

POLITICAL SCIENCE 1101
SAMPLE ESSAY ANSWERS
BUCKNER F. MELTON, JR.

Below is a range of answers to the following essay question, ranging from high A to low F. Carefully read and compare each answer and my analysis of each to get an idea of how to prepare to answer the essay questions on the actual exams.

Question: Discuss the basic considerations of society, government, and politics that we examined at the beginning of the course, including the problems regarding the relationship of the individuals to each other and to the group; the definition and nature of “government”; the definitions of “law” and “policy” and how they are related; and the nature and definition of statehood.

This essay is well-organized and clear. I can understand what the student is trying to tell me.

This essay question requires a lot of analysis, or “connecting the dots” between ideas. (Some questions need more analysis than description; some need more description than analysis.) Here the student shows from the beginning of the essay that she knows how to analyze the issues by asking the question of why we even have government.

Examples are always good. Here the student includes examples that I didn’t specifically mention in class, such as the idea that we all live downstream. This shows that the student is connecting the ideas of this course to the real world. Excellent!

The student has recognized that individuals and groups often try to take advantage

ANSWER 1
This is an A answer.

What is government and why does it exist? Many great thinkers have asked that question. Aristotle noted that humans are social animals, and that we need some way of regulating or relationships with each other and with the community overall. Thousands of years later, James Madison noted that if people were angels we wouldn’t need government. But we do need government exactly because people aren’t angels. They are individuals who have individual needs and interests, even though they have things in common with one another as well. All humans need food, water, air, clothing, and shelter to live. I may not be able to feel your own personal pain, but it is possible for you to eat the food that I had grown for myself and shift the pain and danger of hunger from yourself to me.

But people are also members of a community with responsibilities to that community, or at least the community, like Aristotle, might argue this. The basic idea is that “we all live downstream,” and that what an individual does can have a big impact on the rest of the community and vice-versa. In this case, how much control should the community have over the individual? How much freedom should the individual have from the community?

Looking at it this way (in terms of individuals and groups) it is possible for groups to take advantage of a rich individual by taking his food to feed themselves; it is also possible for a single individual to take away another individual’s food; and it is even possible for an individual to do something that harms a whole community and its common interests, such as polluting the water or air with a hog farm or clear-cutting a forest that damages the entire environment.

of each other, and that this is the problem that we are trying to solve. In doing so the student includes several examples from the Course Outline.

Having raised the subject of government, the student then segues to a discussion of the two major aspects of government: policy and law—and describes the difference between them clearly.

Another good segue: law is about authority, and the ultimate authority in a government is sovereignty. Good description of the aspects of statehood, with more examples from class and from her own experience (i.e. Byron)

In the final paragraph the student notes that disagreements over the nature and legitimate power, of governments is open to debate. She also notes that her essay is thus related to the theories of how the state originated while also realizing that she doesn't need to include that material; mentioning it is enough.

This answer contains all relevant material from a) the Course Outline, b) other material from the class web page, and c) things I covered in class as well as some of the student's own ideas. Top marks.

57-60 points.

So how do we regulate the relationships among individuals, and between an individual on the one hand and the group on the other? How much control should a community have over the lives of its individuals? How much right should an individual have to tell the community to go take a flying leap? The answer to this is government, an institution that makes enforceable decisions about the relationships among individuals as well as between the individual and community. Government is the system that “steers” the community.

Government does this “steering” by dealing with both with policy and law. Policy is a question of “should.” Should the hog farmer be free to pollute, or should the community have the right to tell the hog farmer he can't pollute? (It's his farm, after all, but is it his air?) That is a question of policy, in which different people or different interests may have different goals or ideas about what to accomplish. But if one of these groups gains political power, then it has the ability to use the government to turn its policy ideas into law. Law, unlike policy, is about making people do things or not do things based on the policies of the people who control the government. Law is about authority—the authority of the government that expresses the will of the community with regard to the individuals living within it.

The ultimate authority in law and government is the state. A state consists of a government over land/territory and people/population. Furthermore, that government must be sovereign, answering to no higher authority. There are many governments that have control over land and people, such as the Warner Robins and Byron city governments (Byron is my hometown), but unless the government is sovereign it isn't a state.

