

Contemporary Issues and Politics

Focus Questions for Unit 2

Revised: 3/17/2024 – Up until a week before the test, this will be a draft document from the last time I taught this course. Since new readings become available and new course-related events happen each term, I will probably make some modest edits to the guide as the unit unfolds, and any items added or altered after the original guide was posted will be noted with bold formatting.

- What are the difference between "states," "nations," and "nation states"? Why and when did modern "states" develop? What specific transportation, communication, and weaponry applications led to the rapid rise of the modern state, and why did this form of social organization displace most other forms of human living? Why and how did Western states become the most important political actor in contemporary international politics?
- How and why did states come to be considered "sovereign" actors? What exactly is sovereignty, and how does this idea in how states interact with one another in the world today?
- What is "globalization," what has caused it, and what are its major dimensions (i.e., is this all just about economics)? How has globalization impacted the rate of democracy, the prevalence of war, and global poverty? Green's videos could be helpful, but Radelet's chapter will be especially so. Based on the short video clip by Hans Roslinger and updated data, what evidence is there that globalization is harming either developing countries or well-off states like America?
- What is the "liberal international order"? What role did the US play in building and maintaining the set of international organizations, norms, and rules that guide the way that powerful and weak states interact with one another? What benefits have that system delivered for the US and most other nations? Why is the system, including NATO (the main military alliance among the advanced industrial democracies) under attack from political forces in the US and elsewhere?
- What is the difference between "absolute" and "relative power" in the international system, and what are the main kinds of power exercised by the US and other states? Focussing on the 2008 (dated but excellent) and 2024 articles by Fareed Zakaria, what are the main sources of contemporary American power that makes us different from other historical empires, especially Britain's? Of the resources that Zakaria identifies as central to maintaining American power, which ones appear to be threatened by the current state of US politics and debt?
- How old is the argument that the US power is in decline? What evidence is there to indicate that some types of American power are declining while others are not? How likely is it that China, Russia, or perhaps Europe, will displace America as the dominant hegemon (and what's a hegemon)? What do Brooks and Hohlforth mean when they say that the international system now and going forward is "partially unipolar"?
- What factors distinguish democratic regimes from non-democratic ones? Why can't we just look at which countries hold elections, and which doesn't? What (and where) are some of the major types of non-democratic regimes in the world today?
- There are various ways that a person can think about good, effective government; based on data we looked at in class, how accurate is it to say the people who live in democracies are almost all wealthier and happier than those who do not? What benefits to citizens are democracies uniquely suited to deliver?
- Outside of force against their own citizens, how do authoritarians stay in power, and why do most of them hold regular elections? Thinking about the arguments you read in the textbook chapter by Magstadt on authoritarianism, are there any situations in which non-democratic governments may have some appeal to citizens? Why are nondemocratic regimes sometimes very popular, even more so than their democratic counterparts?
- What are the defining qualities (the "essence") of totalitarian regimes, and how are they different from both democracies and authoritarian regimes? (To answer this, either quickly review Magstadt's separate chapter on this topic, or review Setzler's PPT slide on the topic). How is day-to-day politics different under totalitarian, authoritarian, and democratic leaders? Why are electoral authoritarian regimes more common than totalitarian regimes?

