U.S. Politics Preliminary Examination Fall 2015

Directions: You must choose three of the 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.

*Please have exam in by 5pm Tuesday and completed bibliography within 48 hours of exam.

General Question

1. Linkage institutions play an important role in American politics. Choose two linkage institutions and assess their importance to the political system. Explain how these institutions can foster, as well as dampen representation. Do these linkage institutions present a problem for a representative democracy?

2. With partisan divisions in the electorate and in Congress at apparent historical highs, has America become ungovernable? Make use of the literature to support your argument.

3. Do identity social movements (for example- black lives matter) represent something new and consequential for American politics? Be sure to discuss and analyze their defining characteristics (both their similarities and differences), the ways they are similar and different from social movements of the past, and the reasons you think they will (or will not) have lasting importance. Be sure to incorporate the best political science literature on these matters.

4. Much of the current debate on American politics deals with the impact of growing economic inequalities on American democracy. At the same time, political and partisan polarization have grown substantially; indeed, the correlation of inequality and partisan polarization is extremely high (.9+). In a well-developed essay, address this correlation, the possible lines of causality, and the implications (if any) for American democracy.

Institutions

1. Frances Lee titled her book on the U.S. Senate (and by inference the U.S. Congress) Beyond Ideology. What did she mean? Why is it important to move beyond ideology in addressing legislative politics? How does her work fit with the research of Steve Smith, Aldrich and Rohde, Keith Krehbiel, and Poole and Rosenthal? In the end, what is the independent effect of party within the U.S. Congress?
2. Congressional scholars have generally concluded that we are living in an era of great, perhaps unsurpassed, partisanship and party power. If that is so, why doesn’t the U.S. House act a lot more like the British House of Commons? What does the political science literature have to tell us about the problems, especially given the well-developed consensus on party power?

3. The literature on presidential popularity and policymaking suggests that presidents enter office with limited political capital and that this capital will disappear whether a president actually “spends” it for specific purposes or not. Capital can be refreshed to some extent by major events, including crisis. However, scholars have often argued that this refreshed capital is itself of only limited usefulness by the president in his battles with Congress and the bureaucracy. After Bush and Obama should we rethink our theories of political capital?

4. Circa 2015, discuss the concept of “presidential power.” What is it? How do we know? How do we know if a president is powerful? What are the criteria? Is “presidential power” a useful idea, or does it get in the way of understanding the nature of the presidency?

Behavior

1. Can the public recognize political fact from fiction? Opinion surveys show that a significant portion of the public often maintains beliefs inconsistent with facts, even when the facts are well known and supported by scientists. How can this be? Why do people believe this way? Political science offers several theories that can help explain the phenomenon. First, review these theories and the extant research based upon them. Second, describe the processes by which people hold false beliefs and the consequences for democratic theory. Finally, does current theory or empirical research offer any way to remedy the problem of false beliefs?

2. Rational choice scholars often make simplifying assumptions about the beliefs and desires of political actors. Scholars who study political behavior often respond that these simplifying assumptions exclude important information, weakening the overall explanatory power of ”behavioral” or “institutional” approaches. Select an area of political inquiry and consider the extent to which our understanding has been advanced by these approaches. Are there instances in which one approach has produced greater progress than the other? Are there conditions under which one approach is more appropriate than the other? Have the different approaches interacted successfully? What are the areas, if any, of potentially fruitful collaboration?

3. Do you think it is necessary to acknowledge the role of gender in political behavior? Explain why? Also, discuss the implications that you see for the evolution of political science in relation to studying these gender distinctions.
4. Perhaps the most influential research in political behavior appeared many years ago (1964), The Nature of Beliefs Systems in the Mass Public by Philip Converse. Why was this piece so important? Discuss the influence of Converse’s classic work on subsequent work in the field of political behavior. Finally, compare Converse’s work to the contemporary classic written by Zaller and Feldman (1992), A Simple Theory of Survey Response…” How does the more recent work answer some of the more troubling questions posed by Converse?

**Parties and Organized Interests**

1. Why do organized interests of all stripes lobby? How do they assess their success? How do “investments” in lobbying compare to those for electoral politics? In the end, what direct evidence do we have that lobbying is effective? What inferential evidence is there that it is effective?

2. The literature on presidential popularity and policymaking suggests that presidents enter office with limited political capital and that this capital will disappear whether a president actually “spends” it for specific purposes or not. Capital can be refreshed to some extent by major events, including crisis. However, scholars have often argued that this refreshed capital is itself of only limited usefulness by the president in his battles with Congress and the bureaucracy. After Bush and Obama should we rethink our theories of political capital?

3. Respond to the following assertion: “Race, not ideology, is the defining characteristics of the principal divide between America’s two political parties.” Draw upon the literature to evaluate the accuracy of the statement at the aggregate or individual level. If true, what implications do you see for the evolution of American politics? If false, why does this perception, the centrality of race to partisanship, persist in academic and political discourse?

**State & Local**

1. The effects of state political variables are virtually impossible to detect in statistical analysis. Parameters for many state-level variables are not identified, so that one cannot differentiate the effect of being in a southern state, for example, from the effect of a legacy of slavery or racial segregation. As a result, efforts to search for state-level predictors are almost always bound to fail. Discuss, introducing whatever counter-examples you can muster from the literature.

2. Over the past few years, many observers have argued that blue states have gotten bluer and, especially, red states have gotten redder. Why is this so? How does such a pattern affect policy-making in the states? How does it affect federalism? If you were going to study this phenomenon, briefly outline a question and propose a way to study that question.