American Politics August 2024 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. Achen and Bartels (2016) claim that "candidate choices determine [voter's] issue positions, not vice versa." This leads many scholars to conclude that issues don't matter in explaining the political behavior of American voters, instead emphasizing the role of party loyalty or group identity. First, explain why this debate is important. Next, provide 2-3 pieces of the strongest evidence on each side of this debate. Finally, where do you come down on the question of whether issues matter to American voters? Why?

2. We asked CHAT GPT where partisan identification comes from. It gave us this answer: "People develop their partisanship through a combination of personal, social, and psychological factors. Here are some key influences: (1) Family Influence, (2) Social Environment, (3) Education, (4) Media Consumption, (5) Personal Experiences, (6) Demographic Factors, (7) Psychological Factors, (8) Political Socialization." Is this a good answer? Why or why not? Make sure that your answer deals directly with the question of the methods and evidence proffered by those who advocate for these and potentially competing perspectives.

3. Converse introduced the concept of ideological constraint in his work in the 1960s and 1970s about voter sophistication. What is constraint? Is it a good standard for voter sophistication? How robust is evidence that voters are ideologically unconstrained?

4. Suppose Donald Trump wins the 2024 election but Democrats retain the Senate and Republicans retain control of the House, with seat margins about the same as before. What will change in lawmaking? What will change in visible politics? In answering this question, make sure you draw attention to the work of Krehbiel and others about theories of lawmaking. What, if anything, is missing in those perspectives?

5. Congressional committees were once widely thought to be powerful. Why, and what does this mean? (What are the theoretical models of committee power.) What does the empirical evidence say about committee power? Why might it have changed over time.

6. It is commonplace in political science analyses of voting and other choices to include measure of respondent demographics to explain these outcomes. For example, one might include measures of a person's race, gender, or age. What is the theoretical basis for doing so? What do these measures tell us and how do they contribute to our understanding of models of human choice? Is their value or downside in a demographic or identity-oriented approach to understanding politics?

Part 2:

1. Bawn (1995) notes that "By delegating policy decisions to the bureaucracy, Congress creates a control problem for itself." Why does Congress create this problem for itself, and what techniques does it have for addressing this problem?

2. This question focuses on electoral accountability.

a. Begin by describing why the principal-agent perspective (or contract theory more precisely) is well suited to study electoral accountability. Your answer may highlight important contributions but please go further than just summarizing what has been done. Highlight one or two limitations of this perspective and evaluate how consequential these limitations are (either theoretically or empirically).

b. Describe the tension between simultaneously limiting the problems of moral hazard and adverse selection in the context of electoral accountability. You should provide some citations for key contributions to this question but provide a coherent description of the problem in your own words.

c. A natural concern is that if voters are sufficiently disengaged then they cannot exercise any oversight and therefore, elected officials are not likely to be constrained by accountability concerns. Trace out possible connections between institutions work on accountability and behavioral work on voter engagement to assess this concern. Feel free to mention work that closely connects these issues or speculate on open questions and possibly productive approaches to study these questions

3. One strand of literature on American Politics argues that American political institutions are disproportionately responsive to the affluent (with "affluence" variously defined). What evidence is used to support this claim and how persuasive is it? What is the counterfactual? Pick two prominent approaches and (1) describe the method and evidence presented and (2) discuss the quality/biases of the data for assessing responsiveness. In your answer, be sure to define "responsiveness."

4. The Speaker of the House is elected by majority rule by House members. Discuss what type of legislator – in terms of party discipline, ideology, etc. -- is likely to be elected Speaker, and stay Speaker, in the modern era. Your response should be organized around predictions from established literature (e.g. party government, conditional party government, spatial voting, pluralism, gridlock, etc..), with a discussion of whether and why they explain actual cases of Speaker tenures well. It should also be informed by, and explain, the institutional powers of the Speaker.

5. Scrutinizing the "imperial presidency" thesis, political scientists point to a variety of constraints that continue to condition the action of incumbents. Among the most obvious are Congress, the courts, the permanent bureaucracy, public opinion, organized interest groups, and investigative journalists. Identify the three most important constraints (feel free to range beyond those listed) and defend your choices. Then, evaluate 1) the effectiveness of each; 2) how, if at all, their constraining effect has changed in recent years, 3) the strength of the case that the imperial presidency is a "myth."

6. Assessing the failure of his Progressive party in the 1912 campaign, Theodore Roosevelt opined that because all the presidential candidates in that race embraced a version of progressive reform, the party could not monopolize popular support for a more programmatic and directorial national government. The party was doomed by the national consensus behind its agenda. But is the converse true as well? What happens when support for a progressive agenda is consigned to a single party? How has the rise of a progressive party affected the political foundations of programmatic government in America?