U.S. Politics Spring 2014 Prelim exam

Directions: You must choose three of these 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, Feb 11 and completed bibliography within 48 hours of exam.

General Questions


2. Much of the current debate on American politics deals with the impact of growing economic inequalities on American democracy. Clarify that debate and discuss the academic literature that most effectively addresses it.

3. How well does American public policy reflect the will of the people? What insights can we gather from current events involving issues such as health care, marijuana legalization, gay marriage, immigration, and gun control?

4. Samuel Huntington argued that America is a “settler society,” and our settlers were initially white, Anglo-Saxon Protestants (WASPs). Write an essay “On American Diversity” in which you trace WASP dominance in America and the successes and failures of WASPs in absorbing other cultures and people. How would leading political scientists and theorist who have focused on political development in America judge the American record in this regard? What explanations do they provide or suggest for these successes and failures? Which of Huntington's possible scenarios regarding America’s racial and ethnic future do you think will come to pass? Why?

Institutions

1. If the U.S. Congress is currently dysfunctional (or close to it), what role do elections for the House and Senate play in producing this dysfunctionality? You must define what you mean by congressional dysfunction and use the literature on the Congress and congressional elections to address this question.
2. Circa 2014, 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?

3. George Edwards argues that there are significant limits on the president’s ability to influence the public’s policy preferences. However, other authors have provided significant empirical evidence of presidential persuasion. Summarize this literature and develop an explanation for these conflicting research findings.

4. What does John Boehner’s experience as Speaker tell us about the value of the median voter theorem when applied to Congress, most notably that the number of legislators in the tails should not matter?

Behavior

1. There has been considerable debate in the literature on voting behavior about the role and nature of issue voting. Describe the concept of issue voting. What does the literature suggest about both the importance of issues and the ways in which issues affect the vote choice? What are some of the pitfalls in assessing the role of issues in voting behavior?

2. Do men and women significantly differ in their attitudes and policy priorities? Are there any issues on which all women can or ought to agree? Draw upon the literature on gender, as well as the renewed policy debates involving issues such as reproductive policy, workplace inequality, gun issues, and social welfare, for example.

3. For much of the 1950s and into the 1970s, political scientists virtually ignored the role of the media in political affairs, holding fast to the “minimal effects” paradigm. Examine the minimal effects perspective, outlining its key contribution to our understanding of the media and political communications generally. Then, compare and contrast minimal effects with our current understanding, highlighting the agenda setting, priming and framing phenomena. How has this change altered our perspective of the media and its impact on political affairs?

4. Do we need to update our understanding of who participates in politics?

Parties and Organized Interests

1. 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.

2. When Robert Salisbury claimed that institutions, not citizen-based organizations, were the dominant elements in the interest group politics, he challenged the next generation of scholars to re-shape the study of interest group politics. Discuss the central questions and
the way in which they have been reconsidered in the 3 decades since then (See “Interest Representation: The Dominance of Institutions,” American Political Science Review, 78 (1984): 64-76.)

3. Consider the role of money in politics over the past forty years. How has political science contributed to our understanding of money in politics, broadly defined? What five things do we know? What three things don’t we know? Take one of these and outline a strategy for understanding it.

4. Recent polls suggest that the percentage of independents in the populace is higher than in decades. Yet the notion that parties are stronger than ever is ubiquitous. Explain these conflicting perspectives.

State & Local

1. The U.S. includes a startling array of inter-local governing (or governance) institutions in metropolitan regions. Describe the most important types. How and why did we come to have such a variety? What do we know about the implications that these varied institutions have for inequality in metropolitan America?

2. Minorities and women have assumed greater leadership roles in subnational government over the past quarter century. What are the most important theories and research findings about such involvements? What important questions remain unaddressed? What kind of research would be most useful in filling in these gaps?

3. 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.

4. Some suggest that the American states are an ideal context for testing our big theories of politics and public policy. Making use of the empirical literature on subnational politics, make an argument that supports this claim.