

American Politics Comprehensive Exam

May 2014

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. Over the past several decades, the question whether and how parties and partisanship matter to American Politics has garnered a huge amount of attention. First, explain how each of the three American Politics subfields of behavior, institutions, and development conceptualizes and studies parties and what that implies for how parties might “matter.” Second, evaluate the evidence on both sides of the debate, both in terms of the findings and the research designs that led to the findings. Finally, consider how the three subfields’ approaches to parties and partisanship complement (or not) each other, and evaluate where the field is in answering this question? And where do we, as a field, go from here?
2. The three American Politics subfields of behavior, institutions, and development are quite different in theoretical foundation and origin. First, describe the origins of each subfield, discussing the theoretical foundations (or tenets) of each. Did each emerge in response to some existing, foundational way of understanding politics? Second, discuss how each subfield approaches the study of political decision making and political outcomes. Finally, are these three ways of studying political decision making and political outcomes mutually exclusive, or can they be complementary? If the latter, provide some examples, either in the abstract or by discussing specific works that demonstrate this.

Section II: Institutions

3. In recent years, 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. First, discuss why the focus changed. Second what have we as an academic community learned from this new focus? 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 courts, and the bureaucracy are believed (or theorized) to influence public policymaking.

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

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. One of the most troubling developments in recent American political life is the growing problem of economic inequality – a development frequently referred to as the emergence of a second “gilded age.” Have APD studies tended to show that inequality is a chronic or new condition of the American political system? What factors have APD scholars identified that have contributed to decline of equality in the marketplace? Do these factors highlight “nonpolitical” factors, for example, “globalization,” or have there been important changes in institutions, the political process and policy that have aggravated inequality?

Section IV: Political Behavior

7. 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.

8. 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.