By this time it should be obvious that different individuals or communities can have different ideas about how much power the government should have over individuals and what policies the government enacts into law. Communities (acting through governments) like exercising authority over individuals, and individuals don't like having the government exercise authority over them. Peoples' view of how much power the government can have over individuals can differ based on how they understand that government to have come into being, which may reveal something about the fundamental nature of that government. Two main views are that of the organic society and the social contract. In America we favor the social contract view, with its idea of more limited government and greater individual freedom, but that is a subject for a different essay.

This is a pretty good answer in that it starts at the beginning of the first section of the Course Outline that's relevant to the question and goes right down the Course Outline until it gets to the end of the last relevant section. It misses little if anything from the Outline (although it includes few or none of the many examples in those sections of the Outline).

Why, then, does it only get a B? Two reasons. First, it doesn't include additional material that I introduced in class and on other handouts from the website—for instance, examples of what are and aren't states, or quotations from Madison (or others) such as the one in Answer 1 above. (Maybe this student cut class that day?)

Secondly, it doesn't tie the various sections together in the way the A essay did, such as picking up how the discussion of what the relationships between the group and the individual was a natural segue to the law/policy discussion. You need to think and to analyze as well as memorize and regurgitate.

In the end, this essay more or less regurgitates most of the relevant sections of the outline. Not bad; not great.

51-54 points.

ANSWER 2

This is a B answer.

The basic considerations of society, government, and politics break down into three basic categories, all of which are related to each other. One is the relationship of the individual to the group; another is the difference between “law” and “policy;” and another is the nature and definition of statehood.

Regarding the relationship of the individual to society: humans are social animals, i.e., individuals who exist within a society or community of other individuals with whom we have to get along. This was recognized thousands of years ago by Aristotle and is still true today. As individuals, we compete with each other for the necessities of life (food, clothing, and shelter); if I win the competition I benefit but you suffer. So this raises the question of how we should deal with this competition or conflict. But even though we exist as individuals, we have some things in common as well, such as similar needs and a common ecosystem. While the community (anything from a family to the human species as a whole) can control these things for the good of that whole community, conflict can arise between the individual and the community. What if the community tries to control or take something that should belong to the individual? What if the individual tries to control something that should belong to the group? In fact, what if one individual tries to control something that should belong to another individual? This is where government comes in; it is the system in place for making and enforcing policies and laws for a community.

The next big issue is the relationship between law and policy. Policy is about the goals of various people or groups within a society. So perhaps members of this group, such as a political party, runs for office, gets elected, and gets control of the government. This group now has the power to turn its policy into law, which unlike policy is enforceable (i.e. the government can make people and groups do things or pay a legal price). Government is about both law and policy, which are clearly related to each other.

The third major issue is the nature and definition of the state. A state is a political entity that possesses a sovereign government over land and people. Sovereignty means that the state doesn't answer to any higher authority. There may be other governments over land and people within a state, but because they aren't sovereign, they aren't states themselves. The way people think about when and how states originate can have a big impact on how much legitimacy and authority a state has.

ANSWER 3

This is a C answer.

This answer is very good as far as it goes. The problem is that it doesn't go far enough. It doesn't define or discuss the nature of "government," and it completely omits any discussion of statehood and sovereignty. There's nothing wrong in this answer, but it leaves out a lot of information that should have been included.

45 points.

As Aristotle once noted thousands of years ago, people are animals, but they are social animals. Animals have needs such as food, clothing, and shelter, and they may come into conflict with each other over these resources. If the resources are something that is common to the whole society or community, then the individual and the community may come into conflict with each other over whether something belongs to the individual or whether it belongs to the community. Individuals can take advantage of each other; the individual can take advantage of the community; and the community can take advantage of the individual.

Different individuals or groups may want to achieve different goals. What these individuals or groups want to achieve or think ought to be or should be achieved is called policy. If a certain group wins control of the government, then the group can turn its policy into laws that the community must obey.

