

American Politics Major Field Exam, Spring 2021

Please number your pages continuously and ensure that your name is on each page.

Part I: General (Morning) Questions

Answer **one** of the following two questions. Please indicate the question number at the beginning 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 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?

Part II: Subfield (Afternoon) Questions

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

1. Despite the best efforts of policy makers, the gender and racial composition of state and federal courts continues to be overwhelmingly white and male. Many pushing to diversify the bench suggest positive effects will flow from the presence of more women and ethnic/racial minorities on our courts. What do social science theories suggest about potential positive effects? Is there empirical evidence to support the expectation that demographically diverse courts make better (different) decisions? Proponents and opponents of efforts to diversify often suggest that women and minority judges will approach decision making differently than their

white male colleagues. What does social science theory suggest? What does empirical research find?

2. The study of American Political Development (APD) examines the causes, nature, and consequences of key transformative periods and central patterns in American political history. In the context of using an APD lens for understanding rights and liberties in the United States, the political and institutional roots of constitutional controversies are as important, if not more, than Supreme Court cases and doctrine in a given time period. For this question, choose a specific civil right or liberty (i.e. free speech, religion, civil rights, gender equality, etc.) and use an APD lens to highlight a meaningful historical era in the evolution of our understanding of this right. Be sure to address any political events, actors, institutions, or social/political culture of significance in this era. Identify in your discussion the relevant Supreme Court decisions that occurred during the era (if there are any). In your opinion, is the APD approach better for understanding this issue than a traditional case-focused approach? Justify your answer, and address whether this is more generally true or not for the study of American rights and liberties.

3. Latinos have surpassed African Americans as the second largest racial minority in America. Yet they seem to have a less coherent political identity as a minority group. What factors might account for this difference? How might the continued growth of the Latino population affect the dynamics of racial politics in the decades to come?

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

1. 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.

2. 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 in recent decades. In your answer, particular attention should be given to institutional tools the President can utilize to bypass Congress. Given this recent literature, is Neustadt still relevant today?