

American Politics Comprehensive Exam, August 2009

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 I – You must answer **ONE** of the following two questions:

1. "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 these frameworks address the economy adequately? How might they better do so to improve our understanding of American politics?

2. 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?

Part II -- American Political Development – You must answer **ONE** of the following two questions:

3. Over the course of American history, a number of important institutional changes have been pursued by reformers to limit the power and influence of political parties. Identify some of these important institutional changes and describe why reformers thought that they would limit party power and influence. Were these institutional changes in fact successful? Why or why not? What is the evidence? In recent decades a major development involving partisanship has occurred – most notably, the Democratic and Republicans have become more polarized. Many scholars and public officials consider this development troubling and have issued new calls for reform. What are the sources and consequences of this partisan divide? Does scholarship in the American Political Development field hold any lessons on the significance of the “new” American party system or whether the remedies that have been proposed to reform it might correct its more troubling features?

4. Assess the institutional capacity of courts to bring about major social change, citing appropriate literature and illustrative cases in support of your analysis. In the course of your essay, weigh the evidence for and against such familiar but often conflicting claims as these: "We have an imperial judiciary"; "The courts are generally behind the times"; "Courts are democratic institutions"; and "Courts are counter-majoritarian institutions." You should feel free to focus on the U.S. Supreme Court but need not do so.

Part III. Institutions – You must answer **ONE** of the following two questions.

5. Arguably, the most important failures of the American political system during the past decade are institutional failures on the part of public bureaucracies. Consider, for example, the response to Hurricane Katrina, the intelligence failures associated with 9-11, the management of the Iraq war, and the failure to police the actions of those American financial institutions that contributed to the current economic "Great Recession."

How does our understanding of the "New Institutionalism" help us analyze these failures? In your answer, take care to define what you mean by New Institutionalism and how is it related to, or differs from, rational-choice and organizational theories. What does New Institutionalism offer scholars of American politics above and beyond other theories that might help them understand these failures of our public bureaucracies? In your answer, consider how the relations between the branches of government are related to this issue.

6. In recent years, three competing theories of legislative organization have emerged: (1) the distributive approach, (2) the informational approach, and (3) the partisan approach.

First, describe each approach and discuss who the main authors are in each "camp," and then describe the assumptions of each theory with regards to both legislative structure and process. Specifically, what roles do committees, parties, and information play in each theory? Second, discuss each approach from an empirical perspective. What is the evidence for each, and how strong/persuasive is the evidence? Third, 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? Fourth, and finally, can each theory be "right" to some degree? That is, are they mutually exclusive, or can they be complementary and together help build our understanding of congressional organization, and, if so, how?

Part IV. Behavior – You must answer **ONE** of the following two questions:

7. Scholars of political behavior have covered a great deal of ground over the last fifty years. What's next for the subfield? Identify and describe two or three important questions that are still in play, and how they relate to the past half-century of work. Your answer should place current theoretical controversies in a context that takes account of the history of political behavior research and of the methodological approaches that should be brought to bear in resolving them.

8. The notable resistance of southern whites to Barack Obama's candidacy continues a half-century trend sparked by the demise of the southern Democratic monopoly of the Jim Crow era. From 1952 through 2004, the average level of support for Democratic presidential candidates fell by more than 15 points among white southerners while increasing slightly among whites in the rest of the country. Does last year's pattern reinforce that long-term shift, underlining the extent to which the Democratic Party's much-discussed "culture" problem is really a regional problem rooted in white racial resentment? What factors other than race have affected the political realignment in the South? Do recent Democratic gains in states like Virginia, North Carolina, and Florida suggest that the dimension of race might be declining in southern politics? Or might other political dynamics, such as the mobilization of African-Americans and Hispanics, better explain the Democrats' incursion into these traditional GOP strongholds? Your answer should describe and explain the various lines of research that might help us understand this question.