

# **AMERICAN POLITICS COMPREHENSIVE EXAMINATION**

**SPRING 2019**

## **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. Scholars and political commentators frequently assert that the electorate is polarized, with distinct ideological camps in disagreement about the nation's most pressing political problems and how to solve them. How do political scientists explain the emergence and persistence of political polarization in the electorate? What are the consequences of political polarization for (1) citizens' participation in politics, (2) electoral politics, (3) national policymaking, and (4) filling vacancies in government? To what extent can these consequences be overcome by unified party control of the national government? Provide both references to literature and examples from contemporary American politics.
  
2. The American federal government is comprised of three distinct branches. Discuss the factors central to the institutional development of each branch of the American federal government. How have these changes altered the stability and relative power of each branch of the federal government? How can each branch seize power from the others? In what ways can each branch of government delegate its power willingly, and why does this occur? To what extent are these shifts in interbranch relations influenced by short-term and long-term changes in the electorate including critical elections, secular realignments, and political polarization? Be sure to provide examples from American political history.

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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. What are the roles of political parties in Congress and the electorate? What methods do political scientists use to measure the impact of parties on legislators and their constituents? How and why has the role of parties changed over time? To what extent does partisanship explain the gridlock that frequently occurs in modern American politics?
2. David Mayhew's (1974) *Congress: The Electoral Connection* is widely read for insights into congressional and electoral politics. In this seminal book, Mayhew offers an explanation grounded in rational choice theory to explain the organizational structure of Congress based on the desire of individual members for reelection. Discuss and evaluate the principal components of Mayhew's analysis as it pertains to legislative behavior and the organization of Congress. Which features of his argument have largely stood the test of time? Which have not (and why)? Be sure to discuss rival perspectives that challenge Mayhew's perspective.
3. Some scholars argue that voters have little meaningful information about the political world. Downs, for example, argued that "rational ignorance" is suitable for many citizens. 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? What factors determine the political views held by the electorate? How do the demands on voters vary in the different models of voting used by scholars?
4. For much of the subfield's history, the literature on the Presidency was dominated by Richard Neustadt's work on presidential power. What was Neustadt's central thesis? Citing the relevant literature, explain how and why scholars have questioned Neustadt. Particular attention should be given to institutional tools the President can utilize to bypass Congress. Given this recent literature, is Neustadt still relevant today?