

American Politics Major Field Exam, Spring 2020

Part I: General (Morning) Questions

Answer one of the following two questions. Please indicate the question number at the beginning of your answer.

1. 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.
2. 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.

Part II: Subfield (Afternoon) Questions

Answer two of the following questions. Please indicate the question number at the beginning of each answer. Please be sure to leave a page break between your two answers for clarity.

1. By constitutional design, the presidency is a central institution in American politics. Political scientists provide numerous explanations for the extent and utility of presidential power. Using political science research, discuss the development and institutionalization of the Presidency. How and why has the office changed over time? In addition, describe the role of the President as an agenda-setter and policymaker. When, and in what policy areas, is the President most successful as a policymaker? What strategies are available to presidents eager to implement their policy agendas? Be sure to elaborate on his interaction with other institutions of American government including the courts, Congress, and the bureaucracy.
2. 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.

3. Scholars argue that there are currently three major approaches to the study of judicial politics: the legal model, the attitudinal model, and the strategic model. Compare and contrast these three models of judicial decision making. As part of your analysis, you should explain the similarities and differences that underlie these perspectives and discuss how empirical scholars have tried to test for the operation of these models in governing judicial behavior (hint: think about research designs used by scholars). You should address any significant critiques present in the way that each model is conceptualized by scholars. In addition, your answer should address how effective each of these perspectives is in explaining judicial decision making at different levels of judicial hierarchies in federal and state court systems (i.e., not just the U.S. Supreme Court). Finally, assess the extent to which these three approaches may be bridged or combined so that we can gain a more complete and rich understanding of judicial politics in the future.
4. The selection of judges in federal and state courts today is often viewed as a politicized process. Drawing on empirical scholarship, evaluate this characterization by discussing the federal judicial selection process, making sure that your analysis recognizes similarities and differences between those nominated to fill vacancies on the federal trial courts, U.S. courts of appeals, and the U.S. Supreme Court and accounts for major changes to the process and/or its political nature across time. In evaluating the politicization of judicial selection in the states, your response should address the evolution of selection methods. Your response should address the raging debate, and its empirical support, within the literature as to these methods.
5. 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?