

## American Politics Comprehensive Exam Study Guide – Spring 2014

### Part I: General (Morning) Question Possibilities

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. 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. Every four years, political scientists offer predictions about which party’s presidential candidate will win the upcoming election through the use of a variety of forecasting models. As is often the case, these relatively straightforward models offer an accurate prediction of the election outcome to within one or two percentage points. Since these parsimonious models can often predict the outcome of the election without accounting for any specific campaign effects, the natural question that is raised is how important are campaigns in light of this highly suggestive evidence? What are the arguments supporting and opposing the impact of campaigns on election outcomes? How can the ways one measures campaign effects influence the results one obtains? What kinds of campaigns are most/least likely to influence election outcomes?
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. We appear to be living an age of intense political polarization and this is assumed by many to be a bad thing. What explanations can be offered to explain why such a condition has come about? What, if anything, can be done to decrease such polarization? What about the argument the polarization is actually healthy for the political system, giving citizens a real choice over the policy direction of the country?