

American Politics Comprehensive Exam, May 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. One prominent definition of accountability is offered by IR scholars Ruth Grant and Robert Keohane in a 2005 APSR article: “Accountability implies that some actors have the right to hold other actors to a set of standards, to judge whether they have fulfilled their responsibilities in light of these standards, and to impose sanctions if they determine that these responsibilities have not been met.”

Given this definition, how is democratic accountability exercised in American democracy? What role do citizens, parties, media, interest groups, elites or institutions have in enabling or hindering the practice of democratic accountability (standards, judgment, sanctions) towards leaders?

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. How do we understand the Obama Administration's domestic policy agenda from an American Political Development perspective? Does the \$787 billion economic stimulus bill signed by President Obama and other features of his administration's domestic program potentially represent a major political development, a durable shift in inherited patterns of governance that will reconfigure American politics? Or is it simply a larger, more expensive version of politics as usual? What are some of the strengths and weaknesses of APD in assessing a president's domestic policy failures and accomplishments? What APD methodologies can be employed to evaluate policy outcomes? How do they differ from the tools used by economists and policy analysts in evaluating policy outcomes?

4. 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?

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

5. What is the "New Institutionalism"? How is it related to (or different 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 institutional change? Why do New Institutionalist scholars turn to "transactions costs" to explain institutional change and development? To what extent can both rational-choice and organizational theories of institutional change (and development) be considered "functionalist"? Is the New Institutionalism also susceptible to the "trap" of functionalism?

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, briefly describe each approach and discuss who the main authors are in each "camp," and then describe the assumptions of each theory with regard to both legislative structure and process. Specifically, what role do committees and parties play in each theory? Second, discuss each approach from an empirical perspective. What is the evidence for each, and how strong or persuasive is the evidence? Is each theory evaluated against both other theories? Third, what are the normative implications of each theory for 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. Given the strong correlation between vote choice and pre-existing attitudes, e.g., partisan identification, incumbent approval, perceptions of the national economy at the individual level coupled with the predictability of aggregate election outcomes based on presidential approval, economic conditions and domestic and foreign tranquility, how do scholars justify arguing that election campaigns matter?

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?