanding of general principles of US government and politics. You'll also be asked to examine data from charts, define key terms, and explain the roles that different parts of our government play in the political system.

AP Government FRQs: Step-By-Step Solution Process

This section provides a step-by-step process for answering any question on the AP US Government exam. **Here's a sample question that I'll reference throughout** so that you can see how these steps might work in practice:

2. Political parties play important roles in United States elections and government institutions. Over the past several decades, the influence of political parties in elections has declined while their strength in Congress has increased.
 - (a) Describe two important functions of political parties in United States elections.
 - (b) Describe one important role political parties play within Congress to promote the party's public policy agenda.
 - (c) Explain how each of the following factors has weakened the influence of political parties over the political process.
 - Direct primaries
 - Candidate-centered campaigns
 - (d) Explain how party polarization has strengthened party influence in Congress.

Step 1: Read the Introduction to the Question

Most questions on this test will have an introductory sentence or two before they break down into parts that you need to answer. **This will give you background information and a general sense of what to expect in the rest of the question.** Some questions are accompanied by images or charts (as we will see in the example section). If that's the case, you should also take a second here to review the graphics and make sure you understand what they're showing.

If you want, you can read the intros to all the questions before choosing where to begin. It may help to build your confidence and improve your efficiency to start with a question that's easier for you. **In the sample question, you would note from the introduction that the question is going to be dealing with the role of political parties in US government.** The intro also tells us that political parties have recently gained influence in Congress while losing influence in the actual election process.

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Step 2: Identify (and Underline, If You Want) the Command Verb

For each part of each question, you're given specific instructions on the type of answer that is expected. These instructions include verbs like "identify", "explain", "describe", "define", and "compare." **It's important to be aware of exactly what the question is asking you to do so that you can earn full points.** These command verbs are the first words you should zero in on as you read. If you think it will help keep you focused, you can even underline them as you go through the question.

In part a of the sample question, the command verb is "describe." This indicates that you need to do more than just state an important function of political parties; you need to expand on exactly what it is. **In parts c and d, the command verb changes to "explain",** which means you'll need to include even more elaboration in your answer on how certain factors have affected party politics.

Step 3: Address All the Potential Points

After finding the command verb in the part of the question you're answering, **take note of how many examples or descriptions you need to provide.** Each of them will almost always correspond to a point in your raw score for the question. **Be careful to answer**

the question thoroughly but directly, addressing all of these points in a way that will make it easy for graders to assess your response. You don't need to write an essay for these free-response questions. Just go straight for the answer to avoid ambiguity.

For part a of the sample question, you're asked to describe two important functions of political parties, which means that part a is almost certainly worth two points. You need to make sure you provide two distinct functions and make it easy for the grader to award points for your answer. If you go through the rest of the question, **it looks like there are five raw points available in total**: two for part a, one for part b, two for part c, and one for part d. Write your answer carefully so you can scoop up all of them!

Step 4: Reread Your Answer

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Finally, **reread what you wrote to ensure that it makes sense and addresses the question completely**. Did you give the correct number of descriptions/examples/identifications? Does your answer directly respond to what the question is asking overall? If you're satisfied, move onto the next part of the question and return to step 2!

AP Government FRQ Example

Now, I'll go through the answers to a real AP Government free-response question from the 2013 exam to show you what your responses should look like:

PRESIDENTIAL APPOINTMENTS TO THE FEDERAL JUDICIARY BY SELECTED DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS, 2000–2011 (in percent)						
President	African American	Hispanic	Asian American	White	Women	Men
Barack Obama	22%	11%	8%	59%	46%	54%
George W. Bush	7%	9%	1%	82%	22%	78%

Source: Alliance for Justice, August 2011
Percentages do not add up to 100.

3. Presidents consider many factors when nominating candidates to the federal courts, and getting their nominees confirmed is often difficult.
- Using the chart above, describe ONE similarity between President Barack Obama's judicial appointments and those made by President George W. Bush.
 - Using the chart above, describe TWO differences between President Barack Obama's judicial appointments and those made by President George W. Bush.
 - Explain why a president's party affiliation accounts for differences in presidential appointments to the judiciary.
 - Describe one way a president can increase the chances of having judicial nominations to federal courts confirmed.

