

American Politics Comprehensive Exam Study Guide – Fall 2014

Part I: General (Morning) Question Possibilities

1. The relationship between congressional committees and executive agencies is of central importance to scholars studying both governmental branches. Much of the current literature on the interplay between Congress and the bureaucracy models committees as autonomous gatekeepers with ideal points that are frequently divergent from the chamber and party medians. A principal-agent model is typically applied, placing the committee in the role of the principal, and the bureaucracy as the agent. In the context of describing the current literature, discuss the benefits and limitations of this approach.
2. 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 has receded over time, however, 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?
3. French economist Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the 21st Century* reached number one on the *New York Times* bestselling hardcover fiction list in May of 2014. In it, Piketty argues the ratio of wealth to income is rising in the United States and other countries and that we should expect this trend to continue. This is, in part, due to economic policies that disproportionately favor the wealthy. Piketty's argument appears to contradict the basic tenets of spatial theory as it is applied to American politics. Using literature on American elections and lawmaking explain this disconnect.
4. Much of the theoretical literature on democracy highlights the importance of deliberation and citizen input. However, the growing literature on deliberative democracy suggests that deliberation only hardens preexisting positions for most participants. How do we reconcile the empirical research with our theoretical ideals of democracy?
5. Assess how changes in political polarization have influenced governance in the United States.