

American University Department of Government

M.A. COMPREHENSIVE EXAMINATION

American Politics/Applied Politics

Fall 2009

This exam consists of questions drawn from the field of American Politics and questions drawn specifically from our Applied Politics concentration offered through the Public Affairs and Advocacy Institute, the Campaign Management Institute, and the Women in Politics Institute.

DIRECTIONS: You will write three essays. You should be able to demonstrate your familiarity with the relevant literature that pertains to the questions you choose to answer. Do not rely on the same literature for different questions.

- **All** students must answer **one** question from **Section I**.
- Students in the **Applied Politics** concentration must answer **one** question from **Section II** and **one** question from **Section III**.
- Students not in the Applied Politics concentration may answer two questions from Section II or one from Section II and one from Section III.

Clearly identify clearly the questions you choose to answer. Please use 12-point type, double-space, and standard margins when preparing your essays.

SECTION I

1. Rational choice theory is, arguably, the dominant paradigm for the study of American politics. Nonetheless, many scholars seriously dispute its utility in studying politics. Discuss rational choice theory, including the areas in which it has enriched our understanding of the political world and in which it has not added any theoretical or empirical leverage. What unanswered questions in political science could benefit from a rational choice approach? Are there areas of study that have been harmed by the perspective?
2. Research on practical politics, such as public policy agenda setting, the policy process, and campaign strategy, has often failed to meet the standards of contemporary political science, including the careful definition and measurement of concepts, the rigorous specification and testing of propositions, and the use of empirical theory to develop hypotheses and explain findings. Comment on whether and how political science has gone beyond description to attempt an explanation of behavior and reach generalizations. Outline a proposal to scientifically study some aspect of the political world that is currently understood only through anecdotes and ad hoc analyses, including a clear research question, a testable hypothesis, a plan for data collection, and appropriate analysis of the data.

SECTION II

1. Using the United States Supreme Court as your baseline, write an essay in which you consider the following questions: Are judges guided solely by factors that we associate with the law—rules, principles of jurisprudence, institutional arrangements and legal precedent—when they decide a case? Or do judicial decisions reflect personal biases, policy preferences, and institutionally-induced strategic considerations couched in the authoritative language of the law? Is it possible to “model” judicial decision making by defining and measuring the personal attitudes of judges, taking into consideration their social backgrounds, policy goals, and desire to please external audiences? Or does constructing a model that identifies and emphasizes legal factors offer a better approach to explaining judicial behavior?
2. Describe what it means for a president to “go public.” How do presidents implement such strategies? What are the pros and cons of “going public”? Be sure to discuss relevant political science literature and examples from history (recent or otherwise).
3. The famous saying from Bill Clinton’s 1992 campaign, “it’s the economy, stupid,” explains a significant amount of voting behavior, except when it doesn’t. What competes with economic considerations when people are deciding for whom to vote? Discuss evidence of economic voting as well as evidence of issue voting and voting based on partisanship or ideology.
4. Central to the study of the U.S. Congress is the role of committees in shaping legislation. Discuss the political science literature on the topic, particularly on the role of committees today and the way that their role has changed over time; whether committees shape legislation according to committee members’ preferences or the preferences of the entire Congress; and the interplay between political parties and committees.

SECTION III—Applied Politics

1. You have been awarded \$900,000 to study the politics and impact of interest groups and lobbying on public policy making. Describe a specific domestic problem, the goals to solve the problem, the program, and strategies and tactics of interest groups and lobbyists involved in the passage and the implementation of the program, and the impact of the program on solving the original problems. Be sure to discuss the role of the interest groups using a model of decision making.
2. When the 111th Congress convened in January 2009, 84 percent of the members of the House of Representatives and 83 percent of U.S. Senators were men. In light of the fact that women comprise more than 50 percent of the U.S. population, scholars, practitioners, and politicians tend to conclude that women's numeric under-representation is a concern. Based on the literature, provide

three general explanations for the dearth of women in Congress. Then, assess prospects for eventual gender parity based on each.

3. There has been much discussion of the role of candidates' campaign messages in the 2008 presidential election. Messages have also been a topic of discussion in the upcoming gubernatorial races in New Jersey and Virginia. Discuss why a candidate's campaign message is so important in a campaign, and analyze what makes a message successful and unsuccessful.