

American Politics Comprehensive Exam (Fall 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. The Founders crafted bulwarks between the legislative, executive, and judicial branches via a variety of checks and balances. Although the basic structure of national government has been maintained, the relationships between the three branches have changed occasionally due to the delegation or taking of certain powers. This has been especially true during the past few presidencies. What is the status of the boundary between the legislative, executive, and judicial branches today? To what extent is the modern presidency able to create its own means to carry out desired policy goals and gain independent power regardless of divided or unified government? What does this mean for the nature of governance in the United States?
2. What can we conclude about the relationship between mass attitudes & opinions and the behavior of policymakers? On the one hand, there is considerable evidence of congruence between the behavior of policymakers and mass public opinion. As evidence, consider that (1) changes in national public opinion tend to correspond to similar changes in public policy, (2) the ideology of the mass public in states tends to match the ideology of state policies that are enacted, and (3) the voting patterns of members of Congress tend to align with the ideology of their home district. On the other hand, the public generally dislikes Congress, distrusts government, and large segments of the population do not follow or actively participate in politics. How do you make sense of these findings? Does the public have policy preferences and do elites follow those preferences? Or do elected officials lead mass opinion? How effectively does (or can) the public hold elected officials accountable for their actions in office? 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?

Part II: Subfield (Afternoon) 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. During the past two decades, journalists and political pundits have claimed frequently that presidents seem to be going alone much more often than in the past—i.e., implementing their policy preferences in a unilateral fashion. This trend has been echoed in the recent scholarly literature as well, focusing on both the impact on political institutions and the public. Is this theme of unilateral behavior consistent with the earlier dominant literature on the presidency? If not, how has it changed over time? What tools available to presidents do scholars point to in support of their unilateral powers thesis? How have the other branches of government responded to these developments?
2. Although written 45 years ago, David Mayhew's (1974) *Congress: The Electoral Connection* is still widely read by students for insights into congressional and electoral politics. In this seminal book, Mayhew offers an explanation grounded in rational choice theory that seeks 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 the congressional institution. Which features of his argument have largely stood the test of time? Which have not (and why)?

Answer one of the following three questions. Indicate the question number and provide the text of the question at the start of your answer.

3. The Michigan model of mass political behavior was developed in *The American Voter* by Campbell et al. in 1960 and in the classic belief systems essay by Converse in 1964. Describe the major claims put forth by this model with respect to ideological reasoning, political sophistication, opinion formation, and voting behavior. To what extent have these claims survived challenges from public opinion scholars and political psychologists over the years? To what extent does the Michigan model need to be revised?
4. Many of the areas of research in political behavior and in public opinion focus, at least in part, on how short-term forces (such as campaigns, the media, or other contemporary information and long-term forces (such as core predispositions, standing decisions, or socialization) affect political attitudes, decision-making, and political behavior. First, discuss the distinction between short-term and long-term forces. Second, make a case for which has more influence on political attitudes and/or behavior (being sure to specify what types of outcomes you're focusing on): short-term forces, long-term forces, or an interaction between the two. Make sure you discuss relevant works in public opinion and political behavior.
5. Does the federal government respond to public opinion of the mass public? What factors facilitate or hinder responsiveness? Your answer should rely on an extensive discussion of the relationship between public opinion and *at least* 1 branch of government (the executive, the legislative, or the courts). You should also address scholarship on whether or not the mass public is equipped and able to form coherent political opinions.