

American Politics Comprehensive Exam

Spring 2014

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. We have a separation-of-powers political system. We increasingly have a highly polarized electorate and an even more polarized legislative branch, with partisan voting patterns that approach those in parliamentary systems. We have major policy/structural issues before us, including but not limited to health care spending and delivery, global warming, education, and social security. What does the political science literature tell us about whether and how our politics can address policy stalemate? Are there institutional fixes for our inability to address these issues? If so, what are they? If not, why not?
2. 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?

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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. Despite being written 40 years ago, David Mayhew's (1974) *Congress: The Electoral Connection* is still widely read by students for insights into congressional and electoral politics. Congress has changed mightily in these forty years, moving from an institution where parties were not especially relevant to one in which they define almost all political action, or lack thereof. Assess how Mayhew's perspective has fared over the past 40 years. Bringing in research on congressional elections, ideology, partisanship, and polarization, assess the explanatory power of Mayhew's core arguments.
2. 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.
3. 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?
4. Some scholars have argued that voters have little meaningful information about the political world. Other researchers argue that voters are reasonably informed and competent to make decisions. How well developed and coherent are the political belief systems of voters? Are voters capable of choosing candidates effectively? How do the demands on voters vary in the different models of voting used by scholars?