

MA Comprehensive Exam Spring 2010 American Politics Review Questions/Issues

1. Be able to discuss the various factors which have lead to the surprisingly low level of turnover in the U.S. Congress. What factors have contributed to the growing levels of incumbency? How might we make the congressional election process more responsive or rather how can we promote competition?
2. Is America a divided or rather a polarized nation? A review of the media and political pundits clearly would suggest we are a divided nation. Moreover, over 90% of the votes in Congress have been party line votes over the last few years. Why is America divided and if we are not divided, why do we appear to be so divided?
3. Be able to discuss the institution of the Presidency and the strengths and weaknesses of this institution? Can a President be successful or is he doomed to fail as a result of the structure of our system of checks and balances? When are Presidents most likely to succeed and what tools can they employ to improve their chances of success?
4. Given the vast research on political behavioral topics such as “the mass public” and belief systems, public opinion, civic engagement, and voting and elections, evaluate the representative nature of politicians and political institutions. [I don't see how this question is really different than #4.]
5. Discuss how interaction among actors and institutions in American Politics affects political outcomes.
6. What are the goals of the bureaucracy, and how do they operate? How are they different from private firms?
7. Why do we have political parties? What role do they serve for politicians and the American public?
8. What are some areas of advancement, avoidance, and confusion when it comes to interest group scholarship? What are the strengths and weaknesses of the literature?
9. What are some of the major changes that we have seen in a) presidential and b) congressional campaigns in the past 50 years? Consider the roles of interest groups, political parties, and the media in your answer.
10. Be able to discuss the process of electing a U.S. President? Understand the biases of our primary system and the impact it has on which candidate each party ultimately selects as a nominee. Furthermore, be able to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the Electoral College and the influence it has on our presidential election process.

11. Where and how are partisan and ideological belief systems learned? Is partisanship stable? What is macropartisanship?
12. Who participates in the political process? What characteristics do these individuals have? Be able to compare and contrast civic volunteerism, rational choice, and SES models.
13. What are some of the key debates in the political behavior literature pertaining to participation (eg. Proximity vs direction models, Sophisticated versus non-sophisticated voters; debates over personal versus national economic impacts; how voters and candidates position themselves, etc.). Be able to evaluate the arguments made by relevant scholars.
14. What theories help us to explain how the American public processes political information? In writing your answer, be sure to discuss concepts such as Converse's (1964) "ideological constraint," heuristics (e.g., Lau & Redlawsk, 2001), the online model of impression formation (Lodge, Steenbergen, & Brau, 1995), the automaticity of affect (Burdein, Lodge, & Taber, 2006), and motivated reasoning (e.g., Taber & Lodge, 2006).
15. How does affect play into political decision making? Given recent developments within this field, do you think it leads to more or less "rational" decisions, and why (It may be useful to frame your argument around the conventional view of rationality.)?
16. How does the economy affect presidential voting? Which factor matters more in determining the vote: "Retrospective" or "prospective" evaluations? "Pocketbook" or "sociotropic" evaluations?