

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

**American Politics Comprehensive Exam
August 2011**

Students taking the exam as a MAJOR have seven 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 texts, 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. 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.

On each essay please indicate clearly which question you are answering.

Part I -- Overview

You must answer ONE of the following two questions

1. In 1961 Robert Dahl posed a [the?] question at the center of the study of American politics: “Who Governs?” Write an essay that evaluates what scholars of American politics have to say about this question—or the somewhat broader question of who has power in American politics. Your essay should cover material from at least two of the three major divisions of the field (APD, Institutions, Behavior) and should give attention to the substance of empirical findings as well as the different theoretical and methodological approaches that different scholars bring to this question.
2. Does the American political system, as it actually functions, fulfill the standards of republican democracy, particularly with regard to political equality and representation? Drawing from the empirical literature in American politics, your answer should address the ways in which American political institutions, organizations, and mass behavior do and do not function in ways consistent with generally-accepted norms of democracy. Note that we are not interested in a theoretical defense of certain democratic norms or theories over others (choose a few general standards and move on) but rather on what political science has suggested about how the system actually functions and whether those findings are consistent with general expectations for an ideal democracy. Finally, your essay should identify new directions in which future research might go to better our understanding of the quality of political representation.

Part II -- American Political Development

You may answer ONE of these questions

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. 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?

Part III -- Institutions

You may answer ONE of these questions

5. Studies of the behavior of political elites – legislators, chief executives, bureaucrats, judges, parties, interest groups, etc. – often fall into one of two camps. One camp begins with the assumption that individuals and groups are rational actors; the other camp rejects this assumption and looks to psychology for alternative theoretical frameworks. What are the strengths and weaknesses of these competing approaches, and what have we learned from them? Do you see any areas where the two approaches could fruitfully be combined? Your discussion should encompass scholarship on at least two types of institutions.
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 theoretical approach: discuss the assumptions of each with regard to both legislative structure and process, focusing specifically on the roles that committees and parties play. Second, discuss each approach from an empirical perspective, assessing how strong/persuasive the evidence for each is and whether each theory is evaluated against both other theories. Third, 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 do those expected policies 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 -- Political Behavior

You may answer ONE of these questions

7. Many scholars studying opinion at the individual level draw attention to ways in which the American public falls short of what democratic theory requires. Others point to the "miracle of aggregation" to argue that things may not be so bad, after all. Describe the basic findings in each of these traditions, and discuss who you think is right, or more right. How should we understand the disjunctures between these two literatures?
8. 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.