

AMERICAN POLITICS COMPREHENSIVE EXAM

May 2012

Rules and Instructions

- You have eight hours to complete this examination.
- Please answer 3 questions – each from a different section.
- 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. To what extent are changes in public policy responsive to public opinion? What are the mechanisms of that responsiveness? Do elected leaders pander to the existing views of the electorate, or are they more likely to try to manipulate those views?
2. The “non-attitudes” hypothesis has played a major role in the development of theories of public opinion. Is it over-rated? In answering this question, outline and evaluate the non-attitudes hypothesis, along with alternative versions of it. Pay particular attention to distinguishing between the conceptions of Converse and Zaller.

Political Institutions

1. Observers often bemoan that politics in Washington, DC, result in “gridlock.” First, what is gridlock and how do we know when gridlock occurs? Second, discuss the underlying assumption that gridlock is inherently bad for democracy. Third, discuss the factors that lead to gridlock (and conversely, the factors that make gridlock less likely to occur)? In answering this question, be sure to

incorporate the role of preferences and institutions and how they interact in producing gridlock. Be specific; employ relevant examples.

2. Institutional theory is more fully developed in the study of Congress than it is in the study of the presidency. Why is this the case? In answering this question, be sure to pay attention to various approaches to the study of Congress and the presidency and assess their overall theoretical contributions to the field.

Approaches to the Study of American Politics / Pro-Seminar

1. Compare and contrast the merits of employing rational choice theory to study American political institutions versus American political 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.
2. What topic in the study of American politics do you view as the most important and understudied, and how would you fill the void? In answering this question, be sure to articulate the central question and/or puzzle associated with the topic, argue for the most promising theoretical approach(es) to shed light on it, and outline the research strategies you would utilize to conduct the research you propose. Ground this answer as extensively as possible in the appropriate literature that does exist.