

American Politics Comprehensive Exam

August 2024

Do 1 question in the methods section, and 2 in the substantive section.

Methods: Choose 1 of 2

1. In a [2011 article in the *Journal of Politics*](#), Sarah Anzia argues that pressure groups can have outsized influence in off-cycle elections with low voter turnout, as opposed to in elections with higher turnout. Anzia takes this premise and focuses it on school board elections in the United States, conceptualizing teacher unions as a dominant interest group in the area of local education policy. She expects that when such elections fall "off-cycle" (i.e, separately from national general elections, national primary elections, or statewide general elections), teachers and union sympathizers comprise a larger proportion of the electorate and are thus able to secure more favorable policy from the school board – measured in terms of teacher salaries. Ultimately, Anzia finds that districts with off-cycle elections pay experienced teachers over 4% more than districts that hold on-cycle elections. The following questions relate to Anzia's research design and empirical analysis. Table 1 from the paper is reproduced below for easy reference. The unit of analysis is the school district in 2004 (one year observation for each school district).

TABLE 1 Effect of Off-Cycle Elections on Teacher Salaries

	Bachelor's, No Experience		Master's, 10 Years		Highest Step	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Off-Cycle	0.015 (0.005)***	0.016 (0.007)**	0.037 (0.005)***	0.035 (0.004)***	0.042 (0.011)***	0.041 (0.011)***
NEA-to-Teacher Ratio		0.031 (0.020)		0.027 (0.028)		0.042 (0.016)**
Enrollment	0.007 (0.002)**	0.008 (0.002)**	0.019 (0.006)**	0.019 (0.005)**	0.037 (0.006)***	0.037 (0.006)***
Median Income	0.097 (0.017)***	0.093 (0.015)***	0.121 (0.030)***	0.12 (0.030)***	0.135 (0.022)***	0.137 (0.023)***
City	-0.007 (0.006)	-0.01 (0.006)	0.009 (0.013)	0.009 (0.014)	0.007 (0.013)	0.007 (0.014)
Fringe	-0.002 (0.004)	-0.003 (0.005)	0.008 (0.009)	0.01 (0.010)	0.005 (0.011)	0.006 (0.012)
% Hispanic	0.105 (0.010)***	0.106 (0.009)***	0.145 (0.037)***	0.152 (0.036)***	0.113 (0.013)***	0.113 (0.013)***
% Black	0.029 (0.017)	0.023 (0.020)	0.044 (0.025)	0.038 (0.024)	0.016 (0.021)	0.007 (0.022)
% Asian	0.229 (0.011)***	0.218 (0.009)***	0.149 (0.016)***	0.14 (0.011)***	0.126 (0.025)***	0.116 (0.020)***
% Native American	0.139 (0.023)***	0.123 (0.019)***	0.108 (0.041)**	0.096 (0.039)**	0.047 (0.036)	0.032 (0.034)
% Revenue from State	-0.026 (0.041)	-0.043 (0.029)	-0.094 (0.089)	-0.093 (0.088)	-0.136 (0.061)*	-0.134 (0.058)*
Observations	665	643	658	636	665	643
R-squared	0.84	0.84	0.84	0.84	0.84	0.84

Notes: Robust standard errors clustered by state in parentheses. Dependent variables are district-level logged annual base salary for teachers of the three sets of qualifications. *Off-Cycle* equals 0 if the district holds school board elections at the same time as the federal general election, a federal primary election, or a statewide general election; it equals 1 if school board elections are not held at those times. *City* equals 1 if the district is in a large or mid-size central city, *Fringe* equals 1 if the district is part of urban fringe of a large or mid-size central city, and small towns and rural areas are the excluded category. All models include state fixed effects. The test for *Off-Cycle* is one-tailed, since I am testing a one-sided hypothesis. All other tests are two-tailed. * significant at 10%; ** significant at 5%; *** significant at 1%

- Note the number of school district-level observations across the 6 estimated models. Clearly, Anzia is not studying all school districts within the United States. In fact, Anzia studies just the 8 states that have within-state variation in election timing (California, Minnesota, Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, and Alabama). From a research design perspective, why do you think she would limit the sample to these states?

Anzia's fundamental model can be summarized with the following equation

$$\ln(\text{salary}_{ij}) = \beta_0 + \beta_1(\text{Off Cycle}_{ij}) + X_{ij}\psi + \delta_i + \varepsilon_{ij}$$

- Why does Anzia log the dependent variable? What implications does this have for the interpretation of the estimated coefficients?
- The delta term in the equation represents state fixed effects. What are fixed effects, and how do they influence the interpretation of the estimated coefficients?

- d. Of the control variables, Anzia puts particular importance on the NEA-to-Teacher ratio measure. This is meant to measure teacher union strength in districts. Why is this particularly important to control for in this study? Do Anzia's findings appear to be robust to accounting for union strength?
- e. Interpret the substantive impact of off-cycle elections on teacher salaries from models 2, 4, and 6 in terms of percentage changes in teacher salaries. Make sure to calculate the correct percentage change and use language that reflects the research design.
- f. A skeptical reviewer wonders why Anzia conducts one-tailed hypothesis tests for *Off-Cycle* and two-tailed hypothesis tests for all other coefficients. Could this reviewer use information from the table and their knowledge of the standard normal probability distribution to conduct two-tailed tests for *Off-Cycle*? If so, what would they find?
- g. Another reviewer is concerned about Anzia's claim that the empirical results confirm her theory about how dominant interest groups can "stuff the ballot box" in off-cycle elections. In particular, the reviewer argues that the outcome variable (logged teacher salaries) does not coincide with the concept of electoral impact. If you were Anzia, what would you say to this reviewer in a revision memo? Could you propose an ancillary analysis that could increase the reviewer's confidence in Anzia's argument?

