Woodrow Wilson Department of Politics
University of Virginia

American Politics Comprehensive Exam
August 2012

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

Exams 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 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.

Part I -- Overview
You must answer ONE of the following two questions

1. Throughout its history, political science has "poached" from other disciplines such as biology, sociology, history, psychology, and economics. Taking account of the major research traditions in the field of American politics – survey-based behavioralism, rational-choice modeling, and historical-institutionalism – consider the degree to which they have relied on theories of other disciplines. To what extent have these traditions contributed to the development of a distinctive political science? Using specific examples, consider the advantages and disadvantages of a multidisciplinary approach to the study of politics.

2. The American political system is frequently described as "dysfunctional" – public attitudes are polarized, institutions are log-jammed, electoral processes are unrepresentative, and public policies are fragmented. Is this an accurate description of American politics? If so, what accounts for this dysfunctionality? What does the political science literature -- historical, behavioral, and institutional – say about the sources of American political dysfunctionality and the solutions for repairing the system? Is "dysfunctionality" actually a good thing, or is the political system hopelessly broken?

Part II -- American Political Development
You may answer ONE of these questions

3. The theory of "critical realignment" once dominated and organized the study of party development and historical electoral behavior. In the last two decades it has come under increasing criticism and arguably no longer enjoys its previous status as the reigning paradigm in the field. What is this theory? What are its strengths and weaknesses? What have been some of the most important critiques of it? In what measure – you may include modifications or adaptations – do you think that it retains validity or value?

4. 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. Describe these debates, and discuss whether these ideational and institutional approaches are fundamentally at odds or can 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?

Part III -- Institutions
You may answer ONE of these questions

5. Consider two claims: The first is that American litigiousness and judicial activism make courts overly powerful actors in the American system. The second is that courts are ineffective engines of social change. What are the sources of these claims? Can these apparently contradictory positions be reconciled? If so, how? If not, which is more accurate?

6. Over the past two decades, the focus of rational-choice institutional scholarship has changed considerably: research on how institutions are internally structured and organized has given way to studies that have emphasized how institutions affect policymaking. Based on this new focus, what have we as an academic community learned? Specifically, discuss the empirical and theoretical (including informal and formal modeling) contributions to institutional scholarship, with a particular emphasis on how the president, Congress, the Supreme Court, and the bureaucracy are believed (or theorized) to influence policymaking.

Part IV -- Political Behavior
You may answer ONE of these questions

7. 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 one policy position aligns with 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? Your answer should consider these questions with reference to a specific topic (or topics) of opinion research.

8. The advent of the nationally-representative sample survey in the 1940s ushered in a highly productive era of public opinion and behavior research, extending to the current day. However, critiques of this technology and the analytic and theoretical orientations it encourages suggest that the analysis of sample surveys drew attention away from the social process and the social context within which opinion is formed. Evaluate this claim, with reference to a specific substantive topic (or topics), and evaluate whether new technologies and methods developed since the 1940s present opportunities for addressing such shortcomings.