

Woodrow Wilson Department of Politics  
University of Virginia

American Politics Comprehensive Exam  
January 2015

Students taking the exam as a MAJOR have eight hours to answer **three questions: one question from Part I and one question each from two of the remaining three parts.** Students taking the exam as a MINOR have six hours to answer **two questions: one question from Part I and one question from any of the remaining three parts.**

The exam is semi-open book. You may consult books, articles, and syllabi but may not access notes or the internet during the exam. You may not receive assistance from or give assistance to another student.

Exams will be evaluated according to the following criteria: 1) the extent to which you address the issues raised by the questions; 2) the breadth and depth of your knowledge of the relevant literature; 3) the skill with which you critically analyze this literature. This is your opportunity to demonstrate in depth your knowledge of the major theoretical issues, scholars, literature, and methodological approaches of the discipline. Answers that simply offer literature reviews without thoughtful theoretical and empirical analyses will be graded less favorably. You should take care to cite a wide variety of specific authors and works to support your answers. Your discussion should also illuminate broader points about the field of American Politics, using what you know from the literatures you have read on American Political Development, American Political Behavior, and American Institutions.

On each essay please indicate clearly which question you are answering.

**Section I: General**

1. One prominent definition of accountability is offered by IR scholars Ruth Grant and Robert Keohane in a 2005 APSR article: “Accountability implies that some actors have the right to hold other actors to a set of standards, to judge whether they have fulfilled their responsibilities in light of these standards, and to impose sanctions if they determine that these responsibilities have not been met.” Given this definition, how is accountability exercised in American democracy? To what extent are high government officials accountable to the people? What role do parties, social movements, media, interest groups, elites, institutions, and citizens themselves play in enabling or hindering democratic accountability?
2. The various subfields within American politics have, over time, become identified with particular empirical approaches and methods – for example, research on public opinion and behavior relies heavily on surveys, scholars of Congress and the bureaucracy frequently use formal and rational choice approaches, and studies of the presidency and political parties

often employ historical approaches. Choose an important question or research area in each of the three subfields (two for those taking the exam as a minor) and consider how the theoretical approaches and methodologies applied in these areas have shaped the kinds of questions scholars ask as well as the answers they propose. What do these research approaches lead scholars to understand very well, but also miss? What might a different research approach applied to each area add to our understanding of American politics?

## **Section II: Institutions**

3. In recent years, three competing theories of legislative organization have emerged: (1) the distributive approach, (2) the informational approach, and (3) the partisan approach. First, briefly describe each theoretical approach. What assumptions about legislative structure and process does each make, focusing specifically on the roles that committees and parties play? What differences would we expect to see in the policies emerging from these different forms of legislative organization, and how do those expected policies square with notions of representative government and democracy? Then evaluate the empirical evidence for and against each theoretical approach. Can each be "right" to some degree? That is, are they mutually exclusive, or can they be complementary and together help build our understanding of congressional organization? Explain.
4. The study of American Political Institutions is strongly rooted in positive political theory. With these origins in mind, answer the following three-part question: First, in studying American Political Institutions, what are some of the pros and cons of incorporating a rational-choice perspective? What are some things a rational-choice perspective assumes (or takes as given), and how does this advance and/or limit theory building? Second, in conducting institutions-based research, what are some of the costs and benefits of taking a single-institutional approach versus a multi-institutional approach? Provide some examples. Third, what are the logical next steps, research-wise, for the Institutions subfield? More specifically, where do theoretical/empirical gaps exist, and where does our current understanding (as a research community) need improvement?

## **Section III: American Political Development**

5. The foremost scholar of the presidency in the field of American Political Development, Stephen Skowronek, argues that certain presidents in history—Jefferson, Jackson, Lincoln, Roosevelt, and Reagan—have played the principal part in “reconstructing” the American constitutional order. Have presidents truly been so central to constitutional development in American politics? What role have political parties, social movements, Congress, and the courts played in these transformations? What alternative APD theoretical frameworks might offer insights into the relationship between the presidents and the political system?

6. The role of ideas in shaping institutions and policies has been a major source of debate among scholars who study American political development. Some APD scholars emphasize political culture or “traditions” and place considerable emphasis on American political thought. Others tend to focus on political structure or “orders” and put more stock in the institutional dynamics of American politics over time. Are these ideational and institutional approaches fundamentally at odds, or can these approaches be reconciled? What research might be undertaken in the future that would add important theoretical and empirical insights to our understanding of the relationship between ideas and practice?

#### **Section IV: Political Behavior**

7. Given the strong correlation between vote choice and pre-existing attitudes (e.g., partisan identification, incumbent approval, perceptions of the national economy at the individual level), coupled with the predictability of aggregate election outcomes based on presidential approval, economic conditions and domestic and foreign tranquility, how do scholars justify arguing that election campaigns matter?
8. We know from many decades of political behavior research that citizens do not make political choices using factual details, robust information, or careful consideration of how policy positions align with one another. But citizens do make choices. How? How normatively appealing are these choices? And how do we know that they don't rely on facts and careful policy reasoning.