Public Policy Prelim, Spring 2007

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. Public policy scholars have attempted to understand and explain the policy process as well as policy outcomes. Some scholars argue that “the preoccupation in mainstream quantitative methods with deducing a hypothesis and testing it against new cases may well inhibit theory building and development” and argue that case studies, typologies, and descriptive work are better tools for developing theory. How useful is descriptive work (case studies and typologies) in developing the field of public policy? Provide examples demonstrating the utility of descriptive work in public policy research. How do these qualitative examples compare to quantitative public policy research?

2. Consider at least three major theories (or theoretical frameworks) in public policy, choosing what you take to be the broadest and most influential. (a) Are they all theorizing about the same thing? Or about different things? Explain. (b) How does the overlap and/or differentiation in topic and scope of coverage of the theories affect the potential for theoretical integration in the subfield of public policy?

3. A central problem with most theories of the policy process is that few seem to have predictive power for explaining the future. Consider three theories and compare and contrast the predictive power of each one.

Part II: Stages of the Policy Process

1. 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 use) by policymakers? How do policy subsystems help structure information in the process?

2. Judging by the research and theory in the sub-field, we appear to be more interested in how policies are formulated (i.e., why we have the public policies that we do) than in what difference policies make (i.e., do the policies work, and what unintended impacts do they have). What are the strengths and limitations of the research that does try to generate more knowledge about what difference policies make? Are there elements of the work on how policies are formulated that might actually link up with the issue of their ultimate effectiveness?

3. Many important policy issues seem to reach the political agenda as a key issue every 8 to 10
years. Are policy agendas cyclical? Explain.

Part III: Business and the Economy

1. What theories and empirical evidence support the claim that the private sector can deliver services more efficiently and cheaper than government? Under what conditions does it “succeed” or not succeed? How is success defined and measured in the literature?

2. Use one more theories of public policy making to explain the rise of privatization in three issue areas.

3. Are the incentives to privatize government services that are presented to elected officials different from the incentives that confront appointees? On the basis of leading theories, would you expect to find a difference? Are the differences observable in “real life”? 