Public Policy Prelim, Spring 2008

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. Although the discipline has historically emphasized how various aspects of the political process affect policy outcomes, a quite different line of scholarship has emerged which examines the impact of public policies on democratic processes, with special attention to the empowerment versus the disenfranchisement effects. Provide a critical review of this literature. Overall, does it provide adequate support for its claim that public policy shapes democracy?

2. Public policy is proposed, acted upon, and implemented by political institutions. Students of political institutions have had much to say about how institutions affect policy outcomes (or the lack thereof). After 30+ years of studying public policy, what can policy scholars inform us about the institutions that make policy? Develop at least two testable hypotheses derived from the policy literature that would enhance our knowledge of institutions.

3. Explore how rational choice theory informs three theories of the policy process. Explain how rational choice elements are assumed or not and what the implications are for each theory.

4. Sabatier and other policy scholars argue that temporal issues are fundamental to understanding any major public policy issue. Despite this contention, empirical policy research often examines an issue at one point in time. Identify one empirical research project that adequately accounts for temporal change and describe the “value added” from explicitly considering this variable. Additionally, identify one research article that does not vary over time. Describe the extent to which adding time may or may not alter any conclusions from this work.

Part II: Stages of the Policy Process

1. Is the principal agent model useful for understanding policy implementation? Why or why not?

2. Choose a stage of the policy process that you believe is the most over tilled and explain why. Is there anything new left to learn in this area?

3. Outline the distinctions between Schattschneider’s general theory of politics that revolves around the scope of conflict and Baumgartner and Jones’ conceptualization of punctuated equilibrium to explain periods of stability and change in policy. Is this simply new wine in an old bottle?

Part III:

NOTE: In the Spring 2008 Public Policy exam, Part III was a set of three questions, tailored to the research of each student. Each student received only one of the following sets of three questions (Health Policy, Education Policy, or Energy Policy). Future exams may or may not be formatted in
the same fashion. Check with your exam chairperson.

Health Policy

1. Can theories of the policy process explain why health policy cycles to the top of the political agenda every 10 to 13 years or so?

2. The United States faces public health challenges on multiple fronts: for example, access to health care, growing disparities in health, cost of health care, emerging infectious diseases, obesity trends, and an aging population and associated costs. Identify one critical issue area considered under the label of health policy. Characterize the state of the research literature in this area. What are the major research questions underpinning this scholarship? What theories are used to answer the questions? Are there typical research design and/or data quality issues?

3. The Evans and Stoddart model explaining the determinants of health includes social, physical and genetic factors all influencing an individual’s health and well-being. This view is widely shared among social epidemiologists and health policy scholars. Evaluate the contribution of the Evans and Stoddart approach as a public policy research agenda. Using criteria developed in the Sabatier book (Fostering the Development of Policy Theory), discuss the contribution of this work, and research that relies upon this framework, for understanding health.

Education Policy

1. What theory of policy change does the best job of explaining the federal government’s changing role in the past twenty years with respect to primary and secondary education? Identify at least one other theory of policy change that you considered and rejected. Explain how/why the theory that you chose is superior.

2. What theoretical insights about policy implementation are best exemplified by implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act? Does the evidence about implementation of this act contradict any theoretical claims about implementation?

3. Provide supporting evidence as well as a thorough critique of one theory you believe is the most promising for understanding education policy in the United States. How well (if at all) does your theory explain the persistent racial and economic segregation and biases found in public schools? Identify the aspects of education policy where your theory performs the best and where it performs poorly.

Energy Policy

1. Energy policy occupies the interests of many scholars who examine regulatory policy. However, the highly divisive and perhaps cultural nature of energy issues seems to make this issue distinct from other forms of regulatory policy. Make an argument for or against using theoretical analysis of energy policy as a means for expanding theory on regulatory policy generally.

2. Use two competing theories of the policy process to explain California’s energy deregulation and the subsequent Energy Crisis in the 1990s. Does one theoretical perspective provide a more plausible explanation than the other? And if so, why?
3. Alternative energy sources have failed to become as widely used as coal or oil. How do social science researchers explain this failure? Does research in any other policy domain suggest potential avenues for increased reliance on alternative energy sources?