2. In the aftermath of a lackluster June 27, 2024 debate with former President Trump, pressure steadily increased on President Biden to halt his candidacy for reelection in 2024. Biden finally yielded to this pressure on July 21 when he decided to cease his campaign and to support Vice President Kamala Harris for the role. This decision ended a month-long conflict within the Democratic party, where insiders were split over Biden's viability as a candidate.

You are a political scientist interested in studying observed variation in party support (or opposition) to Biden's candidacy. Specifically, you noticed that – prior to Biden's decision to drop out – prominent liberals (e.g., Bernie Sanders, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez) had strongly supported Biden while relative moderates (e.g., Adam Smith, Adam Schiff) had quickly urged the president to halt his candidacy.

- a. How would you demonstrate that moderates and liberal democrats in Congress actually did show varying levels of support to Biden in the aftermath of the debate? What data would you use and why? How would you treat members/senators who never publicly supported or opposed Biden?
- b. Supposing that your descriptive data from above confirms that liberals had been more likely to support Biden, you come up with two alternative (but potentially complementary) "hunches." 1) You suspect that liberals in the party had

negotiated with the Biden campaign to exchange support for more liberal "planks" to the party platform at the August convention. And 2) you suspect that liberals come from safer electoral districts than their more moderate counterparts and were thus less worried about a disappointing Biden campaign exerting "negative coattails" on their own reelection prospects. Take these hunches and develop specific testable hypotheses attached to each.

- c. Now, develop separate research designs to assess each of these testable hypotheses, with one design focusing on quantitative analysis and one focusing on qualitative analysis (That is, the design for research question 1 on platform inclusion could be qualitative or quantitative, but then the design for research 2 on seat safety would be the alternative design type to what you choose for 1). Describe the data needed for your two designs, the units of analysis, and how your design could falsify your hypotheses from part b). Justify why you chose to pair the quantitative/qualitative designs to each research question. What about the research questions make them particularly amenable to different research designs?
- d. Say that you separately analyze your two questions with your stated designs and find support for both. You freely admit that "both might be going on" but your dissertation adviser suggests that you get off the fence and come down on one side or the other. Describe how you might use case study analysis to further adjudicate between the two mechanisms of liberal support (platform concessions versus seat safety).
- e. Finally, distinguish your approach to this topic from one that you suspect a political journalist might take. Describe how your research methodology would lead to knowledge accumulation in the field, rather than an ephemeral impression of a particular moment in political time.

Substantive questions: Choose 2.

1. In today's judiciary, judges at confirmation hearings tend to profess to belong to two broad schools of constitutional interpretation: original intent, or "living Constitution" also sometimes styled "non-interpretive". (ignore critical legal studies, critical race theory and other theories for now). But nominees from both of these schools also endorse judicial restraint. For your essay, describe these two schools as to their method of interpretation. Next, describe how each school has, according to its scholarly critics, been guilty of judicial activism when practicing its chosen method.

Using one of the cases below, show how these two methods of interpretation and tensions over restraint/activism are on display in it. You may also argue that the case is an exception in which these schools are not as clearly divided as in others. Be sure to cite relevant cases, scholarly work, and broader concepts (when relevant) such as separation of powers and federalism in your answer.

Dobbs vs. Jackson (abortion case)
Trump vs. U.S. (immunity case)
DC vs. Heller (gun rights case)

Pick one of the critical schools that would be relevant to the topic, and provide a brief critical analysis of how the courts have behaved in your chosen case.

Finally, in a concluding section, what does this case tell us about the role of the unelected federal judiciary in our political system?

2. What can we learn about American politics by examining the gridlock over immigration policy that has persisted for at least 30 years? Describe the challenges that the nation faces with regards to immigration politically, demographically, geopolitically, and economically. Cite relevant scholarship outlining various aspects of the issue. In your answer, please include institutional factors, as well as political aspects as related to public opinion and elections. You must write in detail about at least one institution, whether it is the judiciary, the presidency, the Congress, or the bureaucracy, and you may also include state governments if you think that important. Finally, based on broad theories of American politics or institutions, should observers anticipate progress on this policy area in the next ten years? If not, explain what would need to happen for progress to occur. You may also draw in examples from comparable political systems, and scholars writing about immigration globally.
3. The political representation and incorporation of traditionally excluded groups in American politics has been a recurrent challenge and concern throughout American history. Drawing broadly from the literature on American politics as well as the study of race and gender, how would you describe the current state of democratic inclusion for women and people of color? Where has progress been made, and where is progress still necessary? Your answer should consider facets of democratic inclusion such as political participation, representation, and influence over political and policy outcomes.
4. While the importance of race in American politics has been covered extensively in the Race and Ethnicity subfields, it has been less so by the larger field of American politics. Construct an essay that engages the significance of race for the American Politics field. Your response should engage the importance of race for institutions, elections, public opinion, and the law.