

AMERICAN POLITICS COMPREHENSIVE EXAM

January 27, 2012

Rules and Instructions

- You have eight hours to complete this examination.
- Please answer 3 questions – each from a different section (this means that there will be one section from which you do not answer any question).
- The answers to all questions combined may be no more than 20 double-spaced pages (with one-inch margins all around and a twelve-point font).
- Make sure to answer the questions you choose fully – you should draw on the relevant literature, provide examples, and pay particular attention to relevant controversies the literature, discipline, and subfield.
- The material you use and cite in the answer to any one question should not substantially overlap the material you use in other questions.
- Good luck!

Political Behavior

1. What role does partisanship play in shaping citizens' political behavior in the United States? Discuss both voting behavior (including turnout) and public opinion. Under what circumstances is partisanship more or less influential? Is it more powerful today than it was, say, 40 years ago?
2. The mass media are sometimes referred to as an unelected branch of government; they have substantial political influence and power over individuals' political behavior and opinions. How valid is this assessment? In formulating your argument, be sure to review the literature on "media effects," document the evidence for and against the media's impact, and specify the audience most susceptible to media effects.

Congress

1. The centrality of political parties in Congress has been the subject of debate for decades. Whereas David Mayhew once wrote that "no theoretical treatment of the United States Congress that posits parties as analytic units will go very far," recent work by John Aldrich, Gary Cox, David Karol, Seth Masket, Matthew

McCubbins, David Rohde, Steven Smith, and others suggests that parties must be factored into theoretical and empirical models of legislative behavior. Assess the claim that “parties matter” both over time and across space (Senate and House). Be sure to discuss the various indicators of “party effects” and how well they are suited to uncover whether parties exert an independent influence over legislators’ behavior.

2. In their textbook on congressional politics, Burdett Loomis and Wendy Schiller emphasize the tension that exists between the two main functions of Congress: representation and lawmaking. Review the political science scholarship so as to explain the origins of the tension and the mechanisms the chambers have in place to reconcile differences and come to agreements.

The Presidency

1. “Presidential power is the power to persuade.” Critically assess and evaluate this claim, paying attention not only to the conceptual argument in the statement, but also the evidence that scholars have presented for and against it.
2. The debate at the Constitutional Convention was largely shaped by questions of how much power to vest in the Executive. Ironically, the document that ensued was quite unclear regarding the president’s powers; and, as Terry Moe and William Howell (1999, 135) explain, “The actual powers of the three branches . . . both in an absolute sense and relative to one another, cannot be determined from the Constitution alone.” We should hardly be surprised, therefore, that over the course of the last two centuries, presidents have repeatedly tested the boundaries of the Constitution, always attempting to increase their power with respect to the other branches of government. How successful have presidents been in testing these boundaries? And what institutional constraints have stymied them?

Approaches to the Study of American Politics / Pro-Seminar

1. Scholars of American politics study political behavior and institutions using a variety of approaches. Why is political science so intellectually pluralistic? Do approaches rise and fall because they prove superior or inferior, or are political scientists just faddish?
2. What has rational choice theory contributed to the study of American political institutions and behavior? In developing your argument, consider not only where rational choice has been especially powerful and productive, but also where it has taken us down inappropriate paths, or overlooked, distorted, or simplified away important aspects that theories of political institutions and behavior should ultimately take into account.