

## Political Behavior Field Exam, Fall 2020

*Instructions:* Answer one question from each section, for a total of 3 questions.

### Section I: Pick one

1. Evaluate the ability of the rational choice perspective to explain and predict the way citizens, in particular, but also, to some extent, political elites, make political decisions and form judgments. First evaluate some of the core assumptions found in rational choice theories (e.g., Riker) and critiqued by their detractors in psychology and behavioral economics (e.g., Thaler). Then evaluate how well rational choice theories explain or predict mass political participation, such as participation in elections (e.g., turnout) and political protest. To what extent can theories and concepts in (political) psychology help to explain behaviors that seem inexplicable according to rational choice theories? Conclude with an overall assessment of the utility of rational choice theories for understanding the political behavior of masses and elites.
2. What do we know about the role of race and racialized attitudes in American politics (or outside the US) today, based on the literature studying race, racial prejudice and related concepts in political science? Evaluate the major concepts, measures (discuss at least 3 of the following--racial resentment, stereotypes, implicit attitudes, emotions and racial identities) and evidence for assessing and understanding whites' and blacks' racial attitudes and their political views. What about racialized appeals - are they still effective (see Mendelberg 2001, Hutchings et al. 2020)? Finally, based on the state of the literature, what measures, concepts and methods do you think would best advance our understanding of the role of race and racial attitudes in the US (or the world) today?

### Section II: Pick One

3. The media (or information) environment in the US has experienced a series of dramatic changes, from the monopolistic broadcast news era to the high-choice media environment of cable, partisan and online news to the recent rise of social media. Focusing on partisan news and social media, how do these developments present challenges for the United States and other democracies? What are the implications of these changes when it comes to public opinion, political knowledge and polarization? How well do insights from the canonical literature on various *media effects* apply to our modern media environment?
4. In the last twenty years, political scientists have been relying increasingly on experimental studies of all kinds—lab experiments, field experiments and survey experiments. Evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of experimental research, using examples from research on *media effects* (e.g., framing, priming, persuasion, etc.). In what ways have experiments advanced knowledge in political behavior in general and media effects in particular? What are some of the limitations of experiments that require the continued use of observational data?

**(See next page for Section III)**

### Section III: Pick one

5. Recently, President Trump suggested that he may not accept the results of this year's presidential election, causing some observers to express concern about undercutting support for a critical democratic norm. This is only one of many examples of the President's chipping away at democratic norms or principles, such as political tolerance, free and fair elections and the rule of law. What importance do citizens place on "principles"—e.g., democratic norms, values and principles versus "politics"—e.g., political identities (e.g., partisanship), politics and policies? Do voters tend to care more about "principles" or "politics"? And what are the implications of popular support for democratic norms when it comes to the health of democracy? As you answer, you should consider relevant research from both the American and comparative context (you may choose to focus on a specific country or set of countries from outside the U.S.).
6. Where do we stand today on assessing the political competence of average citizens? Some scholars seem almost nihilistic in their pessimistic judgment of the competence of the American voter, emphasizing evidence that many people are politically uninformed or misinformed, "innocent of ideology," seldom vote on the basis of issues, and, if they are political sophisticated, often blindly follow party leaders and resist any new information and arguments that conflict with their prior views. Evaluate the evidence as well as the standards that have been used to assess the competence of average citizens and reach your own informed judgment on this issue.