- In what sense was post-revolutionary Iran initially a totalitarian state? How did authoritarianism become institutionalized in post-revolutionary Iran, and is there any evidence to suggest that it has developed in a way that leaves open any possibility for democracy in the future? Who (which institutions; don't worry about the names of specific leaders) holds power in Iran today, and what is the best way to describe its governmental structure? While one of your readings talks about modern Iran being a blend of theocracy and democracy, what specifics about "the Guardian Council" and "Supreme Leader" positions make it flat out wrong to refer to today's Iran as democratic even when it holds elections with competing candidates and counts all of the ballots fairly?
- Thinking about the documentary you watched, "Our Man in Tehran," how does the Iranian government stay in power and control its people? Thinking of the same film, what do we get wrong when we assume that everyone in dictatorships is unhappy, feels constantly constrained by the state, and would replace their government immediately if they could?
- Why do countries want nuclear weapons, and how well is the intl community doing in trying to reduce their role in international politics? What obligations does Iran hold as a signatory of the nuclear non-proliferation treaty (the NPT)? What obligations does the US and other nuclear power have under that same treaty? What evidence, if any, suggests that neither of Iran nor the US always honored its treaty commitments? Why does only one side face sanctions?
- How many nuclear weapons have the US and other legally recognized nuclear powers developed over the last several decades? How many are "deployed" (that is, placed on a missile and fully prepared to be fired) vs. stored in reserve (which is to say, the warhead is not mounted on a missile and lacks an immediate triggering mechanism)? How many do we have today? Are we getting rid of them as required by the NPT? How many does Iran have, and where is it in the weapons development process? What other countries that aren't supposed to develop nuclear weapons have tried to so? Has any country ever given its nuclear weapons up? How and why are all of the recognized nuclear powers upgrading their arsenals now?
- Thinking about the nature of the Iranian political regime, Iran's specific leadership, and the balance of power in the Middle-East, are there any *unique* concerns with Iran developing nuclear weapons that also don't apply to the many countries that already have them, including the US, Russia, China, Pakistan, and Israel? What would be the most likely consequences of Iran acquiring nuclear weapons?
- What are the key elements of the 2015 Iranian nuclear deal? What countries signed the deal? Why did the US walk away? How do states with nuclear weapons act relative to other states? Why does Kenneth Waltz—a major political science analyst—think that the US and Europe should not stand in Iran's way if it wants to develop nuclear weapons?
- If you wanted to predict whether a given leader is likely to be able to dramatically improve or harm their society, what variables are going to be most useful in your analysis (See especially Mukunda's table 1.1)? Looking at the track-record of American presidents, how important is previous experience in government or the popularity of a president in determining who will be a highly successful leader? (For the question of how much experience matters specifically with US presidents, make sure to look at the data in the short article by Julia Azari).
- Why do most US presidential candidates campaign in a way that suggests that they will be transformational leaders? Why do most presidents turn out to be "just" "transactional," and why do some political scientists—Joseph Nye being one of them—see transactional presidents as sometimes more helpful to American society than "transformational" ones? What types of American presidents are mostly likely to be transformational, or at least to try to be? Under what circumstances are American presidents most likely to be transformational?
- Thinking about how historians and the public remember presidents after their service, how good of a measure is "presidential approval" (or disapproval) for assessing the effectiveness of presidents? How does the public's assessment of President Biden's time in office so far compare to patterns for other recent presidents (Reagan and forward)? Why over recent presidencies have we seen approval rating hovering around 50 percent no matter who the president was or how the economy was going? Where will Biden, Trump, and Obama (It is early for sure, but make an informed guess thinking about the criteria that historians use) likely to end up in the overall ranking of presidents and why?

- What are some of the institutional and other obstacles that make it impossible for pretty much any normal president to carry through on most of their campaign promises? When is deep political change—like that promised by most presidential candidates—most likely to be achieved in the American political system? What are some of the specific promises Presidents Obama, Trump, and Biden made as candidates? What specific challenges have they run into in implementing those policies, including the ones on which they centered their campaigns?
- What obstacles did President Trump run into even though many pundits thought he would overcome challenges to implementing his campaign promises due to party-unified governance for during his first two years in office? To what extent did Biden face similar challenge? Why was Biden modestly more successful in pushing through major policy initiatives? How did the 2018 election transform the ability of President Trump to be effective in office, even if nothing else about him changed? President Biden has faced issues after his first mid-term elections, so how has use of power needed to be different in the last two years of his administration to get anything done?
- Drawing evidence from the Frontline Documentary, *The Choice 2020*, in what ways do Donald Trump and Joe Biden differ when we look at their upbringing, relevant professional experience, motivations for seeking the presidency, capacity to persuade and motivate those around them, temperament, decision-making style, and personality type? What relevance do these qualities have on how their presidencies will be remembered? What were the central policy priorities of each man that might cause someone to want them to be our president? Do either of them have specific character flaws that in your view should be disqualifying? Is there any way to think about these leaders' limitations in a different way that might change your mind (keeping in mind that whatever candidate you supported, >100 million Americans thought differently from you)?
- What are some of key personal and psychological attributes that make some presidents more successful than others? What are some of the traits and personality types and that social scientists point to as most hampering and helping presidents to lead well? What do political psychologists see as President Trump's main psychological traits, and to what extent did the predictions about his behavior that were made before he took office turn out to be accurate? So far, how well have trait analyses of Biden predicted his behavior, strengths, and limitations in office?
- Under what circumstances is widening economic inequality not necessarily bad for the poor? What are some of the economic and moral arguments that conservatives cite about the plusses of having quite a lot of inequality (i.e., limiting access to social benefits and keeping tax rates for the well off at rates that are much lower than what is typical in the advanced democracies)?
- What evidence is there to suggest that inequality is more extreme in the US than it was several decades ago (how is this measured typically?). Roughly, how much is the distribution of income among the top 1%, the middle class, and the poor changed by our tax system? Roughly, what share of America's total private wealth is owned by the top 1% vs. the bottom 90%?