There are some correct things in this essay, but not many. The student shows signs of being confused. First she talks about individuals and societies; then jumps to mentioning (but not explaining) policy and law; then jumps to mentioning government and sovereignty; then jumps back to policy and law (again without defining them); then back to the notion of the individual; and all of this in the first paragraph. This suggests that the student a) doesn't know the meaning of a lot of the terms she is throwing around and b) doesn't understand the proper relationship of these terms and concepts to each other, since she keeps bouncing around among them. Why do we need government? What brings individuals into conflict with other individuals or with the community?

Next, the student returns to "government" as well as saying (briefly and vaguely) that its role is to settle conflicts. Then she gives a (partial) definition of statehood, and ends by jumping far ahead by discussing something that (given her patchy previous discussion) probably doesn't belong in this essay, the American social contract.

36 points.

ANSWER 4
This is a D answer.

Aristotle wrote about individuals being part of a society. Societies have governments to steer them by using both policy and law. A government that is sovereign is a state government. Different people in a community may like different policies as well as different laws. An individual may dislike the fact that the government can tell him what to do and what not to do.

The whole point of government is to decide what belongs to who and to enforce this decision. There are many governments and some of them are sovereign, i.e. nobody can tell them what to do. If a government is sovereign then it is a state. The state is formed by social contract, which is how Americans created the United States in 1776 with the Declaration of Independence as well as the Constitution in 1789. So the United States is a state.

This essay has two problems: one of them big and one of them huge.

First (the huge problem): it doesn't answer the question I asked. I asked for a discussion of the basic considerations of government and society that we examined at the beginning of the course. This answer claims to be about that, but instead of discussing individual versus group, law versus policy, and the nature of statehood (as the question expressly asked), it discusses the social contract, which is covered by a different question—a question I didn't ask. Either the student is very confused or he's trying to pull a fast one.

Second: even if I had asked a question about the social contract, this isn't a very good answer to that question. It gets a lot of things wrong, such as Hobbes's name and who wrote Leviathan; the date of the writing of the Constitution (the student confuses the Constitution with the Declaration of Independence to a degree); and the date and reason behind the Bill of Rights. The student also leaves out a great deal, such as the Mayflower Compact, the Declaration of Independence, and the Articles of Confederation.

15-18 points.

ANSWER 5
This is an F answer.

The key to understanding the basic considerations of government is to understand the social contract. This is the idea that the people of a community made a conscious decision to create a government. This is how Americans viewed the basic considerations of government rather than as an organic society. They came together in 1776 to write the Constitution which took power away from the Parliament and gave it to the Americans.

The idea of the social contract comes from John Hobbes and John Locke. In the contract people give up some of their natural liberty in return for security. John Locke wrote Leviathan in which he said that since life in the state of nature was so bad that people had to come together to create a government that could protect their life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness.

Just because you know that there is a social contract doesn't mean you know what the terms of that contract are. You could have a contract to create a dictatorship such as Hitler. Our contract is the Constitution, which was written in 1776. Its terms included federalism and separation of powers, and then in 1787 because of Shays's rebellion, we added the Bill of Rights to tell the government what it couldn't do. The Constitution and the Bill of Rights together are the basic considerations of government in the United States.

ANSWER 6
This is an F answer.

Does this answer even need comment? You have your choice of questions (if this isn't a makeup exam), and this is the best you've got?

5 points.

The American government has many different states. Individuals live in the states and form groups or committees (and even subcommittees) which disagree on what should be done such when it comes to farming trees and pigs, or on global warming, etc. Because of this disagreement there was a revolution in 1776. They built a federal government of states which had some power but the national government had the rest of the power such as the power to make law and tell people what they should do and can't do. Congress is an important part of this government. It is ruled by the speaker who is sort of like a president. The other part of the national government is the Senate which is ruled by the president when he is there, otherwise by the vice president who can be of a different party.

ANSWER 7
This is an F answer.

Does this answer even need comment? You have your choice of questions (if this isn't a makeup exam), and this is the best you've got?

2 points.

Government is an important part of enforcing law and policy for individuals and states.

ANSWER 8
This is an F answer.

You have had every possible essay question in your possession (along with, on the Course Outline, a lot of the information needed to answer each and every one of those questions) since the very first day of class. Is there any excuse for this?

Zero points.

[nothing in the bluebook but a blank page where an essay is supposed to be]