Public Policy Prelim: Spring 2014

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.

The exam is due back by 5 pm the next day, but an extra 24 hours is allowed for the completed bibliography. Good luck!

Part I: General Public Policy Questions

1. Public policy in the US is sometimes substantially at odds with prevailing sentiments of the general public. How could this be? Outline what you see as the most theoretically compelling and empirically well-grounded explanations for this paradox of public opinion-public policy divergence in a democratic society. What limitations or problems are there in the research and theorizing on this matter?

2. Theories of public policy often have different expectations about which variables matter most to the process. Some public policy theories place preeminence on the role of institutions while other theories focus on the role of social behavior. Contrast an institutionally focused theory to one that emphasizes social behavior. Explain how these two theories differ and where they overlap. Evaluate the strength of the research that has been generated by each theory. Which theory has more potential for developing future public policy research and advancing knowledge of the policy process?

3. Pick two public policy theories. Drawing on existing research, briefly discuss how each theory has been used to advance the field of public policy in the past ten years. Focusing on the limitations and potential of each theory, assess how they could be improved and applied to advance the field of public policy in the next ten years.

4. Viewed from the perspective of enhancing our understanding of public policy, what do you see as the most important theoretical developments provided by scholars of interest groups in the U.S.? Explain what those theoretical developments are and why they are so important for our understanding of the policy process. Comment on the status of empirical test of those theoretical developments.
Part II: Stages of the Policy Process

5. Identify the strongest set of empirical literature contributing to our knowledge of one of the stages of the policy making process. Defend your selection. Why it is stronger than the empirical literature testing phenomena in other stages of decision-making.

6. Evaluate the theoretical and empirical treatment of bureaucracies in the public policy literature. What are the strengths and weaknesses to the dominant treatment of agencies in public policy research?

7. Agenda-setting is fundamentally about the politics of attention and attention dynamics in the political system. In this regard, the media plays an important role in the policy process in both shaping and echoing the policy agenda. Discuss how the public policy research treats the role of media in policy agenda-setting, and disagreements over its significance.

8. The power of the problem definition has been considered in a range of research. Clarify what this research suggests. Under what conditions do problem definitions matter and how do they matter for policy making?

Part III: Policy Specialty

9. Does one theory work better than another in explaining [Climate Change/Immigration/National Security/Counterterrorism]? Why or why not?

10. The August 2013 issue of the Policy Studies Journal presents six emerging theories of the policy making process (institutional collective action; ecology of games; policy regime perspectives; robustness framework; collective learning; and narrative policy framework). Select one of these theories and apply it to your substantive area. How would empirical research in your area benefit or change by the introduction of this new theoretical lens?

11. How might [Climate Change/Immigration/National Security/Counterterrorism] policy be fitted into any of the policy typologies that have preoccupied scholars in the public policy field? Are there problems in making it fit into the classic typologies? If so, what are the implications for theorizing about policy type? To the extent that it does fit into one or more categories of a major policy typology, what kinds of hypotheses about [Climate Change/Immigration/National Security/Counterterrorism] policy are thereby suggested? Does existing empirical research on [Climate Change/Immigration/National Security/Counterterrorism] policy provide any evidence relevant to such hypotheses? Explain.

12. [Climate Change/Immigration/National Security/Counterterrorism] remains a significant policy dilemma. What has been the role of subnational governments in this policy area? How has subnational activity made a difference on the nature of the problem?