If we have time in this unit, we'll cover these topics, too: if not, they will be covered on the next exam!

- What evidence is there to suggest that the US is choosing to have high inequality, and that it is not alone among advanced democracies making this choice? Looking at data from Pew, how do liberals and conservatives differ in their views about why some Americans are so rich and many others so poor?
- Why do progressives fret so much about growing inequality? Why does Robert Reich think that the US between the 1950-1970s is "the country" that we should try to emulate today with respect to economic policy and the government's role in expanding opportunity? For folks like him, what happened in the 1980s forward that explains growing inequality? Why does he think that policies that increase wealth in the middle-classes are better for growth of America's wealthy?
- Thinking about evidence covered in class and assigned materials, what's the empirical record of whether having high levels of inequality or taxation benefits or hurts middle-class Americans and the economy as a whole? How has economic inequality changed over the 20th century and into the start of the 21st century? What role did changes in taxation and different types of governmental policy play in increasing or decreasing inequality over time? What about nature of

production and globalization has changed levels of economic inequality, and made it more difficult for governments to combat inequality even if they want to?

- What are the major forms of political participation in America? What role does “political voice play” in modern democracy, and why do social scientists like Verba, et al. think that *equality* of political voice matters as much as *quantity* of political participation? What kinds of resources are needed to participate equally and “loudly” in the American political system? Which economic and social groups have more of these resources, and which have less?
- What is the relationship, if any, between economic and political inequality? How have disparities in political participation changed over time in America when compared to other advanced democracies? How does voting, giving campaign contributions, and advocating for specific policies and candidates differ for America’s well off individuals and those with low incomes?
- To what extent do the policy preferences of America’s elite (the very well off and campaign donors) look different from those of the typical American? What evidence is there to suggest that either the middle-class (about half of America) or the well-off (about 10 percent of America) are better positioned to get the policies that they prefer enacted? Pay close attention to the findings in
- What are the main arguments for and against requiring voting the way that we require payment of taxes, jury duty, and military service when needed to preserve our democracy? What percentage of Americans aren’t voting and what are the main reasons for that?
- Why should “non-voters” matter according to Sean McElwee? Thinking about his article and Pew’s data, to what extent do non-voting Americans look different and want different things than voters from government? How would the way American politics, including perhaps Congress, perhaps change if voting became mandatory here like it is in many other democracies? How, according to the Economist, would parties change if they knew that everyone was going to be voting?
- How and why are efforts being undertaken in many states to try to reduce voter turnout? Who (i.e., which political party and which states) is most active in making it more difficult to vote than it has been in the past? What specific policies are being enacted that correspond to reduced rates of voting, and what groups are most affected by changes to the voting process? Why don’t the Constitution and federal courts make it more difficult to change registration and voting rules that are empirically linked to decreased voter participation (i.e., what exactly is the “right” to vote in the Constitution)?
- Why have political scientists typically placed limited emphasis on the role that specific political leaders play in shaping the behavior of the nations they lead? What factors allow some leaders to be much more impactful on their populations than others? Thinking specifically about American presidents, what distinguishes the great and particularly bad ones from the rest?