

## Contemporary Politics and Issues

### Focus questions for the third unit of the course

\* Any items added or significantly revised since this guide was originally posted will be noted with **bold** formatting. Remember as you prepare that you will want to be in a position to reference specific readings and evidence from them on your examinations.

- Why in the world does Benjamin Ginsberg think violence is a valuable form of political activity that will not go away (and what empirical evidence is there that indicates that we are a lot less violent than we used to be)?
- What major forms does political violence take within states and between them? When is violence most likely to be used as a primary mode of political activity, and who is most likely to use it? What evidence does Ginsberg give to suggest that violent politics has been the source of much good in the world?
- What are the defining qualities of a “revolution” that separate it from other modes of political violence and widespread political and social change (it may be helpful here to think about why your instructor objected to calling America’s War of Independence a revolution)? Who participates in revolutions? Why are they so violent? (your chapter reading on political violence could be clearer here, but Ginsberg explains these ideas well.)
- What are the goals of most revolutionaries? How successful are regime changes started by domestic actors relative to those started externally? What are some examples of revolutions (think about big social changes and not just country names) that brought about profound change? Why don’t most revolutions achieve democracy and end violent repression?
- Under what circumstances is a repressive government most likely to face a successful revolution or non-violent mass resistance by its own people? What kinds of people are most likely to revolt? What kind of societies are most likely to experience revolution? Historically, how well have revolutions delivered on their far-reaching promises to redistribute power in favor of everyday people?
- What—besides the use of violence—distinguishes “terrorism” from other means of political change? What kinds of groups and what kinds of people (including “homegrown” and “lone wolf” terrorists in America) are most likely to direct violence against civilians to get what they want? Why has terrorism become more prevalent as democratic rule has become more widespread? Why are Americans so darn afraid of terrorism?
- To what extent is white nationalist terrorism a problem in the US and Western Europe? How does its frequency compare to jihadist-inspired terrorism? Why is the prevalence of white nationalist violence often missed in terrorism statistics, especially those looking at political violence in the United States?
- What evidence is there to suggest that—at least for now—political Islamists may be more interested in transforming politics in the Islamic world than in the West? How successful have they been in achieving their goals when compared to the counter-measures implemented by the West and some governments within the region? What specifically did they want from the West, and why have provoked fights with so many Western countries?
- In recent decades, democratic societies that come under attack from terrorists and or fear the activities of rogue states abroad have reacted to these threats in various ways. Why do Mueller and Stewart believe that the American response to the 9/11 attacks was contrary to the nation’s interest? What process and standards do the authors propose for evaluating how the US should deal with and prepare for threats to our security? Why do they see the resources

devoted to post 9-11 activities as poorly allocated, and why do they think that Americans supported politicians and agencies who spent this way?

- Why does the Economist suggest that it is often best to “just live” with terrorism than to focus on it?
- Is violence always the right answer to dealing with thugs in power? What is the track record of non-violent opposition in bringing down brutal leaders versus violent confrontation? What evidence can we use to answer these questions?
- Under what conditions is non-violent opposition most likely to succeed? What specific non-violent strategies appear to work best to bring down tyrants and why? Specifically, what is the logic behind using non-violent tactics?
- What assumptions do Stephan and Chenoweth make about leaders and the military in their analysis (they don’t explain these well, but you should consider what kinds of leaders and societies might be more susceptible to non-violent means than others)? How has the success rate of non-violent resistance movements bringing down dictatorships changed in the last two decades and why (be familiar with the arguments of Chenoweth’s study in the Journal of Democracy)?
- 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? 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 the 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 hurts middle-class Americans and the economy as a whole? How has economic inequality changed over the 20<sup>th</sup> century and into the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century? What role did changes in taxation and different types of governmental policy play in increasing or decreasing inequality over time? What about the 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 the government? How would the way American politics, including perhaps Congress, 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?
- What is a country's "political culture," and how important is it (or not, according to the Economist) in shaping actual political behavior in a society? Where do our most basic political attitudes and beliefs come from? Why do all modern countries—democratic or otherwise—attempt to manipulate these beliefs and to create explicit expectations and demands related to "citizenship" (The Magstadt chapter will be especially helpful on the last question)?
- Political scientists Welzel and Inglehart say that in most countries today a majority of the population says that it supports democracy. However, these authors argue that support for democracy often is "superficial" or "instrumental." What do they mean? What are the deeper "cultural" and "value" requirements for a country to become and stay a democracy over the long run? According to scholars like Francis Fukuyama, Christian Welzel, Robert Inglehart, and Patrick Basham, which specific cultural attributes and beliefs appear to be most important in causing society to become more democratic over time?
- Using Iraq as an example, why do some societies—at least for now—appear to lack the cultural foundations for democracy to take root, and how might the communications revolution be changing how long it takes for previously isolated cultures to become more conducive to democracy? Using Iraq to think about obstacles to democracy, why was Patrick Basham so pessimistic about the prospects of creating democracy there when he wrote his article in the second year of the invasion? How correct did his predictions turn out to be?
- What specifically is "deconsolidation," and why are authors like Foa and Mounk surprised to see evidence of it in the US and other longstanding democracies? What evidence is there that support for democracy is in decline in the US and other longstanding democracies? Who specifically is less supportive of democracy and more supportive of non-democratic politics? To what extent does this phenomenon extend outside of the advanced industrial democracies?
- What are some of the causes political scientists are pointing to when trying to explain why some advanced democracies may "deconsolidate"? What activities and rhetoric do non-democratic leaders engage in that undermine support for democracy? Is there any evidence some of America's leaders are engaged in those activities?

- Considering the argument by Jonathan Haidt, how might the internet and social media fueling anti-democratic politics? How might globalization be increasing populism and anti-democratic politics? How successful has anti-democratic politics been in the US so far, which politicians have embraced it and how, and what stands in its way?
- How do the salaries earned by political science majors compare to college graduates with other majors? What are the most common fields that people with a political science major go into after college? What is the pay-off for going to graduate school, and what percentage of political science undergraduates will eventually to do graduate school of some type? How will that choice impact what kind of careers they are likely to pursue? Where can you find the best available evidence to answer these types of questions?