

American Politics Comprehensive Exam

Spring 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. In the context of studying American political development, students of legislative politics often remark that a zero-sum relationship exists between congressional committees and political parties. Indeed, in earlier eras when political parties in Congress were quite strong, committees were considered to be much weaker in terms of their role in the legislative process. As the power of party leaders receded, most scholars agree that this ushered in an era of "committee government." Discuss the nature of the relationship between congressional committees and parties over the course of congressional history. To what extent is it accurate to characterize this relationship as zero-sum? Under what conditions might committees and parties be working toward the same legislative goals?
2. By constitutional design, the presidency is a central institution in American politics. Political scientists provide numerous explanations for the extent and utility of presidential power. Using political science research, discuss the development and institutionalization of the Presidency. How has the office changed over time, and how/why? In addition, describe the role of the president as an agenda-setter and policymaker. When, and in what policy areas, is he most successful as a policymaker? What strategies are available to presidents eager to implement their policy agendas? Be sure to elaborate on his interaction with other institutions of American government including the courts, Congress, and the bureaucracy.

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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. Every ten years, House seats are reapportioned among the fifty states, and state legislatures are charged with redrawing district boundary lines. The common logic is that redistricting matters; however, there is a great deal of disagreement about how redistricting matters. Using current scholarship, your task is to answer the following question: What effect, if any, does redistricting play in congressional representation and, in turn, on the types of policy outcomes (more liberal or conservative) passed by Congress?
2. Political scientists frequently borrow or absorb techniques from other fields such as genetics and geography or adapt existing techniques such as social networks and text processing. Pick one of these fields or techniques and, citing relevant literature, discuss how they have been adopted by political scientists and what we have learned.
3. Describe, theoretically, four processes by which the media could shape opinion. (For at least one of the four, describe how some sort of intermediary factor plays a role in the media's effect on the public.) Empirically, how does the evidence support or undermine each of these four theoretical processes? Overall, how much influence does the news media have on public opinion? Do you think politicians and press leaders can lead the public at will? Why or why not?
4. The overriding party cleavage in Southern politics for well over one hundred years has been that of race, or the black/white dichotomy aptly described by Key in *Southern Politics in State and Nation*. But Key and others have also indicated the existence of other cleavages lurking below the surface of this racial division. Describe how the racial division has characterized the Southern party structure of the past and discuss whether it is just as salient today. Using current scholarship, identify and discuss at least two other cleavages that may redefine political parties in the region. Finally, set up a brief research design to construct a test of these competing theories.

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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. What are the major differences between presidential nomination campaigns and presidential general election campaigns? Identify and explain several differences (rules, the electorate, information, voting factors etc.) between the two types of campaigns and explain how these differences lead to differences in strategy and dynamics. Discuss and evaluate evidence of campaign effects in presidential nomination campaigns compared to presidential general election campaigns.
2. Although written over 40 years ago, David 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. In a well-written answer, 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)?

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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. A number of political scientists engage in forecasting elections (e.g., national presidential vote, number of congressional seats won). How can this information be valuable in terms of advancing our understanding of voting and elections? Abramowitz once said that presidential forecasts should be as early as possible, as accurate as possible, using as few variables as possible. Some of these criteria imply that campaign events should not be included in the models. What would be the advantages and disadvantages of including campaign events?
2. While relatively few observers would dispute the notion of an incumbency advantage in Congress, there is much less agreement among congressional scholars over the sources of that advantage for incumbent legislators. Discuss and evaluate the most important factors that scholars have identified during the past few decades as contributing to the incumbency advantage. In your answer, be sure to acknowledge limitations associated with existing explanations as well as why certain factors may not help us fully understand the advantages accruing to incumbents.
3. Every ten years, House seats are reapportioned among the fifty states, and state legislatures are charged with redrawing district boundary lines. The common logic is that redistricting matters; however, there is a great deal of disagreement about how redistricting matters. Using current scholarship, your task is to answer the following question: What effect, if any, does redistricting play in congressional representation and, in turn, on the types of policy outcomes (more liberal or conservative) passed by Congress?
4. Individuals' survey responses tend to be inconsistent from one time period to another and survey responses across various issues tend not to correspond in a way that ideology would suggest. Why do we observe these patterns? Describe four different answers observed in the literature. Which of these views is most convincing to you theoretically and why? Which view is most convincing empirically and why? Does your view of why individuals' survey responses are unstable suggest that the public's opinion is not sufficiently informed for a democratic society? Why or why not?