

**American Politics Comprehensive Exam  
Fall 2015**

**Part I: General (Morning) Questions**

**Answer one of the following two questions. Indicate the question number and provide the text of the question at the start of your answer.**

1. Is political gridlock a function of divided government or an artifact of policy preferences and American political institutions? In answering this question, you may want to consider arguments made by other scholars as well as the evidence that can be (or has been) brought to bear on the issue. You might also want to consider whether/how the status quo (the current set of policies) affects our perception of the correct answer.
2. To a greater (the US House) or slightly less (US Senate) extent, party voting in the Congress has risen to levels approaching that of parliaments in responsible party systems. Why has party voting and polarization increased over the past thirty years? What are the implications for the functioning of a separation-of-powers system of these historically high levels of partisanship? Does this combination of party voting and independently powerful legislative bodies (House, Senate, Congress as a whole) pose a threat to democratic rule, or is it pretty much “politics as usual” within the American system.

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**Part II: Subfield (Afternoon) Questions**

**Answer two of the following four questions. Indicate the question number and provide the text of the question at the start of your answer.**

1. Although written over 40 years ago, Mayhew's (1974) *Congress: The Electoral Connection* is still widely read by students for insights into congressional and electoral politics. In this seminal book, Mayhew offers an explanation grounded in rational choice theory that seeks to explain the organizational structure of Congress based on the desire of individual members for reelection. Discuss and evaluate the principal components of Mayhew's analysis as it pertains to legislative behavior and the organization of the congressional institution. Which features of his argument have largely stood the test of time? Which have not (and why)?
2. What do we know about the impact of the Electoral College on candidates' strategies and resource allocations? What factors influence aggregate state electorates (which may or may not be the same as factors that influence individual voters)? Why are some states more influential in the Electoral College? What potential changes, if any, would make the Electoral College system more democratic? Explain.
3. During the past decade, journalists and political pundits have frequently claimed that presidents seem to be going alone much more often than in the past—i.e., implementing their policy preferences in a unilateral fashion. This trend has been echoed in the recent scholarly literature as well. Is this theme consistent with the earlier dominant literature on the presidency? If not, how has it changed over time? What executive branch tools do scholars point to in support of their unilateral powers thesis? How have the other branches of government responded to these developments?
4. Since Schubert's seminal research, judicial politics scholars have utilized the "attitudinal model" in analyses of decision-making. Alternative views of judging posit that justices decide cases based on legal or strategic considerations. Compare and contrast these models of decision-making. As part of your analysis, you should explain the similarities and differences that underlie these perspectives, the methodological approaches testing these models, and leading empirical findings. In addition, explain which of these models explain recent Supreme Court jurisprudence with regard to either the Affordable Care Act or marriage rights for homosexual Americans. Why is one perspective more successful than others in explaining these outcomes? Finally, discuss the utility of these models in advancing explanations of decision making at different levels of judicial hierarchies in federal and state court systems.