

### Question Three

(Suggested time—40 minutes. This question counts for one-third of the total essay section score.)

In his book, *American Mythos: Why Our Best Efforts to be a Better Nation Fall Short* (2006), author Robert Wuthnow introduces the concept of “reflective democracy,” saying that it is “one in which individual citizens in their personal lives and in their life together devote effort to examining the cultural assumptions on which their behavior rests and is justified,” one in which “people who do not engage in ill-considered judgments...[but are] more concerned with...the society’s goals and values...”.

In a well-organized essay select an issue which you might think is worthy of “reflective democracy” and identify the reasons why you think it deserves such thoughtful consideration. Use evidence from your reading, experience or observations to support your argument.

Please remember to:

- Frame a thesis that takes a defensible position on an issue you think worthy of “reflective democracy” and why you think it deserves such thoughtful consideration.
- Select and use evidence that supports your line of reasoning.
- Follow the conventions of standard written English when crafting your response to the question.

### **Précis and Explication of Free Response Question Three: On Reflective Democracy**

Free Response Question Three asked students to respond to a quote from “reflective democracy” from Robert Wuthnow’s provocative 2006 book, *American Mythos: Why Our Best Efforts to be a Better Nation Fall Short*. Students were asked to select an issue which they might consider worthy of “reflective democracy,” and to identify the reasons why they think it deserves such thoughtful consideration. Moreover, they were asked to use evidence from their reading, experience or observations to support their argument.

In light of the plethora of issues simmering on the world and domestic fronts, selecting an issue to examine through the lens of reflective democracy should not be difficult. One could, for example, look at the recent conflict between law enforcement and African Americans, the seemingly unwarranted shootings that triggered the “Black Lives Matter” movement, considering both the dismayed and agitated reaction of the community and the victims’ families but also the tension and anxiety of the police. Such a discussion would impartially examine the various factors that initiate the use of excessive force: the failure of a black victim to obey law enforcement’s commands; the relative ease of a white officer’s confusing a hand-held object such as a cell phone with a deadly weapon; the understandable reluctance of a black victim to comply with a command when he believes he is doing or carrying nothing illegal; the heightened anxiety felt by a white officer stationed in a primarily black neighborhood; the resentment of a black victim at being stereotyped as a criminal; the resentment of a white officer at being stereotyped as a racist. As Wuthnow asserts, “Reflective democracy is more concerned with why we think certain actions are legitimate,” and evaluating a person or a circumstance is the end of it.

Thus, whether we are examining the use of deadly force, the nature of our immigration or trade policies, our military involvement in various theaters, or addressing homelessness, unemployment or the opioid crisis, engaging in reflective democracy can only help us to better understand the multiple perspectives on an issue and help move us towards a more informed and effective solution. Reflective democracy moves past the neighbor in Robert Frost’s famous poem “Mending Wall” who insists upon rebuilding a property wall though there are no cows to wander across the boundary and though the properties are clearly defined by different types of trees; the same neighbor who mechanically repeats his father’s maxim, “Good fences make good neighbors” though it is little more than a vacuous saying.