

American Politics Comprehensive Examination

Fall 2022

Part I: General (Morning) Questions

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

1. An ongoing debate in American politics centers on whether—and to what extent—the system of separation of powers/checks and balances constrains the choices made by the three branches of government. Consider the literature on the interactions between two branches of your choice (e.g., Courts and Congress, Congress and the Executive, the Executive and the Courts) and provide a well-reasoned and grounded response to chief questions raised by this debate: Why (or why not) would we expect one branch (e.g. the executive) to constrain the other (e.g. Congress), and vice-versa (e.g. why [or why not] would we expect Congress to constrain the executive)? To what extent is this expectation met? And what are the implications if they fail? Finally, as political scientists what questions should we be examining in this area given what we know at this point in time and why?
2. In recent years, the literature on American political behavior has focused a good bit of attention on the question of the degree to which the U.S. public is “polarized”? Some scholars have argued that in stark contrast to political activists and elites, the mass public is, for the most part, not polarized. Others claim just the opposite: that polarization in the electorate is sharp and growing. A third group contends that while there is not much evidence for ideological polarization in the mass electorate, there is a high and increasing level of “affective polarization” versus “ideological polarization” among ordinary Americans. Of course, other scholars suggest that there is both ideological and affective polarization in the electorate. Write an essay in which you describe these various perspectives on mass polarization and identify which perspective is most compelling from both a theoretical and empirical standpoint. Moreover, use your knowledge of institutions and research associated with the impact of polarization to describe how legislative, judicial, and executive branches are affected by the polarization, and whether or not there is a recursive impact on the mass public.

Part II: Subfield (Afternoon) Questions

Answer two of the following questions and provide the text of the question at the start of your answer.

1. In “The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics,” Converse (1964) concludes that people do not hold real or meaningful attitudes on most issues. Many of Converse’s critics, on both substantive and methodological grounds, argue that people do hold meaningful attitudes. Have the critics discredited Converse’s major findings? What are the major criticisms of Converse’s findings, and which do you find the most, and least, persuasive? Do you believe the evidence in the literature mostly supports or discredits Converse’s depiction of the American voter?
2. Research on motivated reasoning suggests that people reason about politics in a way that confirms their predispositions. If this is largely the case, how does change in public opinion happen? Do you agree

that most people, most of the time, are not persuadable or do you believe that most people, most of the time, may change their political minds when given new information? What role, if any, do source cues or framing play in this process?

3. In the 2022 term, the recently enlarged conservative majority on the Supreme court expanded the right of gun owners, curtailed restrictions on the role of religion in public life, limited the EPA's ability to combat climate change, and eliminated the right to abortion. In general, the Court moved decisively toward the right on most decisions with the number of unanimous decisions plummeting to its lowest point in fifty years. Political scientists studying judicial behavior have offered the legal model, the attitudinal model, and the strategic model as explanations for judicial behavior. The results from this last term have led some scholars to conclude that the attitudinal model is all that is necessary for understanding the behavior of the Court. Do you agree? What do the legal and strategic models capture, if anything, about Court behavior that the attitudinal model does not? What are the limits or blind spots of the attitudinal model? In your answer, be sure to discuss each model's key assumptions and predictions and what evidence would be required to see each of these models predicting the votes of justices.

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 and how did it shape the literature on the presidency during the latter half of the twentieth century? Explain how and why scholars have questioned Neustadt focusing specifically on the literature published during the past 20 years. Particular attention should be given to institutional tools the President can utilize to bypass Congress. Given this recent literature, is Neustadt still relevant today for those scholars studying the presidency's place in the political system?

5. In the study of African American politics, group identity and group consciousness are central concepts for understanding political attitudes and behavior. Yet, such concepts have traditionally not figured prominently in the study of White political behavior and appear to be less prominent in understandings of other racial and ethnic groups such as Latinos/as and Asians. Why do we see these differences? How do changing demographic and political conditions affect the importance of group identity and consciousness in shaping political behavior?