

## AMERICAN POLITICS EXAM: AUGUST 2021

Answer **THREE** of the following, **ONE** from **EACH** section

### SECTION A

1. The charge that Congress has become “dysfunctional” lumps together several possible problems: 1) Congress is no longer effective in representing voter preferences; 2) Congress is no longer effective in legislating; 3) Congress is no longer effective in holding the other branches to account. Interrogate each of these elements in turn, and consider their relationship to one another. On balance, is the charge of dysfunction valid or not?
2. Joe Biden has described the Trump presidency as an “aberration.” Assess the Trump-as-aberration thesis with reference to three expectations drawn from the political science literature, (e.g., regarding presidential appointments, unilateral action, agenda setting, legislative accomplishment, party building, presidential rhetoric, etc.). Which, if any, of these three expectations did the Trump presidency confound and why? Which, if any, did it confirm and why? In what sense, if at all, has Biden’s performance thus far been a return to “normalcy”? Is there anything in the Biden-Trump comparison that would lead you to alter the criteria that political scientists use to evaluate presidents’ performance and impact?
3. A prominent scholar notes, “By delegating policy decisions to the bureaucracy, Congress creates a control problem for itself.” How so? Why does Congress create this problem for itself? What techniques does it have for addressing this problem?
4. “What makes the Supreme Court such an important institution are the effects of the opinions crafted and released by the justices. By creating expectations about future court behavior and sanctions for noncompliance, the Court’s opinions affect the behavior of private parties and political actors in all three branches of government.” Based on the relevant literature, evaluate this statement in two areas: the impact of the Supreme Court on the behavior of lower federal courts and the impact of the Court on the legislative and executive branches.

### SECTION B

1. There have been nearly 10,000 cites to Paul Pierson’s 2000 article on “path dependence.” Yet students of American politics use the concept in a variety of potentially incompatible ways. Drawing on existing scholarship, identify (1) a U.S. public policy or political institution that has evolved in a path-dependent way and (2) one that has not. How do we know the difference? Based on your answer, how useful do you find the concept for understanding key features of American politics?
2. The paradox of “democratic exclusion” posits an inverse relationship between political inclusiveness and effective government: democratic governments rely on a baseline of consensus among those contesting power, and it is often easier to find agreement on rules of engagement when substantial segments of the population are politically marginalized. To what extent does American political development conform to this thesis and why? Where does it depart? Do you see evidence of this paradox at work in American politics today? Where and in what way(s)? What are the implications of this paradox for American government going forward?

3. While most political observers believe that interest groups have significant influence on policy outcomes, the evidence connecting interest group activity to policy outcomes has been difficult to uncover and met with skepticism. What are the theoretical and empirical barriers to identifying the influence of interest groups on policy? Based on your answer and the evidence, do interest groups have significant influence on policy outcomes?
4. The claim that racism is “systemic” or “structural” looks beyond the prejudices of individuals to the effects of institutions and institutional arrangements. How would you go about disentangling institutional biases from incumbent preferences? Do institutions in the contemporary United States bias action apart from the individuals who occupy them? How so? Examine three institutions/arrangements in answering these questions. Based on your answers, what are the prospects for rooting out structural racism in the United States?

## SECTION C

1. The American polity stands out for its persistent two-partyism. First, why have two parties dominated the system? Second, how does American politics look different today than it would if the United States had a multi-party system? In your answer, be sure to discuss how the incentives of the parties as well as voter divisions might be transformed. Ultimately, how would federal lawmaking be different if the electoral/party system alone were changed?
2. There is now abundant evidence that the two parties in Washington are much more distinct and antagonistic—in a word, more polarized. What are the best explanations of this trend among federal elected officials? Based on extant theory and evidence, how important are two oft-cited culprits: primary elections and campaign finance? Finally, do we need different explanations for Republicans and Democrats? Why or why not?
3. The Democratic party wants to know how best to avoid or mitigate losses in the mid-term elections of 2022, and it has hired you as a consultant to summarize the wisdom contained in the political science literature. What strategies would you suggest are likely to prove most effective and why? What strategies are likely to prove less effective and why? How successful do you expect your recommended strategies to be in bucking the pattern of mid-term losses for the president’s party?
4. An influential strand of research in American political behavior claims that group identity is the most important factor in explaining individuals’ issue opinions and vote choices in the contemporary era. This research argues against the idea that Americans’ political evaluations and voting decisions are grounded in “rational” factors such as policy positions or evaluations of economic performance. Instead, citizens form political judgments and make voting decisions largely on the basis of long-standing social identities. What do you think of this argument? Be sure to cite evidence as well as theory
5. The last 25 years have seen an explosion of research on the causal effects of voter turnout efforts (GOTV) and voter persuasion efforts in the United States. First, synthesize some of the major conclusions of this line of work. What sort of regularities are present in the literature? Then, critically reflect on what has been cumulatively learned due to this line of research, with particular emphasis on its theoretical implications for the study of American politics.