

**Ph.D. Comprehensive
Examination *AMERICAN
POLITICS*
August 2020**

Part I

1. Political scientists increasingly use quasi-experimental methods to detect causal patterns in American politics. Discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the causal inference movement for detecting and explaining outcomes in American politics. On balance, how helpful do you think this methodological approach has been for advancing our theoretical and substantive understanding of American politics?
2. Formal and game theoretic contributions in American politics are sometimes not well integrated with “non-formal” theoretical work, whereas there are some areas of American politics where there is sufficiently high integration between formal and non-formal work. Critically evaluate examples where you see a lack of such integration and where you see a good degree of integration. What are the consequences of each for our ability to explain patterns in American politics?
3. The notion of “polarization” is widespread in scholarly treatments of American politics. What exactly is polarization, and how has it changed over the past half century amongst both the mass public and elites? To the degree that there have been changes in polarization, what are the consequences for elections, policymaking, and representation?
4. Scholars of American politics often see themselves as students of either political institutions or behavior. In what core ways do these research traditions differ? What do they have in common? Do you think it is healthy or harmful for the subfield to divide ourselves along this line? Explain why.

Part II

1. According to Dilliplane, Goldman, and Mutz (2013, 236), “To study many contemporary political phenomena, researchers need reliable and valid measures of the extent to which people have been exposed to political content in mass media, yet measures of this kind have proven elusive.” Discuss the challenges of measuring media exposure and the various ways scholars have attempted to deal with this problem.
2. Discuss the influence of race and gender in U.S. elections. Consider this both in terms of voters’ identities and candidates’ characteristics. Compare and contrast congressional and presidential elections.
3. “Ideology” is a core concept in the study of mass behavior, public opinion, and elections and voting. What is “ideology,” and how much and in what ways does it matter for decision making and outcomes? Frame your answer in terms of both classic and modern conceptions of these topics.
4. Imagine that Democrats win control of both the presidency and Congress in the 2020 elections, and there remains a conservative majority on the Supreme Court. What tools could Democrats bring to bear to influence future decisions by the Supreme Court? Discuss what we know about the likely effectiveness of each of these tools. Where should future research on the strategic influence of political branches on courts in American politics focus, and why?
5. Rational choice perspectives borrowed from economists pervade scholarship on legislative politics. Why have economic modes of thinking dominated research on legislative outcomes? In what ways does rational choice fall short, and what other approaches might legislative scholars fruitfully draw from and why?
6. The Obama and Trump administrations have relied extensively on unilateral executive action (e.g., regulations, executive orders) to shape public policy. Why have recent administrations tried to circumvent Congress and with what degree of success? What are the strategic considerations a president should consider when deciding whether to employ a unilateral approach for furthering their policy goals? Under what conditions, if any, can Congress and/or the courts rein in unilateral action by the president?
7. The figure below shows the relationship (by party) between congressional districts’ partisanship in presidential elections and the ideal points of members in the 107th (2001-02) and 115th (2017-18) Congresses. Discuss the implications of this graph for theories of political parties, representation, and electoral accountability. Also, discuss some of the major causes and consequences of any changes between the 107th and 115th Congresses.

