## American Politics August 2023 General Exam

Instructions: Please answer 3 questions, making sure to answer at least one question each from Part 1 and Part 2. **Please read the questions carefully and make sure you answer all the parts of the questions you choose.**

**THIS EXAM IS OPEN BOOK AND OPEN NOTE. YOU ARE FREE TO CONSULT ORIGINAL SOURCE MATERIAL, BUT NOT TO CONSULT ANOTHER LIVE PERSON OR TO USE AI/CHAT GPT/ETC.**

**Part 1:**

1. 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.

Bring evidence and theory to bear in refereeing this dispute. First, which analysis is correct (or closest to correct), and why?  Second, what does your answer to the first question mean for our understanding of contemporary U.S. policymaking and governance?

2. When Congress writes laws and the president signs them, they often delegate substantial policymaking authority to the bureaucracy. First, drawing on theory and with reference to relevant empirical evidence, why does Congress delegate? Second, when authority is delegated, how does policymaking take place? What dictates whose preferences are best achieved in the resulting policies? Who then has the most control over policy, Congress or the president, and why? Third, what implications does Congress granting such authority to the Executive branch have for separation of powers?  Lastly, would policy outcomes be improved if Congress could not delegate? (Hint: Make sure you clarify the feasible counterfactual.)

3. Over sixty years ago, members of the American Political Science Association wrote a report calling for American political parties to follow their European exemplars and adopt clear and divergent political platforms. Fast forward to today, and the parties are divided, with each offering clear and distinct platforms. Contemporary political scientists now often bemoan polarization. What did the reformers of the 1950s get wrong? What elements of party conflict are good and what elements are problematic? What is the alternative to staunch partisan division? How, if at all, is the equilibrium observed today in American Politics different from the nature of political conflict in Europe that motivated a desire for "European-style" political parties?

4. In these polarized times, it is often forgotten that progressivism did not begin as the ideology of a particular party. The premise was that if a programmatic government with a powerful administrative arm was to be sustained, it had to be built on ideological ground that spanned both parties. To what extent has that original premise been borne out? At what point in the development of post-1900s programmatic government did that condition give way, and why? How is the administrative state changed when progressivism is associated with one party and fiercely opposed by the other?

5. Estimates of the ideology of members of Congress (MC) by Poole and Rosenthal – NOMINATE or DW-NOMINATE scores – are standard and widely-used measures in political science. Discuss in detail two specific shortcomings of this class of models *as a measure of preferences* and propose a data collection or analysis method to overcome at least one of these shortcomings. Cite specific empirical and theoretical work as necessary, and make sure to give credit to the NOMINATE approach where credit is due.

6. A central feature of the American political economy is its multi-venue, multi-level character, with long-term "repeat players" able to shift their strategic focus and political investments from one political institution to another, e.g., from the national government to the states, from legislative institutions to the courts, or from congressional lawmaking to executive rulemaking. In general, scholars of the American political economy argue that this dynamic increases the power of organized economic interests, such as business, trade, and professional groups and labor unions, relative to voters. First, identify an important example of such venue-shopping behavior by one or more organized economic interests. ("Important" in this case means consequential for the life chances of citizens.) Second, assess its substantive impact—i.e., how important is it? Finally, with regard to your chosen example, lay out some basic evidence that speaks to the relative influence of the relevant organized interest (or interests), on the one hand, and voters, on the other hand. In other words, in your chosen case, how do we assess the relative role of organized interests and voters in shaping policy?

**Part 2:**


1. When policies persist despite opposition to them, two prominent explanations in American politics research are (a) claims of path dependence and (b) claims that policy making is a non-majoritarian practice where certain actors can protect unpopular policies through their control of the agenda or their veto power. What are the microfoundations of each explanation? How could you test the efficacy of each model and/or distinguish between the two? (Is there a particular area where changes, or lack therefore, in policy demonstrate that one explanation is superior to the other?) In making your argument, be sure to address the likely arguments of the other side.


