Essay Questions for AP Government

Unit 1: The Constitution as the Basis of the US Government

1. The power of the federal government relative to the power of the states has increased since the ratification of the Constitution. (2005)
   a. Describe two of the following provisions of the Constitution and explain how each has been used over time to expand federal power.
      • The power to tax and spend
      • The “necessary and proper” or “elastic” clause
      • The commerce clause
   b. Explain how one of the following has increased the power of the federal government relative to the power of the state governments.
      • American with Disabilities Act
      • Civil Rights Act of 1964
      • Clean Air Act

2. The Framers of the United States Constitution created a legislative system that is bicameral. However, it is not just bicameral; the framers also established two houses of distinctly different character and authority. (2006)
   a. Discuss two reasons why the framers created a bicameral legislature.
   b. Identify one power unique to the House of Representatives and explain why the framers gave the House that power.
   c. Identify one power unique to the Senate and explain why the framers gave the Senate that power.

3. The framers of the United States Constitution created a federal system. (2007)
   a. Define federalism.
   b. Select two of the following and explain how each has been used to increase the power of the federal government relative to the states.
      • Categorical grants
      • Federal mandates
      • Selective incorporation
   c. Select two of the following and explain how each has been used to increase the power of the states relative to the federal government.
      • Welfare Reform Act of 1996
      • Block grants
      • 10th amendment

4. In The Federalist paper number 10, James Madison expressed concern over the possibility that both majority and minority factions would have too much power over government, and he presented ways of minimizing that danger. The United States Constitution established a democratic government but also contained several provisions that limited majority rule. Throughout the next two centuries, the role of majority rule in the United States government and politics continued to change. (2009)
   a. Identify the part of the national government that was originally most closely tied to citizens and explain how it was tied to citizens.
   b. Explain two ways the US Constitution limited majority rule.
   c. Choose two of the following 20th century developments and explain how each moved the US from a less democratic system to a more democratic system.
      • Primary elections
      • The 17th amendment
      • Expansion of suffrage

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Unit 2: The Institutions of the US Government

Congress

1. Both party leadership and committees in Congress play key roles in the legislative process. (2002)
   a. Define two of the following elements of the congressional committee system and explain how each influences the legislative process.
      • Specialization
      • Reciprocity/logrolling
      • Party representation on committees
   b. Identify two ways party leadership in Congress can influence the legislative process, and explain how each way influences the process.

2. Conflicts between Congress and the President over war pres have their origin in the United States Constitution. In 1973, Congress passed the War Powers Resolution in an attempt to clarify the balance of powers between the two branches of government. (2007)
   a. Describe the primary constitutional conflict between Congress and the President over the decision to go to war.
   b. Describe two provisions of the War Powers Resolution that were designed to limit the President’s power over war making.
   c. The War Powers Resolution has received mixed reviews, but Congress has other powers over war making. Other than the constitutional power that you described in (a), identify and explain two other formal powers Congress has over war making.

3. Congressional reapportionment and redistricting are conducted every ten years. When redistricting is conducted, politicians often engage in gerrymandering. (2007)
   a. Define congressional reapportionment and explain one reason why it is important to states.
   b. Define congressional redistricting.
   c. Explain two goals of politicians when they gerrymander during redistricting.
   d. Describe two limits that the United States Supreme Court has placed on congressional redistricting.

4. In the United States Congress, the majority party exerts a substantial influence over lawmaking. However, even when one party has a numerical majority in each chamber of the United States Congress, there is no guarantee that legislation supported by that majority party will be passed by both chambers. Rules of each chamber independently influence the likelihood that legislation will pass in that chamber; legislation passed by one chamber is not always passed by the other. (2009)
   a. Describe two advantages the majority party in the United States House of Representatives has in lawmaking, above and beyond the numerical advantage that the majority party enjoys in floor voting.
   b. Describe two differences between House and Senate rules that may make it likely that legislation may pass in one chamber but not in the other.
   c. Explain how the differences identified in (b) can lead to the passage of a bill in one chamber but not in the other.

5. 

Presidency

1. Presidential approval ratings fluctuate over the course of each presidential administration. (2003)
   a. Identify two factors that decrease presidential approval ratings, and explain why each factor has that effect.
b. Identify two factors that increase presidential approval ratings, and explain why each factor has that effect.

2. Presidents are generally thought to have advantages over Congress in conducting foreign policy because of the formal and informal powers of the presidency. (2004)
   a. Identify two formal constitutional powers of the President in making foreign policy.
   b. Identify two formal constitutional powers of Congress in making foreign policy.
   c. Identify two informal powers of the President that contribute to the President’s advantage over Congress in conducting foreign policy.
   d. Explain how each of the informal powers identified in (c) contributes to the President’s advantage over Congress in conducting foreign policy.

