

**American Politics Comprehensive examination
Fall 2018
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. The system of separation of powers/checks and balances informs much of what we think about in American politics, including the choices of both political actors and institutions. Consider how this system constrains the choices made by the three branches of government, and the literature on interactions between the branches. Choose two branches of government (e.g. Courts and Congress, Congress and the Executive, or Courts and the Executive) and respond to the central questions raised in this literature: Why (or why not) would we expect one branch of government to constrain the other, and vice-versa? To what extent do the branches, in reality, meet these expectations? Consider both political powers as well as political preferences of the branches of government--and how they matter--when answering this question. Finally, what are the implications for the functioning of a separation-of-powers system given the historically high levels of partisanship that we experience in modern-day American politics?
2. 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?

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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. Over the last few decades, the influence of party on legislative behavior and policy outcomes has become the most important problem in the study of Congress. Write an essay that (1) outlines the major theses of that literature, (2) evaluates the strength of the evidence for each thesis and (3) identifies the research that remains to be done. Cite the relevant literature.
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. 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. To what extent has the increased nationalization of elections in recent years contributed to an overall decline in 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.
4. Polarization has become a buzzword among political scientists and political pundits alike. Despite its omnipresence in the political discourse, there is still considerable disagreement regarding the nature of polarization among the mass public. While some scholars argue that American voters are polarized on political issues and ideology, others argue that social polarization is much more powerful in driving interparty hostility. Discuss the most important works in this debate and evaluate their empirical validity. In your answer, make sure to (1) define and contrast ideological/issue and social polarization as well as compare their normative implications for our understanding of mass political behavior, (2) discuss the nature of partisanship from the perspective of Social Identity Theory, and (3) speculate about potential strategies to address polarization among American voters.