

**American Politics Comprehensive Exam
December 2013**

Students taking the major exam have eight hours to answer three questions: one question from Part I and one question from each of two of the remaining Parts. Students taking a minor exam have six hours to answer two questions: one question from Part I and one question from any of the remaining Parts.

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

All Students will be evaluated according to the following criteria: 1) the extent to which they address the issues raised by the questions; 2) the breadth and depth of their knowledge of the relevant literature; and 3) their ability to analyze critically this literature.

This is your opportunity to demonstrate in depth and breadth of 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. In 1961 Robert Dahl posed a [the?] question at the center of the study of American politics: “Who Governs?” Write an essay that evaluates what scholars of American politics have to say about this question—or the somewhat broader question of who has power in American politics. Your essay should cover material from at least two of the three major divisions of the field (APD, Institutions, Behavior) and should give attention to the substance of empirical findings as well as the different theoretical and methodological approaches that different scholars bring to this question.
2. Many political scientists have claimed that we live in a new Gilded Age, and that the “Great Compression,” the period of relative income equality of the mid-twentieth century, is over. Pundits decry the challenges the new Gilded Age poses for the health of American democracy. What light have the scholars of American Political Development, Institutions and Behavior shed on the political economy? What are the respective strengths and weaknesses of these three approaches to the study of American politics in identifying the core problems of inequality, the prospects in our system for democratic control, and the factors that make income inequality more or less of a political concern?

Section II: Institutions

3. Studies of the behavior of political elites – legislators, chief executives, bureaucrats, judges, parties, interest groups, etc. – often fall into one of two camps. One camp begins with the assumption that individuals and groups are rational actors; the other camp rejects this assumption and looks to psychology for alternative theoretical frameworks. What are the strengths and weaknesses of these competing approaches, and what have we learned from them? Do you see any areas where the two approaches could fruitfully be combined? Your discussion should encompass scholarship on at least two types of institutions.

4. In a number of areas – like basic lawmaking, the initiation and conduct of military action, and judicial selection – more than one branch of the federal government is involved. How have political scientists sought to model and analyze these areas of cross-branch interaction? Distinguishing by area where appropriate, identify (a) how the Constitution provides multiple branches of government with power/authority and (b) how political scientists have attempted to incorporate that power/authority into their models and analyses. Does one branch of government seem to have a power advantage – how and why? And is that power advantage absolute or conditional?

Section III: American Political Development

Over the course of American history, a number of important institutional changes have been pursued by reformers to limit the power and influence of political parties. Identify some of these important institutional changes and describe why reformers thought that they would limit party power and influence. Were these institutional changes in fact successful? Why or why not? What is the evidence? In recent decades a major development involving partisanship has occurred – most notably, the Democratic and Republicans have become more polarized. Many scholars and public officials consider this development troubling and have issued new calls for reform. Does scholarship in the American Political Development field hold any lessons on the significance of the “new” American party system or whether the remedies that have been proposed to reform it might correct its more troubling features?

The field of American Political Development has been criticized as relying too much on the development of institutional factors, and not enough on culture, religion and ideas. Do you concur with this criticism? Are there exceptions that prove the rule? Can you point to work in APD or other subfields of American politics that illuminates the important interplay between institutions (state-building) and society?

Section IV: Political Behavior

How has the rise of the opinion survey shaped patterns of democratic accountability? When public officials respond to data from surveys, are they responding to citizen preferences? What limits officials’ ability to manipulate opinion? How much correspondence is there between policy produced by government and what the public seems to want? Identify the literature(s) in political behavior that speak to these questions and evaluate their contributions to answering them.

Americans are famously ignorant about politics. So what? Evaluate the literature on political knowledge and sophistication, and explain how it does or does not matter for democracy.