

General Exam Questions

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(1) In Western Europe, political divisions tend to correspond to underlying social cleavages. Some scholars argue that this correspondence exists because different social actors create political parties in order to pursue their interests in the electoral arena. Others argue that the correspondence exists because political parties, in their quest for votes, actively shape collective identities and thus politicize social cleavages that would otherwise remain politically dormant. In short, some maintain that politicians represent public opinion, while others claim that politicians manufacture that opinion. Where do you stand on this issue? Will consideration of institutions, such as electoral systems, influence your answer to this question? Please spell out how the resolution of this problem might affect our understanding of what democracy is and is not. Feel free to make references to the “classics” in the literature on political parties.

(2) What is a political party in a democracy? Is this definition universal or is it contingent on either cultural or historical characteristics of a given country?

(2) Politicians in Eastern Europe are in the process of constructing new party systems. Some argue that these party systems will come to resemble the party systems in Western Europe. Others, in contrast, insist that these systems will evolve differently. What do you think? How might an adherent of the social cleavage theory approach this problem? What about a proponent of the electoral systems theory? Do scholars who subscribe to the path-dependency theory have anything to say about this question? Again, feel free to draw on the “classics” in the literature.