

American Politics Comprehensive Exam Study Guide – Spring 2015

Part I: General (Morning) Question Possibilities

1. Since the 1970s there have been a number of significant changes in American presidential campaigns and the forces that shape them. Areas of change include the scheduling of primaries and caucuses, the nature of the news media, the rules and procedures governing delegate selection, the manner in which electoral campaigns are financed, and the technology used to conduct electoral campaigns. How have these cumulative changes altered the nature of campaigns and elections? How have these changes impacted on political groups and individuals? Have they altered the nature of democracy in the United States?
2. David Mayhew's *Congress: The Electoral Connection* was published over 40 years ago, but still exerts a tremendous amount of influence on scholarship examining 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. To what extent has evidence been found of an electoral connection outside of the modern (post-World War II) era? What are the broad implications of such findings?
3. 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?
4. Considerable evidence has emerged that public opinion and the behavior of policymakers are congruent with each other. As evidence of this consider three common findings: (1) As nationwide public opinion changes over time, public policy changes in the same way. (2) The ideology of the mass public in the American states tends to match the ideology of the policies enacted by the respective state governments. (3) The voting patterns of members of Congress tend to be in line with the ideology of their respective home districts. What do you make of empirical relationships like these? In

American politics do the policy preferences of the mass public influence elected officials, or do elected officials lead mass public opinion? Explain why, theoretically, you believe your answer to be true. How has existing evidence weighed in on this question? What additional empirical tests would you want to use to answer this question?

5. 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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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. In 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?
3. 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)?
4. Scholars of American political parties have long debated the nature and origin of parties. Explain how the diverse coalitions thesis, responsible parties thesis, and your favorite rational choice model differ in explaining the rise and decline of parties. What are the strengths and weaknesses of each? Which argument most accurately describes political parties and why? Can this theory explain the recent decline and resurgence of political parties?
5. Considerable evidence has emerged that public opinion and the behavior of policymakers are congruent with each other. As evidence of this consider three common findings: (1) As nationwide public opinion changes over time, public policy changes in the same way. (2) The ideology of the mass public in the American states tends to match the ideology of the policies enacted by the respective state governments. (3) The voting patterns of members of Congress tend to be in line with the ideology of their respective home

districts. What do you make of empirical relationships like these? In American politics do the policy preferences of the mass public influence elected officials, or do elected officials lead mass public opinion? Explain why, theoretically, you believe your answer to be true. How has existing evidence weighed in on this question? What additional empirical tests would you want to use to answer this question?