

Columbia University Department of Political Science
Written Qualifying Examination in American Politics

August 2021

*Majors in American politics should answer **ONE** question from part I and **TWO** questions from part II (2 hours for each question, 6 hours total).*

*Minors in American politics should answer **ONE** question from part I and **ONE** question from part II (2 hours for each question, 4 hours total).*

PART I: The purpose of this section is to examine your capacity to apply political science theory to general questions in American politics. In doing so, you are expected to demonstrate broad knowledge of the American political system. However, your first priority should be to answer the specific question asked.

1. The election and presidency of Donald Trump is viewed by some as an anomaly and departure from the long-run path of American democracy. Others view Trump's dominance of the political dialogue and his political success as logical extensions of longer-term trends or cycles in U.S. politics. Drawing on relevant theoretical and empirical literatures, what has the election of Joseph Biden and ensuing politics revealed about the state of the American republic and democracy? What would you emphasize as the most important aspects or themes?
2. Political observers have argued about whether certain political systems have an advantage in responding to crises. What has the current pandemic revealed about the ways American politics and institutions affect the ability of the government to respond to major crises? Your answer should draw on both the behavioral and institutional literatures.
3. A common argument offered in support of American federalism is that it keeps government closer to the people. An assumption made by this defense is that state and local governments will adopt policies that reflect the preferences/needs of their constituents. Is this assumption reasonable? Why or why not? What does the empirical research tell us about responsiveness among subnational governments? Are some people better represented than others in municipal governments and state capitols?

PART II: The purpose of this section is to test your ability to apply political science theory and empirical knowledge to important questions about specific features of the American political system. Be sure to answer each part of the question.

1. Twenty years ago, typing “misinformation and fake news” into a Google Scholar search would scarcely have garnered any scholarly articles, especially in prominent journals. Nowadays, these topics attract a great deal of scholarly attention throughout the social sciences and especially in political science. What have we learned about American politics, both theoretically and empirically, from this burgeoning research literature?
2. To what extent are *history, context, and contingencies* of different sorts important to the empirical study of the *nature of public opinion and opinion change* and/or any of the *relationship between and among public opinion, the media, political leadership, and policymaking* in the United States. Focus on the substance of the relevant research, but comment as needed on any methodological considerations.
3. What does the bureaucracy do? How does the existing literature on American institutions answer this question, and what is missing?
4. In the unlikely event that the Supreme Court reversed its decision on gay marriage (*Obergefell v. Hodges*), what would happen? This situation is ripe for the studying the relationship between public opinion and policymaking. This could start with the study of the Court decision itself. More importantly, it could involve studies of policymaking at all levels and by different political institutions. Assuming you had ample resources, time, and a team of researchers, how would you study this over the years that follow? What research strategies could you take? Which ones would you give priority to? What methodological issues would you be attentive to?
5. Trump’s broad gains with Latinos was one of the most surprising outcomes of the 2020 election. Pro-Trump swings were observed in Cuban-American, Puerto Rican, and Mexican-American enclaves across the country. Possible explanations include the reduced salience of immigration, incumbency, backlash against the “defund the police” movement, and the rise of Spanish-language misinformation. Which of these explanations do you find the most compelling? Why?
6. Is polarization “symmetric” in the sense that it reflects equal and opposite movement by Democrats and Republicans? What is the evidence for asymmetric vs. symmetric polarization in American politics? Critique and analyze this evidence.
7. American Political Development (APD) is widely viewed as a distinct field of inquiry within political science. What are the features of APD that mark it as

unique among the various fields of inquiry in American Politics? What are the advantages and disadvantages to the APD approach? How might APD make progress in the future? Should APD become more integrated into the rest of the subfield of American Politics?

8. Can we understand Congress or the Supreme Court or intra-branch conflict (choose one) in terms of a single dimension or do we need a more complicated story? Your answer should include a discussion of institutions, strategic motives, agendas, and change over time.
9. Over the past 15 years, the study of local politics has witnessed a dramatic resurgence. Scholars in this subfield now routinely publish in the top-ranked political science journals, employ and help develop cutting-edge research tools, and have been hired in leading political science departments. Identify and describe 2-3 particularly noteworthy contributions made in the local politics literature during this period of resurgence. Explain why they represent advances over what was known or believed previously. Critically evaluate the extent to which each of these noteworthy contributions speaks to political science debates that transcend the local politics literature.
10. Political scientists who study US politics tend to divide on how responsive politicians are to the views of ordinary voters. Some seem to claim that politicians can act freely to take whatever policy stances they want and it will not affect how they are treated by voters. Others seem to see policies as a response to the will of the electorate. Can you sort this out?
11. The filibuster is back in the news again as Democrats under conditions of unified government, but with the narrowest of majorities in the Senate, seek to enact their agenda. The deployment of the so-called “nuclear option” to reduce the effectiveness of or even eliminate the filibuster has again become a central topic of debate among political practitioners and observers. Many point to the filibuster as a key driver of perceived dysfunction in a polarized polity. Drawing on theory and evidence from the relevant literatures, discuss how eliminating or severely curtailing the filibuster would change the course of American politics and policy. Are there reasons to believe that not much would change if the Senate eliminated supermajoritarian requirements for legislation?