

## AMERICAN POLITICS EXAM

SUMMER 2017

Answer THREE of the following questions. You must answer at least one question from each part.

### PART A:

1. In recent decades, presidents have become notably more aggressive in subordinating policy making in the executive branch to their own preferences. But during the 2016 presidential election, concern that Donald Trump was out of his depth on matters of policy was countered by assurances that today's incumbents are surrounded by executive institutions dedicated to providing the necessary expertise, objectivity, and guidance. Evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of those assurances with reference to the organization and operations of the White House, the EOP, and the executive branch at large. Have recent developments compromised the capacity of executive branch officials to instill knowledge, foresight, competence, and effectiveness in governmental policy? What resources do executive branch officials still have to ensure that those values are upheld? How is the performance of the executive branch to be evaluated, if not by conformity to the president's preferences?
2. Consider the recent history and likely future of the Senate filibuster. How have Senate norms of minority rights and supermajority action fared in recent years? What factors are working to erode them? What works to sustain them? Is the 60-vote Senate for ordinary legislation at risk? Why or why not? How would the elimination of supermajority rules and norms alter American government and politics?
3. The argument that, despite the reforms of the 1970s, party elites have managed to keep control over presidential nominations was seriously challenged, at least on the Republican side, during the 2016 presidential campaign. Consider the case for elite control, and weigh each of three possible responses: 1) Trump's nomination was an anomaly, and elite control is likely to remain the norm; 2) there are new dynamics at work in presidential nominations that are likely to change the rules of the game and the future prospects for elite control; 3) the argument for the persistence of elite control in the post-reform era was overstated from the start.
4. At a conference on political polarization, former Congressman Vin Weber stated: "It's not at all clear to me what [polarization] has done in terms of the governance of the country... [Polarization is] more evident in the rhetoric of candidates and officeholders than... in the policy outcomes were seeing out of the United States Congress." Assess Weber's statement, addressing the following two key questions: First, as a theoretical matter and assuming that polarization exists, what are its implications for lawmaking? Second, as an empirical matter, does political science corroborate the view that polarization is more evident in rhetoric than in policy outcomes?

## PART B

1. As a democracy, we want policy to reflect voter preferences. But always following the whim of the people can generate suboptimal policy. Consider the structure of American government. Which parts bring voters' preferences to bear on government most directly? Which wrongly distort, or quiet voters' preferences? Which usefully protect government from voters' oversight?  
Describe **one** institution that facilitates the influence of public preferences over government policy-making, and **one** institution that thwarts it. Be sure to discuss both the nature of political institutions, the nature of public preferences, and the interaction effects. You might consider evidence from either the state or federal level, and can discuss any of the many channels and impediments along the way: participation rates, voters and their competence, the organization of Congress, the separation of powers, and so on.
2. When scholars say that American political development is "racialized," they mean to suggest that race is not just one topic of interest among others, but that American politics in all of its various elements is continually reproducing, negotiating, and altering ideas about race and configurations of racism. Is race the one massive, inescapable fact of our political history and development to which all issues are more or less directly related, or is the case overstated? To address this question, identify TWO issues of pressing importance in American politics today that do NOT have an explicit racial component. Then 1) assess their relationship to the racialized pattern of American political development and 2) assess the importance of that relationship relative to other factors in explaining contemporary politics. Make sure your answer incorporates an overall evaluation of the importance of race compared to other historical and contemporary factors in understanding American politics.
3. In 1964, Philip Converse argued that Americans do not have constrained belief systems. Most Americans have policy preferences that are logically inconsistent—or they don't really have policy preferences at all. Evaluate this claim. First, specify Converse's claim. What is a "belief system"? What is "constraint"? Second, describe his empirical work. How does Converse evaluate Americans' political ideologies? What conclusion(s) does he reach? Third, evaluate how his work has been received. Since publication in 1964, what has political science come to say about this work? Do scholars still agree that Americans do not have constrained belief systems, or has this claim been called into question?
4. It is well established that partisanship is associated with vote choice and policy opinions. However, some scholars argue that Republicans and Democrats see the world completely differently, that one's partisanship acts as a "perceptual screen" that filters out news, opinions, and even fact that run counter to one's partisan beliefs. This is a self-reinforcing, leading partisans to operate in separate bubbles, each with its own set of facts and news sources. Evaluate the evidence for these claims. Explain what is at stake.