2. Numerous media outlets have reported on the diversity—with respect to race, gender, and professional background—of Biden's nominees to the federal district courts and the Courts of Appeals. Why, if at all, should we expect increases in identity-based diversity among federal judges to affect court outcomes? If so, for what types of cases, and should we expect the effects to be different in district courts versus appeals courts? Your answer should engage with classic theories and models of judicial decision making as well as with more recent empirical research on judicial decision making. Given that a Democratic president is making these efforts to enhance diversity, what are the key threats to inference in isolating the effects of this diversity?


3. In describing mass political attitudes, political scientists sometimes use the term "ideology." With specific reference to existing research, what does "ideology" mean and how is it distinct from partisanship? Does ideology matter for which candidate a voter supports in a general elections? Why should we expect that it does (again with specific evidence from scholarship)? Assuming you had ample resources, how would you design an observational or experimental study to test the role of ideology in elections and what alternative explanations would you try to rule out, and how?


4. Analysts regularly rely on public opinion survey data to characterize the opinions of the American electorate as a whole and among key subgroups (for example, the rich and the poor, different racial subgroups, and those who do and do not vote). Of late, it has become fashionable to compare these expressed opinions to realized policy. Suppose that the attitudes expressed by the electorate as a whole or a key subgroup does not comport with realized policy. What does this tell us? What are the threats to inference in concluding there is a failure of representation?

5. An article you are asked to review presents a statistical model in which the dependent variable is the share of the vote received by incumbent members of the House running for reelection. Here is the regression Table:

| | Incumbent Vote Share in District (0 to 1) | |
|---|---|---|
| | (A) | (B) |
| Incumbent Vote Share in Previous Election (0 to 1) | .272 [.129] | .282 [.135] |
| Partisanship of District (-1 to 1, Positive values indicate voters are aligned with incumbent's party) | .155 [.082] | .198 [.096] |
| Incumbent's Campaign Spending ($/1,000) | .005 [.010] | |
| Challenger's Campaign Spending ($/1,000) | -.036 [.021] | |
| Trips to District by Incumbent (Number) | -.020 [.005] | -.019 [.004] |
| Distance from Washington, DC, to District (Miles) | -.00007 [.00039] | -.00008 [.00041] |
| Bills Co-sponsored by Incumbent (Number) | -.004 [.001] | -.003 [.001] |
| OLS Coefficients with Huber/White robust standard errors in brackets. N=1012. Data are for all incumbents running for reelection in midterm elections between 1990 and 2022. Separate year-effects and constant not reported to save space. | | |

The author is interested in testing the argument that members of Congress will do better in their quest to retain office if they devote greater attention to popular efforts that are visible to their constituents, including making frequent visits to their district and cosponsoring legislation. On the basis of the above regression, however, the author concludes:

> There is no evidence that incumbent members of Congress can improve their electoral fortunes by taking time to return to their district or by cosponsoring many bills. In fact, contrary to the conventional wisdom, we demonstrate that both sorts of activities decrease the vote share of incumbents. We believe this is because voters wisely recognize that visits home and cosponsorship, while visible, are not accurate indicators of efficacious legislative behavior. Members would be better served working diligently in committee on behalf of their district if they wished to convince voters of their true merit.

Part I:

Answer these questions about the regression output displayed in the table:

1)    According to the regression output reported in column (A) of the table, holding all variables constant, how does a .10 change in Incumbent Vote Share in the Previous Election affect the predicted Incumbent Vote Share in District?

2)	Is the coefficient estimate for Incumbent Vote Share in the Previous Election statistically significant? How can you tell?

3)	What does statistical significance mean? is it just a technical way to say that a variable is "important"?


Part II:

Assess this article. Make sure to address these three questions:

1)	How well does the author characterize conventional wisdom?

2)	How well does the author's recommendation for alternative legislator behavior comport with the state of knowledge?

3)	How appropriate/convincing is the data analysis, and why?