

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

**American Politics Comprehensive Exam
May 2012**

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 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 contemporary traditions of empirical research in the field of American politics – survey-based behavioralism, rational choice modeling, historical-, and non-historical institutionalism, and public policy – 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? (Discuss at least 3 empirical traditions). Using specific examples, consider the advantages and disadvantages of a multidisciplinary approach to the study of politics.
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 –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 – and if so, how? 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. 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?
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. The U.S. Constitution provides for a “separation of powers” and “checks and balances” among the Executive, Legislative, and Judicial branches of the federal government. 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? Area by area, 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. Area by area, does one branch of government seem to have a power advantage – how and why? And is that power advantage absolute or conditional?
6. Thinking both in historical and theoretical terms, why do political parties exist in the United States? Discuss the purposes that they serve and assess whether they are (and have been) effective in fulfilling those purposes. From a normative perspective, are parties good for democracy and American society more generally? Discuss some costs and benefits that come with political parties and how political life and the political process would be different if political parties did not exist. Are we in fact better off by having a political party system? Why or why not?

Part IV -- Political Behavior

You may answer ONE of these questions

7. American citizens, it has been often observed, are not especially good at the job. Large swaths of them are politically inattentive, politically uninformed, and politically intolerant much of the time. Yet, citizen competence is not a stable individual attribute. Scholarship in the study of citizen behavior has increasingly begun to take the contexts in which citizens reside more seriously, examining the influence of institutional, electoral, informational, and policy structures on the behavior and competence of the American public. Explain the basis for concerns about citizen competence, and then evaluate the role of these structures and environments in shaping “citizens.” Can (some) citizens become better citizens, at least some of the time?
8. The scholarly consensus among students of political communication from the 1950s through the 1980s was that the mass media had “minimal effects.” How has that conclusion evolved? Explore in detail how the minimal effects model has been revisited or revised, reinforced or refuted in recent decades. Is there a new consensus? What do we know about media effects on attitudes and behavior?