

USPIP United States Politics, Institutions, and Policy
Fall 2011

Directions: You must choose three of these sections and write on one question from each. You are expected to support your arguments with adequate citations to appropriate literature, but you are reminded to respond to the questions that are asked. Please be aware that your exam is evaluated both on the quality of the individual answers as well as on its overall quality. Use of the same material to answer several different questions is one sign of weakness in that regard and it may result in a failure in the overall evaluation even though each individual question is considered to be satisfactory. Please limit your answers to approximately 2500 words per question, not including bibliography.

I. General

1. Researchers in all fields of American politics are increasingly likely to employ experimental methods. Consider a specific subfield of American politics and consider the contributions made in this subfield by experimental research. What are the advantages and disadvantages of experimental research designs?

2. Many keen observers of American politics believe the political system is now characterized by “unhealthy” partisan polarization of the political class, leading to the inability to deal with important political issues, undermining citizen support for government and eroding trust in the policy-making process. What are the leading explanations for this situation? If polarization is at the core of the problem, what ought to be done?

II. National Institutions.

1. The Senate in the post-1990 era has become increasingly dysfunctional, to the point that it often stops the American Congress from addressing major issues in timely, serious ways. Moreover, it is essentially undemocratic. Although the latter condition cannot be addressed, the rules (written and informal) of the Senate can. Using the political science literature on the Congress and the Senate’s role in the legislative process, address the nature of Senate delay. What purpose does it serve? How does it affect decision-making? Should the filibuster rules be modified? Why or why not, and if so, how?

2. Neustadt argued that the power of the president was derived from his power to persuade. More recent scholarship has argued that presidential power is derived from formal powers granted by the Constitution. Evaluate these two literatures and assess the source of presidential power.

3. Who controls the bureaucracy? Congress, the president, and the bureaucracy itself have all been cited as institutions that control the actions of the federal bureaucracy. Which of these groups is most effective in controlling the bureaucracy?

4. It can easily be argued that designers of the American Constitution intended for the legislative branch to be the most powerful institution in our system. However, it is also clear that the relative power of Congress has ebbed and flowed over time. Making use of recent scholarship, how would you characterize the current balance of power between the President and Congress?

III. Political Behavior and Elections

1. Identify and discuss three media effects on public opinion. Outline the relevant theories and the most prominent empirical findings. What do these findings suggest about the role of mass media in our democratic system?

2. Voting is an individual act but nevertheless influenced by larger political and social factors. Choose three such factors and discuss associated theories and empirical evidence that describe and document relevance to the behavior of voting.

3. Declining Turnout in American national elections over the past 50 years has been given a good deal of attention in recent years. What do we know about the causes and consequences of this decline? Cite relevant literature. What are your predictions for voter turnout in the 2012 presidential election?

IV. Political Parties and Organized Interests

1. What are the major roles for interest groups in the highly polarized manifestation of American politics of recent years? Do groups reinforce the party divisions, or do they diminish them? Do groups help cut through the knots within the policy-making process or do they make things worse? Why?

2. It has been argued by some that while we have far more interest-groups representation than we had four decades ago, this has not translated into a fairer and less biased system of influence in both the electoral and policy processes. Do you agree or disagree with such an assessment? Why or Why not? Explain your position using the literature in political science.

3. What role do political parties play in contemporary American elections and in policy making, and how and why has it come about? Is their contemporary role more or less important than the one played in the past (say before the 1950s)? If you could “reform” the contemporary party system, what changes would you make and why?

V. Subnational

1. Intergovernmental relations in the U.S. federal system always exhibit elements of conflict as well as elements of cooperation. But at some periods, the ratio of conflict to cooperation seems to be higher than at other periods. Offer at least three explanations to account for the changing balance of conflict and cooperation in the U.S. federal system, drawing upon both literature suggesting these explanations and literature providing evidence that either supports or refutes each.

2. The literature regarding state and local government attempts to 'race to the bottom' in a variety of policy areas appears to draw conflicting conclusions. Summarize this research and make an argument as to which side provides the strongest evidence.