

American Politics Field Exam – Spring 2021

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Instructions

Answer three questions total, including at least one from each section.

Section 1 – Institutions

1. Scholars in a variety of different disciplines disagree about the definition and nature of presidential power. Citing the relevant literature explain why it is difficult to define terminology related to presidential power and its implications for American government.
2. Rational choice theories have been employed in the presidential, congressional and courts literature, as well as the separation of powers literature. Identify and explain the strengths and weaknesses of the theory.
3. Much attention has been given the importance of ideology and policy preferences in the study of judicial behavior. Others have argued that legalistic and strategic factors play a crucial role. Which set of factors is the most important and why? Be sure to cite examples from the literature. Finally, what new approaches to understanding judicial behavior would we be wise to pursue? Why?

Section 2 – Parties and Behavior

1. “American democracy is in crisis. Polarization has become so stark that Americans care more about doing whatever it takes to defeat the other party than they do about democracy.” Evaluate this statement by consulting the literatures on partisan polarization, democratic values, and tolerance.
2. Donald Trump made attacking the media a hallmark of his presidency, and he expressed concern that “bias” in the mainstream media meant that he would not be evaluated fairly by voters. Review the literatures on media bias and media effects in order to evaluate Trump’s claims. How have scholars conceptualized and measured media bias, and to what extent have they found evidence of it? Additionally, to what degree is the media influential in shaping public opinion? What is the “minimal effects hypothesis” and what is the current state of the literature with respect to it?
3. Party identification and ideological identification have become increasingly intertwined. Four or five decades ago, there was barely a correlation between the two in the mass public. What were the dynamics of this change within the mass public? Did elites play a role? If so, what was that? When answering, be sure to discuss the role of the party organization, the party in government as well as the party in the electorate.