

## AMERICAN POLITICS COMPREHENSIVE EXAM, MAY 2008

**General instructions:** Students taking the exam as a MAJOR have seven hours to answer one question from Part I and two questions from the remaining three parts (but no more than one question from any part). 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 shall be semi-open book but pledged. Students may consult texts and articles, but may not access notes or the Internet during the exam. Students may not receive 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 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.** 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. **Answers that simply offer literature reviews without thoughtful theoretical and empirical analyses will be graded less favorably.**

### **Part 1. You must answer ONE of the following two questions.**

1. The various subfields within American politics have, over time, become identified with particular empirical approaches and methods – for example, research on public opinion and behavior relies heavily on surveys, scholars of Congress and the bureaucracy frequently use formal and rational choice approaches, and studies of the presidency and political parties often employ historical approaches. Choose three core research areas within American politics (those named here, or others you identify and define) and consider how the theoretical approaches and methodologies applied in these areas have shaped the kinds of questions scholars ask as well as the answers they propose. What do these research approaches lead scholars to understand very well, but also miss? What might a different research approach applied to each area add to our understanding of American politics?

2. "It's the economy, stupid."--James Carville

"Although political science employs a variety of frameworks to analyze politics, such as the behavioral, rational, institutional, and historical approaches, the driving force of American politics is economic--the condition of the macroeconomy, fiscal and monetary policy, income distribution, and employment." Do you agree with this statement? Examine how these different frameworks address the role that economics plays in the

study of politics. Do they do so adequately? How might they better do so to improve our understanding of American politics?

**Part 2. American Political Development. (No More Than One Question.)**

3. How do we understand state-building from an American Political Development perspective? What are some of the methodological strengths and weaknesses of APD in answering this question? Is there indeed a distinctive APD approach? What APD tools can be employed methodologically?

4. Political parties were not part of the formal Constitution, but all serious students of American politics, at least since the 1830s, have counted the party system as one of the main institutions of American government. In terms of APD, trace the aim and function of political parties since their emergence, indicating the role they have played in different periods. Have parties “developed” or not over the course of American history? What are the strengths and weaknesses of viewing this question in terms of path dependency theory? Is APD the same as “history”?

**Part 3. Institutions. (No More Than One Question.)**

5. In recent years, three competing theories of legislative organization have emerged: (1) the distributive approach (otherwise known as the gains-from-trade-approach or the sub-government thesis), (2) the informational approach, and (3) the partisan approach (which includes both the cartel theory and the conditional-party government theory).

First, briefly describe each approach and discuss who the main authors are in each “camp.” Then describe the assumptions of each theory with regard to both legislative structure and process. Specifically, what role does uncertainty play in each theory? Discuss each approach from an empirical perspective. What is the evidence for each? How strong/persuasive is the evidence? Is each theory evaluated against both other theories? Finally, what are the normative implications of each theory, vis-à-vis the policymaking process? That is, if each theory is “correct” in its conjectures, what should we expect to observe about policies produced from the respective forms of legislative organization – and how might this square with notions of representative government and democracy?

6. What is the “New Institutionalism”? Define the term. How is it related to (or different from) rational-choice and organizational theories? How can the New Institutionalism help us to understand institutional change? That is, what does the New Institutionalism offer us above-and-beyond other theories? Why is explaining the choice of institutions more difficult than the choice of policies under a given set of institutions? In other words, why is it easier to treat institutions as *exogenous* rather than *endogenous*?

**Part 4. Political Behavior. (No More Than One Question.)**

7. Who participates in American politics? What is the nature of this participation? Under what conditions does it occur? What effect—if any—does participation have upon government and U.S. politics more broadly?

8. 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. Evaluate the role of these structures and environments in shaping “citizens.” Can (some) citizens become better citizens, at least some of the time?