

**Woodrow Wilson Department of Politics
University of Virginia**

**American Politics Comprehensive Exam
December 2011**

Students taking the exam as a MAJOR have eight 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 six 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 texts, 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. Thus, you should take care to cite a wide variety of specific authors and works to support your answers. All of your discussion of specifics 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.

For each essay, please indicate clearly which question you are answering.

Part I -- Overview

You must answer ONE of the following two questions

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. In recent years, media sources have reported on growing partisan cleavages, often rooted in ideological disagreements, in the United States. Such intense partisanship (often referred to as "polarization") seems pervasive and is often described as destructive. What does the political science literature – the historical, behavioral, and institutional – say about such polarization? Does it exist at the mass and/or elite levels? If it does exist, what is causing it and what are the normative consequences (if any)? Has public policy (lawmaking) been affected – why or why not? Can significant partisan cleavages, in fact, be a good thing – why or why not?

Part II -- American Political Development

You may answer ONE of these questions

3. Scholars such as Theodore Lowi, Theda Skocpol, Stephen Skowronek, Suzanne Mettler, and Julian Zelizer have written about the development of an American "State." And yet, very little political science scholarship carefully delineates the major features and principal dynamics of the "State". Does America have a State, as distinguished from the major institutions of government? What are its most important characteristics? Has "state building" transformed in any fundamental way the principles and institutional arrangements of American politics? Does the development of the State follow inexorably from modernization or has state power been contested throughout American political history?
4. Karen Orren and Stephen Skowronek prescribe a research program for American Political Development scholars that places "durable shifts in governing authority" at the center of inquiry. Is this a promising avenue of research? What place, if any, do studies of political culture or political organizations have in such a research program? Is the study of enduring shifts in governing authority a research regimen that distinguishes the way political scientists, as opposed to historians, examine history?

Part III -- Institutions

You may answer ONE of these questions

5. Consider two competing claims. (A) We can understand all we need to about judges' decision making by using the same general analytical frameworks that explain the decisions of other policy makers, such as legislators or agency officials. (B) It is a mistake to see a judge as just another political actor; failure to take seriously the role of law in judicial decision making results in a distorted understanding of judges' decision making. Discuss in detail the evidence for each claim. Which claim do you think comes closer to the truth, and why?
6. Over the past two decades, the focus of institutional scholarship has changed considerably: research on the internal structures and organization of institutions 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 Congress, the Presidency, the Supreme Court, and the bureaucracy are believed (or theorized) to influence public policymaking.

Part IV -- Political Behavior

You may answer ONE of these questions

7. Americans are famously ignorant about politics. So what? Evaluate the literature on political knowledge and sophistication, and explain how it does or doesn't matter for democracy.
8. In his 1995 American Political Science Association Presidential Address, Sidney Verba argued that: "Surveys produce just what democracy is supposed to produce – equal representation of all citizens. The sample survey is rigorously egalitarian; it is designed so that each citizen has an equal chance to participate and an equal voice when participating. Here is where science and political representation meet." Evaluate this claim.