3. A number of factors enable presidents to exert influence over Congress in the area of domestic policy. However, presidents are also limited in their influence over domestic policymaking in Congress. (2008)
   a. The Constitution grants the president certain enumerated powers. Describe two of these formal powers that enable the president to exert influence over domestic policy.
   b. Choose two of the following. Define each term and explain how each limits the president’s ability to influence domestic policymaking in Congress.
      • Mandatory spending
      • Party polarization
      • Lame-duck period

4. Fiscal policy and monetary policy are two tools used by the federal government to influence the United States economy. The executive and legislative branches share the responsibility of setting fiscal policy. The Federal Reserve Board has the primary role of setting monetary policy. (2008)
   a. Define fiscal policy.
   b. Describe one significant way the executive branch influences fiscal policy.
   c. Describe one significant way the legislative branch influences fiscal policy.
   d. Define monetary policy.
   e. Explain two reasons why the Federal Reserve Board is given independence in establishing monetary policy.

5. The concept of “divided government” in the US means that one political party can control the executive branch while another controls the legislative branch. This poses problems for the President in making appointments to federal offices. (2002)
   a. Describe two problems that divided government poses for the President in making federal appointments.
   b. Identify and explain two ways Presidents try to overcome the problems described in (a).

Bureaucracy

1. The United States Congress and the President together have the power to enact federal law. Federal bureaucratic agencies have the responsibility to execute federal law. However, in the carrying out of these laws, federal agencies have policy-making discretion. (2006)
   a. Explain two reasons why Congress gives federal agencies policy-making discretion in executing federal laws.
   b. Choose one of the bureaucratic agencies listed below. Identify the policy area over which it exercises policy-making discretion AND give one specific example of how it exercises that discretion.
      • Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)
      • Federal Communications Commission (FCC)
      • Federal Reserve Board
   c. Describe two ways in which Congress ensures that federal agencies follow legislative intent.

2. Using the data in the graph above and your knowledge of US politics, perform the following tasks. (2003)
   a. Identify two trends shown in the graph.
b. Explain how each of the following contributes to the difference between the federal and the state and local lines in the graph
   - Block grants
   - Federal mandates

Judiciary

1. The judicial branch is designed to be more independent of public opinion than are the legislative or the executive. Yet the US Supreme Court rarely deviates too far for too long from the prevalent public opinion. (2005)
   a. Describe two ways in which the US Supreme Court is insulated from public opinion.
   b. Explain how two factors work to keep the US Supreme Court from deviating too far from public opinion.

Unit 3: The Political Process

1. Citizens often choose to participate in the political process in ways other than voting. (2003)
   a. Identify two forms of participation in the political process other than voting.
   b. Explain two advantages of each form of participation you identified in (a).
2. Different interest groups will choose different techniques to achieve their objectives based on their resources, characteristics and goals. (2004)
   a. Describe each of the following techniques and explain why an interest group would choose each technique.
      - Litigation
      - Campaign contributions
      - Grassroots lobbying/mass mobilization
   b. Select one of the following groups and identify the primary technique it uses from the list in part (a). Explain why the group you selected would employ that technique over the other two techniques.
      - American Medical Association (AMA)
      - Sierra Club
      - National Rifle Association (NRA)
      - National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)
3. While interest groups and political parties each play a significant role in the United States political system, they differ in their fundamental goals. (2006)
   a. Identify the fundamental goal of interest groups in the political process.
   b. Identify the fundamental goal of major political parties in the political process.
   c. Describe two different ways by which interest groups support the fundamental goals of political parties in the political process.
   d. For one of the forms of support you described in (c), explain two different ways in which that form of support helps interest groups to achieve their fundamental goal in the political process.
4. A significant feature of the Electoral College is that most states have a winner-take-all system.
   a. Describe the winner-take-all feature of the Electoral College. (2007)
   b. Explain one way in which the winner-take-all feature of the Electoral College affects how presidential candidates from the two major political parties run their campaigns.
   c. Explain one way in which the winner-take-all feature of the Electoral College hinders third party candidates.
   d. Explain two reasons why the Electoral College has not been abolished.
5. Minor parties (third parties) have been a common feature of US politics. (2004)
   a. Describe the point of view expressed about minor parties in the cartoon above.
   b. Identify and explain how two rules of the US electoral system act as obstacles to minor-party candidates winning elections.
c. Minor parties make important contributions to the US political system in spite of the institutional obstacles to their candidates’ success. Describe two of these contributions.

6. Trust and confidence in government have declined in recent decades. (2004)
   a. Explain how divided government has contributed to the decline in trust and confidence in government.
   b. Explain how the increased cost of election campaigns has contributed to the decline in trust and confidence in the government.
   c. Explain two specific consequences of the decline in trust and confidence in government for individual political behavior.

7. In the United States political system, there are several linkage institutions that can connect citizens to government. Elections constitute one such institution. Because of low voter turnout, elections represent an imperfect method of linking citizens to their government. Even when there is low voter turnout, however, other linkage institutions can connect citizens to government. (2009)
   a. Describe how each of the following is related to the likelihood of voting.
      • Age
      • Education
   b. Identify one current government electoral requirement that decreases voter turnout. Explain how it decreases voter turnout.
   c. Identify one linkage institution other than elections and explain two ways it connects citizens to government.

