
Directions: You must respond to the general question; you must choose three of the remaining 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 limit your answers to approximately 2,500 words per question.

Section I. General – Choose one of the following:

1. In classic discussions of American government, federalism was understood as a key structural mechanism for protecting liberty. Describe the theoretical basis for this expectation. Has the federal structure had that effect, either now or in the past? Would you favor a conception that expands federal government authority over the states or conversely the states over the federal government?

2. From your point of view, what two political scientists have contributed most to our understanding of American politics? Describe their contributions and justify your choices by citing various literatures.

3. Describe the role of the concepts of policy networks and advocacy coalitions in changing theoretical and conceptual understandings of American politics. What aspects of American politics do these concepts help explain? What aspects do they distort or obscure?

Section II. Congress and Presidency

1. Since the early 1800s, the U.S. Congress has organized itself through political parties and committees. What difference does it make whether one or the other organizing frameworks dominate? Drawing on historical examples and congressional scholarship, discuss the implications of the strengthening party system of the 1980s and 1990s. Would committees necessarily benefit from a weakening of the party leadership?

2. The U.S. Senate, notes political scientist Barbara Sinclair and others, is simultaneously highly partisan and highly individualistic. Explain how this can be so. In the end, which is the stronger force? Why?

3. How is the relationship between the President and Congress influenced by divided party control over the separate branches? (be sure to address the most recent literature).

Section III. Political Behavior

1. Recent studies on campaigns and elections suggest that campaigns and elections do not matter. Specifically, critical variables such as Gross National Product, Disposable Income, and Presidential Popularity predict quite accurately the eventual winner of the contest a full year before Election Day. In this sense, the electoral outcome is a function of events and circumstances exogenous to the campaign. By extension, campaigns do not matter! Is this literature persuasive? Why or why not.

2. Some researchers suggest that voters have little meaningful information about the political world.
Other researchers argue that voters are reasonably informed and competent to make decisions. How well developed and coherent are the political belief systems of voters? Are voters capable of choosing candidates effectively? How do the demands on voters vary in the different models of voting used by scholars?

3. It seems as though public opinion research no longer touches the important questions anymore. In your view, what are the major research questions in opinion research? How successfully have they been addressed?

Section IV. Subnational

1. Allegedly, an important advantage of studying state and local government and politics in the U.S. is that it provides an opportunity for comparative analysis—i.e., different states (or different cities) having differing governing institutions, political contexts, policy outcomes, and so forth, and this diversity affords us an opportunity to learn about the consequences of variation in these things. Using either the literature on state politics and policy or the literature on urban politics and policy, write an essay that shows your assessment of whether and how research in the field has actually taken good advantage of this potential for comparative analysis. Are there substantial bodies of theoretical and empirical development that are based upon comparative state (or comparative urban) analysis? If so, what are they and why are they significant? Are there significant questions that could and should be addressed with a comparative state (or comparative urban) approach but so far have not? If so, what are they and why have they been overlooked?

2. Cities are thought of as places of “culture and civilization” yet our theories of urban politics have focused largely on the political economy. How have urbanists used the concept of culture as a complement to and as a challenge to prevailing theories of urban politics? How should urbanists bring culture into their understanding of city life in order to build more complete and accurate theories of urban politics.

3. Despite some recent attention to state legislatures, scholars underutilized these bodies as sources of data about institutions and processes. Choose some well-researched topic from the congressional literature and design a research proposal that would test for generalization(s) from Congress to state legislatures. What would be the theoretical expectations regarding the similarities or differences in functions of state legislatures and Congress? What would be the major benefits of this research design?

Section V. Parties and Interest Groups

1. A number of political party scholars believe that recent changes in campaign finance have altered the relationships among parties, groups, and candidate organizations in American elections, creating a situation where the era of candidate-centered politics may be in decline. Outline some of the changes that have affected the balance of influence among parties, groups, and candidate organizations since the campaign finance reforms of the early 1970s. What factors underlie such changes? All things considered, have such changes been healthy for American democracy?

2. Some political scientists describe the regular and periodic nature of electoral realignments. How do we know when a realignment has taken place? Are there different types of realignments? What is the role of issue evolution in electoral realignments? Make an argument concerning the usefulness of realignment as a meaningful concept. Are there alternative concepts with more promise in explaining longitudinal party changes?
3. What factors underlie the tremendous expansion of the number of organized political interests active in American politics in recent decades? Has such expansion helped move the nation toward the pluralist ideal? Is this expansion of organized representation positive for the growth of American democracy?

Section IV. Public Law.

1. To what extent, and in what ways, is the Supreme Court responsive to the will of the majority in the U.S. system? What factors have enhanced or restrained such responses? Would your answer be contingent on the time period under study – for example, how would an answer discussing the 1950s differ from an answer discussing the 1990s?

2. The Supreme Court decides disputes, according to some scholars, “in light of the facts of the case vis-à-vis the ideological attitude and values of the justices. Simply put, Rehnquist votes the way he does because he is extremely conservative; Marshall voted the way he did because he was extremely liberal.” That approach – the attitudinal model – increasingly has been challenged by scholars who favor alternative theoretical models. What are the alternatives, the criticisms they level against the dominant model, and the best defense of the attitudinal model? Share with us your evaluation of the model’s past and future contributions.

3. To what extent has there been a “litigation explosion”? And what are the most important influences on changes in litigation rates over time? All things considered, has the explosion of litigation been beneficial or detrimental to the political system?