

American Politics Field Exam
August 2019

Answer THREE of the following questions, but no more than TWO from SECTION A or SECTION B. All answers must be typed.

SECTION A

1. If President Trump has another opportunity to nominate someone to the Supreme Court, how will this change decision-making on the Court? What does the answer to this question depend on? You should draw on theories and empirical evidence about Supreme Court bargaining and theories and empirical evidence about nominations and confirmations.
2. One central claim of the institutionalist approach is that institutions are (sometimes) solutions to collective action problems. Choose an important American political institution. Describe its features, the decisions available to actors within it, and how those features interact with the decisions of actors to facilitate the production of a collective good. Describe one theoretical account of the institution that takes its features as exogenous. Describe another that takes its features as endogenous. What, if any, additional insight is gained by considering endogenous institutional features? Finally, describe one theoretical critique of the institutionalist endeavor that applies to the theories you have explicated. How, if at all, does this critique restrict or complicate our understanding of said institution?
3. It is commonplace to note that business interests in the United States are often well served by public policy. This, in turn, leads many observers to assert that business as a whole or a specific business sector is distinctly influential. Is this conclusion warranted? What is the relevant counterfactual? What are the theoretical mechanisms? In short, what are the limitations of judging business power based on the observation that "business wins" (or "business loses")?
4. There is a widespread perception that Donald Trump has broken the rules, his performance as president defying all expectations. Political scientists are more divided. Some have endorsed the "not normal" assessment; others find much that is just as should be expected. Where do you come down on this question? Select **three** general expectations about incumbent behavior and its likely political effects from the political science literature on the presidency. Defend your selections as robust tests of Trump exceptionalism. How does each fare? What does your assessment say about the strengths and limitations of the current literature?
5. Analyst one: Parties are extremely powerful in the U.S. Congress. Look at how infrequently members buck their parties and the clear polarization in roll call voting. Analyst two: Parties are extremely weak in the U.S. Congress. Leaders cannot compel their members to do anything, are vulnerable to defections on the extremes and from the middle, and can only work together on issues where they already agree. Which analysis is correct? Bring evidence and theory to bear in refereeing this dispute.

SECTION B

1. For over a century, with only three exceptions, the president's party has lost seats in midterm elections. What theories explain this persistent pattern in American politics? Which theory (or theories) is most supported by empirical evidence? In light of these theories, were the results of the 2018 election surprising or as expected?

2. Recent work in political science claims that “affective polarization” has risen dramatically in the mass public. What is affective polarization and what are the theoretical underpinnings of this perspective? What are the explanations given for changes in this form of polarization? Assess the evidence about the origins, existence, and magnitude of affective polarization.

3. American representative democracy is based on delegations of authority. Voters delegate to elected representatives; elected officials delegate to bureaucratic agencies. This, in turn, raises concerns about accountability—the capacity of the “principals” to ensure their “agents” pursue policies consistent with their preferences. Discuss **two** different domains where delegation is central and highlight the positives and negatives associated with this delegation. With a focus on accountability, answer the following questions: Why is delegation of authority beneficial in the domains you identify? Why is it harmful? When do the benefits outweigh the costs? In short, develop an argument for why the accountability mechanisms you identify accomplish their goals (or not) with support from relevant literature.

4. Converse and his allies famously claimed that most Americans lack meaningful and coherent ideological beliefs. By what standard did that work define coherence? Is it a good one? Discuss the theoretical merits of the argument and relevant evidence in the contemporary context.

5. Over the past generation, a large body of work has explored how white voters are motivated by animus toward African Americans and how politicians have exploited this “racial resentment” by using coded or “implicit” appeals. Critics have argued that this scholarship is too focused on the black-white divide (neglecting, e.g., white-Latino relations); that its account of implicit appeals is incorrect; and, indeed, that the concept or measurement of racial resentment is itself flawed. On evidentiary and/or theoretical grounds, what are the best arguments for seeing racial resentment as a powerful influence on contemporary white political behavior. On the same grounds, what are the best arguments for questioning this conclusion? Which do you find most convincing? How does the election of Donald Trump influence your assessment?