Public Policy Prelim, Fall 2006

Instructions: Answer one question from each part of the examination for a total of three answers. Please identify the question you are answering at the beginning of each essay. You are limited to 3000 words for answering each question.

Strong answers make coherent and forceful arguments, are grounded in scholarly literature, and make use of relevant examples. They show an understanding of current research and issues. Weak answers often fail to make an argument or do so without reference to relevant literature. Exams are graded as a whole; repeating arguments in response to different questions weakens the overall exam. Good luck!

Part I: General Public Policy Questions

1. Is public policy in the U.S. responsive to broad public opinion? Outline what we know so far about this provocative question. Then offer a critique of this line of research, suggesting what aspects of it are most promising and what theoretical and/or methodological issues need to be resolved in order for the field to have more definitive knowledge about this question.

2. Public policy scholars study many of the same phenomena that are examined by students of chief executives, legislatures, bureaucracies, and even elections and public opinion. The dividing line between the two groups of scholars is often hazy, although we can usually recognize it. What are the strengths of a broad focus on the policy process instead of a narrower on the latter institutions or behavior? In what ways is research on relatively general policy matters able to create unusual knowledge? Alternatively, what is the value to public policy scholars of more focused research on individual institutions or processes?

3. Elinor Ostrom recently argued that political science, as a discipline, has not focused on identifying the circumstances under which different theoretical approaches improve and contribute to our understanding of behavior (Ostrom 2006). What theoretical lenses in public policy are vulnerable to this criticism and why? And which theories may, in fact, contradict Ostrom’s argument, and why? (Ostrom, E. 2006. “Converting Threats into Opportunities” PS.: Political Science and Politics, Vol 40(1): 3-12.)

Part II: Stages of the Policy Process

1. There is by now a huge body of literature on agenda setting in the U.S. policymaking process. What are the most important things that we know about agenda setting as a result of all of this research? Explain, with reference to the relevant literature. By contrast, what aspects of agenda setting are not yet well understood? Explain, again with reference to the appropriate literature.

2. Understanding public policy via a stages approach segments various aspects of policy making. Discuss connections (or lack thereof) between the policy adoption literature and the policy implementation literature. How do these two areas of research inform each other? If they aren’t sufficiently informative, suggest potential opportunities for adoption and implementation researchers to learn from each other.

3. Much of policy making is based on information, however, in today’s world, finding information is not as difficult as processing information. Policymakers are constantly inundated with information from agencies, analysts, interest groups, media and citizens to name a few. The information ranges from heavily biased to poor in quality to neutral. In what ways does “information” factor into the
policy process? How is information used (and not used) by policymakers? How do policy subsystems help structure information in the process?

Part III: Business and the Economy

1. Although we generally think of policy formulation and adoption as something that happens in elected political institutions, bureaucracies are also active in the formation and adoption of public policies. Write an essay in which you discuss how regulatory bureaucracies have and/or can influence the formation and adoption of policies by other political institutions. In addition, explain how recent literature describes how different regulatory bureaucracies shape policy during implementation. Do the findings have implications for policymaking generally and/or bureaucratic policymaking specifically? [DHM]

2. Within the United States, there is a long standing debate regarding the role of policies in promoting economic performance and policies protecting citizens from the vagaries of a complete “free market system.” Identify how – if at all – general theories of the policy making process contribute to either elements of this debate (promoting economic growth and protecting some from an unencumbered free market).

3. The independent regulatory commission is a constitutional, administrative and historical oddity. A spate of commissions, created between 1887 and 1934, were explicitly charged with regulating all sorts of businesses, from banks to radio stations. And yet large pieces of economic policy were left under the control of non-independent non-regulatory commissions, such as the environment, anti-trust and pharmaceuticals. Write an essay that has 3 parts. First, survey the administrative structures that have been put in place to regulate the economy. Second, address the question of whether or not it makes a difference if a policy domain is controlled by an independent commission. Third, how can we explain the fact that some areas are under the control of commissions and others are not?

4. When Bauer, Pool and Dexter wrote their classic study of American Business and Public Policy, the painted a picture of corporations with minimal political wherewithal, expertise, or impact on public policy. In the 40 years since the publication of that study, has our understanding of the role of business in policy formation changed a great deal? If so, were Bauer, Pool and Dexter incorrect? Or has “the real world” really changed?