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First, let's consider the chart and the introductory sentence for this question. It looks like **we're comparing the distribution of judicial appointments by gender and ethnicity for two different presidents.**

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For part a, you are asked to describe one way in which the judicial appointments of Obama and Bush were similar. You might say that **in both cases more than half of the appointees were white**, with Obama at 59 percent and Bush at 82 percent white. **You could also say that the percentage of Hispanic nominees was similar for each president or that in both cases Asian American nominees were the rarest of all the ethnic groups.** You would earn one point for this part of the question if you included either of those responses.

For part b, you are asked to describe two differences between the presidents in their judicial appointments. One difference you might point out is that **a significantly larger percentage of Obama's nominees were women** - almost half compared to Bush's mere 22 percent. A second difference is that **Obama appointed a greater percentage of candidates from racial minorities.** For example, 22 percent of his appointees were African American as compared to Bush's 7 percent. You could earn two points for part b, one for each difference between the two sets of nominees.

Part c asks you to explain how party affiliation impacts judiciary nominations. You might say that **the President often chooses nominees with similar views who will adhere to his policy preferences.** This typically means people who belong to the same political party as the President.

You could also say that **the President tends to choose nominees who will make his**

party's electoral base happy and lead to victories in future elections. Part c was worth one point.

Finally, part d asks you to describe what a President can do to increase the likelihood that his federal court nominees will be confirmed. **Possible answers to part d include:**

- Consulting with the Senate/using senatorial courtesy
- Selecting a moderate candidate in the first place
- Properly vetting candidates and choosing people who are highly qualified

You would earn one point for this part of the question if you described any one of these methods. Notice that **this question was worth a total of five raw points**, which is probably the lowest raw point value you'll see on any of the AP US Government free-response questions. However, **a lower raw point value doesn't mean it's worth any less in your final scaled score**; each free-response question is equally important on this test.

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Even people who make extremely important decisions, like federal judges, are appointed partially based on their political favorability.

How to Practice AP US Government Free-Response Questions

There are several resources that you can use to hone your skills in answering AP Government FRQs.

Official College Board Resources

The College Board site hosts [free-response questions from previous tests](#) that you can use for practice. Questions that come from tests administered between 2004 and 2015 are accompanied by scoring guidelines, so you can check your answers and tally up how many points you would have earned. **These are the best sample free-response questions you can get because you know for sure that they accurately represent what you'll see on the real test.** The questions from 2002 and 2003 don't have scoring guidelines, so be aware that you won't be able to check the official answers if you choose to use them.

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2 Review Books

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Review books can also be good resources for free response practice although they tend to vary in quality. [The Princeton Review book for AP Gov](#) includes **five full practice tests**, so there should be plenty of free response questions that you can use to practice your skills. [The Barron's review book](#) also has **a couple of practice tests and extra free response questions that may be useful for practice.**

If you don't want to buy the book, you can also take [Barron's free online practice test](#) for AP Gov, which includes free-response questions and scoring guidelines. **If you use these free-response questions for practice, just be sure to intersperse them with official questions from the College Board** so that you maintain an accurate sense of what to expect on the real test.



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Review books can be great resources for free-response and multiple-choice practice questions and for test-taking strategies that you may not have discovered on your own.

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Conclusion

The four free-response questions on the AP US Government exam can be approached methodically to earn the maximum number of points. Read the introduction to the question first so you can get your bearings. Then, for each of the separate parts, identify the command verb, address all aspects of the question, and double check your answer for missing pieces and careless errors.

I'd suggest practicing at least a few free response questions before heading into the exam. The best resource to use is the College Board website, which has an archive of past questions accompanied by answer guidelines. These questions are pretty simple compared to the free-response questions on other AP tests once you get the hang of them!

What's Next

Not sure where to begin in studying for the test as a whole? [Read our five-step plan that will help you prepare to take on any AP test.](#)