8. One of the most important ways the news media influence politics is through agenda setting. (2009)
   a. Define policy agenda.
   b. Explain how the national news media engage in agenda setting.
   c. Explain the primary reason the president tends to have an advantage over Congress in gaining media attention.
   d. Consider the table above.
      • Describe the differences in the viewing patterns of older and younger age-groups.
      • Describe the change from 1974 to 2002 in viewing habits that exists for all age categories.
   e. Given the information in the table, describe one implication for presidents in their use of the media to promote their political policy objectives to the American public.

9. In the last half of the 20th century, voter turnout in federal elections has declined. During the same period, voter turnout has been higher in presidential elections than in midterm elections. (2002)
   a. Identify two factors that have contributed to the overall decline in turnout in federal elections and explain how each factor has contributed to the overall decline.
   b. Identify and explain two reasons why voter turnout has been higher in presidential elections than in midterm elections.

10. The US Congress has debated a variety of campaign finance reforms over the last decade. The proposals debated have included the following: (2005)
    • Eliminating soft money
    • Limiting independent expenditures
    • Raising limits on individual contributions
    a. Select one of the listed proposals and do all of the following:
       • Define the proposal.
       • Describe an argument that proponents make in favor of the proposal.
       • Describe an argument that opponents make against the proposal.
    b. Select a different listed proposal and do all of the following:
       • Define the proposal.
       • Describe an argument that proponents make in favor of the proposal.
       • Describe an argument that opponents make against the proposal.
11. Several characteristics of an interest group can enhance its influence over Congress. Because of the perception that interest groups exert undue influence, Congress has regulated the influence of these groups.
   a. Describe how each of these characteristics of an interest group can enhance its influence over Congress.
      • Financial resources
      • Expertise
      • Size
   b. Identify two ways in which Congress has regulated the influence of interest groups.

Unit 4: Rights and Liberties

1. Initially the US Constitution did little to protect citizens from actions of the states. In the 20th century, the Supreme Court interpreted the Constitution to protect the rights of citizens from state governments in a process referred to as incorporation. (2005)
   a. Define selective incorporation.
   b. For two of the following, explain how each has been incorporated. Each of your explanations must be based on a specific and relevant Supreme Court decision.
      i. Rights of criminal defendants
      ii. First Amendment
      iii. Privacy rights

2. The First Amendment includes two clauses relating to the freedom of religion. (2007)
   a. Select one of the following cases and identify the First Amendment clause upon which the United States Supreme Court based its decision.
      • Engel v. Vitale (school prayer)
      • Lemon v. Kurzman (state funding for private religious schools)
   b. Describe the Supreme Court’s decision in the case that you selected in (a).
   c. Select one of the following cases and identify the First Amendment clause upon which the Supreme Court based its decision.
      • Reynolds v. United States (polygamy)
      • Oregon v. Smith (drug use in religious ceremonies)
   d. Describe the Supreme Court’s decision in the case that you selected in (c).
   e. Many of these decisions have caused controversy in the United States. Describe two ways in which other political institutions might limit the impact of Supreme Court decisions.

3. “The rights of citizens of the United states to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of race, color or previous condition of servitude.” Fifteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution, 1870

Despite the ratification of the 15th Amendment, voter turnout among African American citizens was very low throughout the first half of the 20th century. Over the past 50 years, civil rights policies have changed substantially, along with a significant increase in African American voter turnout. (2008)
   a. Explain how two measures taken by some states prior to the 1960s affected voter turnout among African American citizens.
   b. Facing discrimination at the voting booth, many African American citizens turned to alternative forms of political participation. Describe two alternative forms of participation that helped bring about changes in civil rights policies.
   c. Choose one of the forms of participation you described in (b) and explain why it was effective in changing civil rights policies.

4. Political institutions can present both obstacles and opportunities to racial minority groups in their efforts to gain political influence. (2002)
a. Identify one feature of one of the following and explain how that feature has presented obstacles to racial minority groups in their efforts to achieve political goals.
   - Federalism
   - The United States political party system
   - The United States electoral system
b. Identify one feature of one of the following and explain how that feature might present opportunities to racial minority groups in their efforts to achieve political goals.
   - Federalism
   - The United States political party system
   - The United States electoral system

**Unit 5: Making Policy**

1. In recent decades, entitlement programs have constituted a substantial portion of the United States federal budget. Social security is the largest entitlement program in the United States. From the information in the chart above and your knowledge of US government and politics, perform the following tasks. (2006)
   a. Define an entitlement program.
   b. What is the primary source of revenue for the Social Security program?
   c. Identify one threat to the future of the Social Security program should the trends depicted in the chart above continue.
   d. Describe one demographic trend that threatens the future of the Social Security program AND explain how it is responsible for the threat that you identified in (c).
   e. Explain how any one of the trends in the chart above would change if the age of eligibility for Social Security were raised.

2. Using the information in the figure above and your knowledge of the United States politics, complete the following tasks. (2002)
   a. Describe what the figure above demonstrates about the distribution of government benefits over time.
   b. Identify two politically relevant factors that have affected the changing distribution of government benefits between children and the elderly.
   c. Explain how each of the two factors identified in (b) has affected the changing distribution of government.

**Unit 6: State & Local Government**