American Politics Exam – Spring 2015

Directions: You must choose three of these sections and write on one question from each. You are expected to support your arguments with adequate citations to appropriate literature, but you are reminded to respond to the questions that are asked. Please be aware that your exam is evaluated both on the quality of the individual answers as well as on its overall quality. Use of the same material to answer several different questions is one sign of weakness in that regard and it may result in a failure in the overall evaluation even though each individual question is considered to be satisfactory. Please limit your answers to approximately 2500 words per question, not including bibliography.

General

1. We appear to be living in an age of intense political polarization and this is assumed by many to be a bad thing. What explanations can be offered to explain why such a condition has come about? What, if anything, can be done to decrease such polarization? What about the argument that polarization is actually healthy and historically not uncommon for the political system, giving citizens a real choice over the policy direction of the country?

2. V.O. Key famously observed that "unless mass views have some place in the shaping of policy, all the talk about democracy is nonsense." Drawing from the literature on both mass behavior and institutions in American politics, assess the current quality of American democracy by this standard of mass opinion shaping public policy.

3. Of the political science research projects, including books and articles, on US politics written in the last decade or so, which will become a classic – will define the field for years to come? Be clear in explaining your choice, how the research impacted the field, describing the work that led up to it and that has come after.

4. What has pluralism meant for American politics, both in theory and practice? Discuss the most important versions of pluralism provided by political scientists and political theorists. Evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of these pluralist alternatives.

Institutions

1. Is the U.S. Congress, as some would claim, “dysfunctional?” Or does it continue to operate, generally speaking, in ways that the framers would approve of? Be sure to provide appropriate congressional literature to support your answers.
2. Assess the state of scholarship on the U.S. Senate, circa 2015. Historically, there has been considerably less work done on the Senate than the House. Why is this? Has recent work by Steve Smith, Barbara Sinclair, Frances Lee, and others rectified this imbalance, or is literature still oriented toward a more quantitative, House-based set of findings?

3. The multidimensional spatial model of voting in Congress is characterized by extreme instability and frequent policy change. In the “real” Congress, we observe more stability and far less policy change than models suggest. This gap between theory and reality has existed for some time. What have we learned about this gap and what problems remain unsolved?

4. Researchers argue that the basic elements shaping the presidency include, 1) the type of person occupying the office, 2) the nature of the office, and 3) the external environment of the office. Analyze each of these elements in terms of their relative importance in shaping the contemporary presidency. What are the relevant indicators that are useful in identifying and measuring the distinguishing characteristics of each element?

5. “President Obama should have acted more like President Johnson as he sought to enact an ambitious agenda of domestic policies during his tenure as the chief executive.” Discuss this statement in terms of what we, as political scientists, know about presidential-congressional relations over the past fifty years.

Political Behavior and Elections

1. A decade or more of research on deliberative democracy, partisan and ideological consistency, and political reasoning suggests that the more partisans learn about and talk about an issue with others, the more they harden their positions and the less likely they are to compromise. Discuss the relevant empirical literature and its implications for a democratic republic where informed and engaged citizens are viewed as the ideal.

2. One of the central questions in research on American political behavior has been the extent to which citizens are “politically sophisticated.” What are the central findings of this literature? Are these research findings dependent on the various ways in which scholars define and measure political sophistication? To what extent have Americans become more or less sophisticated over time? Does it really matter? Explain.

3. We learned during the job interview season that many in the field of political behavior are excited about experiments. What benefits and costs await behavior scholars as they embrace experimental science? Please cite literature on experiments and behavior experiments specifically.
4. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 helped eliminate many obstacles to minority political participation in the United States. However, minority electoral and non-electoral participation remains lower than Anglos in the United States. Compare and contrast African American, Asian American, and Latino participation levels. What factors influence this low level of participation, and the disparity between Anglos and minorities, for both electoral and non-electoral activities? Can this lower rate of participation among minorities be increased in the future?

5. Does campaign advertising make a difference? When, how, and under what circumstances? In writing your answer, critically evaluate the strategies used by authors advancing empirical claims.

**Parties and Interest Groups**

1. Frank Sorauf outlined the idea that political parties consist of the party in the electorate, the party in government, and the party organization. This formulation remains standard. Circa 2015, discuss the relevance of this formulation, especially in terms of outside money rules, amounts, and sources, as well as the overall relationship between organized interests and parties in a polarized, partisan era.

2. Discuss the role of third parties in American politics, both historically and theoretically. Based on the political science scholarship, argue why or why not a viable third party movement would be able to challenge the two major parties.

3. As heard on CNN: “The rise of partisanship in Congress has completely crowded out interest groups. Members of Congress are so tightly aligned with their political parties that there is virtually no room left for old-fashioned lobbying and pressure politics.” Do you agree or disagree? Why? Please respond and employ relevant literature.

4. Given that organized interests spend at least $3.5 billion (and probably more like $7 billion) per year for lobbying, it would seem a given that these interests know that this “investment” pays off. But scholarly studies across various fields do not necessarily support the idea that lobbying by interests affects policy outcomes. Assess the lobbying-policy linkage. What are the key substantive and methodological issues that render the body of findings less than definitive? Briefly suggest the outlines of a study that might help us understand the role of lobbying more fully.

**State and Local**

1. The study of parties and elections at the national level is a very important component of the intellectual development of the American politics field and remains a featured part of the discipline. But the study of local elections is far less developed. Why is this? Do we need entirely different theories to understand local elections, or are at least some of the most powerful theories about parties and elections at the national level potentially applicable to the study of local elections?
2. Describe the various major lines of work that have made political economy a dominant framework in the study of urban politics in the U.S. What is your assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of these differing political economy approaches with respect to the understanding of local-level politics and policymaking in the U.S.?

3. One potential advantage of studying sub-state governments in the U.S. is that the diversity of institutional arrangements for governing might provide insights into how institutions matter. But do different institutional arrangements actually make a difference, and if so in what way? Drawing from the relevant empirical literature, outline what we know about the impact of differing forms of governing institutions at the local level in the U.S. (Note: Regional institutions as well as city-specific institutions should be considered).

4. Although research on state politics has been growing in the past decade, many scholars appear to believe that state politics research is “minor league.” Make an argument for why this research is important. How should the approach of state politics researchers differ from researchers examining national politics, if at all?