General Question

1. With partisan divisions in the electorate and in Congress at apparent historical highs, has America become ungovernable? Make use of the literature to support your argument.

2. What is republicanism (as a political philosophy that may or may not correspond to the principles of the Republic Party)? How have republican ideals been incorporated into American institutions and political culture. Drawing on the literature, discuss the relationship between republicanism and liberalism.

3. Much current debate on American politics deals with the impact of growing economic inequalities on American democracy. Clarify that debate to isolate some central themes and discuss the academic literature that most effectively addresses them.

4. Many scholars believe that it is impossible to understand American politics without understanding the role of race in American politics. In practice, what does this mean? That is, how does studying race inform the study of American politics? What, if anything, do we fail to understand about the United States if we fail to take race into account?

Institutions:

1. In 1974 David Mayhew wrote an extended essay – Congress: The Electoral Connection – that greatly affected congressional scholarship over the past forty years. Congress has changed mightily in these forty years, moving from an institution where parties were not especially relevant to one in which they
define almost all political action, or lack thereof. Your job is to assess how Mayhew’s perspective has fared over the past 40 years. Bringing in research on congressional elections, ideology, partisanship, and polarization, assess the explanatory power of Mayhew’s core arguments.

2. The literature suggests that presidents enter office with limited political capital and that this capital will disappear whether a president actually “spends” it for specific purposes or not. Capital can be refreshed to some extent by major events, including crisis. However, even such refreshed capital is of only limited usefulness in the president’s battles with Congress and the bureaucracy. After Bush and Obama should we rethink our theories of political capital?

3. By the 1960s, both the Congress and the Presidency had become “modern.” Their staffs and policy reaches had noticeably expanded since 1930. Since then, it seems these two “Rivals for Power” (to quote James Thurber’s book title) wrestle back and forth in a battle for primacy. Does the presidency have built-in advantages? What weapons does the Congress have? Has rising partisanship and polarization changed the nature of this relationship? Basing your response in the scholarly literature, outline, discuss, and critique the scholarly literature on this continuing struggle.

Behavior

1. Many scholars of American politics argue that over the last forty years partisan polarization at the elite level has sharply increased. At the same time a number of scholars argue that polarization of the electorate has not kept pace. Why are political elites polarizing but citizens not? What are the political linkages between elites and citizens that might lead one to expect that such polarization should equilibrate and what not? In fashioning your response, you should discuss the relevant existing explanations but you should also work to formulate your own answer.

2. In American democracy, the mass public should govern the choices of elites. But does mass opinion actually constrain the elites? Do elites instead shape the responses of the mass public? Write an answer that addresses the most important claims with respect to the balance between elite and mass politics. It should identify the various positions — and most convincing evidence — on each side of the argument. How would you go about adjudicating between or among these competing positions?

3. Political psychology literature has emphasized the role of heuristics and low-information rationality in understanding individual citizens’ political cognitive processes. What are the strengths and limitations of this literature? Has this literature changed our fundamental understanding and assumptions of the nature and quality of mass political decision-making? Why or why not?
4. How does the literature on gender and politics fit in with the campaign and election literature? Does the research on gender and politics build on this literature, or does it challenge the assumptions and conclusions of this literature? Identify any gaps in the gender and politics literature (with respect to elections and campaigns) and offer a direction for future research. Do you think it is necessary to parse research on elections and campaigns according to gender?

5. It seemed as though people hated government after Watergate, but now, well, it is much worse. Negative attitudes toward the political system, at least according to the nightly news, are much more prevalent. What does the academic research on this problem have to say? Does the evidence indicate a major shift in public attitudes toward the political system? How can we understand observed levels of alienation and distrust? What are the potential consequences of such shifts in attitudes?

Parties and Organized Interests

1. Although the interest group literature has changed little in the past few years, a new body of work is being constructed around the issue of coalition formation among interest groups. Explain the theories employed in this emerging literature and discuss whether this literature tells us anything new about interest group formation, maintenance, and role in the policy process. Be sure not to simply review the literature but to also take a clear position on this new body of research.

2. The study of lobbying has begun to become more sophisticated, especially as large data sets are created from post-1995 lobbyists’ reports. Still, the two core perspectives on lobbying remain those that emphasize an exchange relationship and those that emphasize the provision of information. Address where the study of lobbying is today and propose a study that would provide a substantial increase in our ability to understand this phenomenon.

3. In 1952, political scientists endorsed the idea of a responsible party system. That was forgotten for about 40 years or so, but we seem to have taken great strides in that direction during the past decade or two. And yet the volume of complaints about the parties is as loud, or louder, than ever. Do you think there is something fundamentally wrong with the parties or the party system? Do you have suggestions about what ought to be done to put the “mainsprings of American politics” into proper working condition? Bolster your answer with whatever evidence you can muster.
An eminent political scientist recently observed that “Parties dominate governmental process (Congressional and presidential politics) to an increasing degree, but they have become weaker and weaker in the electoral process.” Do you think that’s correct? Argue your case, citing appropriate evidence where possible.

Subnational

1. The U.S. includes a startling array of inter-local governing (or governance) institutions in metropolitan regions. Describe the most important types. How and why did we come to have such a variety? What do we know about the implications that these varied institutions have for inequality in metropolitan America?

2. What factors or circumstances shape the extent to which the relationship between the national government and the states is conflictual? A few scholars have attempted to lay out theoretical frameworks addressing this question, and there are ample empirical studies providing possible raw material for further theory building about this. So, in light of existing theoretical efforts and empirical work, what factors or circumstances are most influential in shaping the level of national-state conflict?

3. Discuss the theme that elected urban officials are highly constrained in their policymaking activities. What are the various constraints stressed by urban theorists? What are the conditions when these constraints are most strong and most weak? Have officials been effective at overcoming these constraints? If so, how and why? Provide examples and discuss the scholarly literature addressing this topic.

4. Since Madison we have thought of states as laboratories of democracy in which citizens can experiment with policies that best fit local needs and preferences. Localities can be viewed in much the same way. Is this really the way our system works? Make an argument based on empirical research evidence of innovative policy diffusion across subnational governments and from the bottom up (from subnational governments to the national government).