

American Comp – Jan. 2007
Richard Ledet

Part One General – Each student must answer TWO of the Following. Make sure to indicate clearly which question you are answering.

1. As late as summer 2006, a majority of Americans believed that at the time the U.S. entered Iraq, Saddam Hussein was in possession of weapons of mass destruction. What do we know about the ability of political elites to affect the opinions and priorities of average citizens? Under what circumstances are elites more and less likely to be successful in altering public opinion? What are the consequences of elite influence on public opinion for democratic accountability?

2. The question central to empirical democratic theory, and underlying our more particular concerns in mass behavior, parties, interest groups, and elections more generally, is whether, and in what ways, the inputs to the democratic process have a tangible relationship to the outputs, where outputs are defined as either (a) policy outcomes (say, welfare spending), or (b) objective conditions (such as poverty rates or inequality). Discuss what we know about the possible relationships among the factors noted above. In light of that, what general conclusions would you draw for our theoretical interpretation of American politics?

3. The last number of years – say, since 2001 -- has witnessed major events in American history, many, indeed most of which have led to and/or required governmental action and, in turn, affected the American political system in myriad ways (think of 9/11, the “war on terror,” etc., etc.; you choose what you deem the most important events). Drawing on various leading theories of and significant research literature in the field of American politics, provide an assessment of what theory and research “tell us” or provide to us (or DON’T “tell us” or provide to us) in understanding how American governmental institutions or political processes addressed and/or were affected by those events.

(These events, and governmental institutions or political processes, are, of course, tremendously complicated and/or interrelated. Do your best, however, to sort out and provide an analytical stance or interpretation -- again, grounded in American politics research.)

4. In contemporary American politics, the ongoing struggle for power between Congress and the presidency has shifted toward the executive. How does the political science literature explain the current state of this power struggle? Be sure to consider, in addition to external events, the structure and history of the institutions themselves, as well as the role of other actors (e.g., parties, the courts, interest groups, voters, the mass media).

Mass Behavior Sub-Field - The student must answer ONE of the following. Be sure to indicate which question you are answering.

1. Voting is a central aspect of any democratic society. Trace the developments in the American politics literature about the process by which voters make the decision to participate, as well as their actual vote choice. How do the conclusions from this literature help us understand candidates' electoral behavior?

2. The effect of the media on public opinion has a long and rich intellectual tradition. Despite the fact that media bias is much discussed in the media, it has received little attention from academics. Drawing upon the literature on public opinion, political behavior, and the media (or markets), provide theoretical reasons for and against the existence or type of media bias. After laying out the reasoning for or against media, propose an empirical strategy for detecting the presence of media bias.