U.S. Politics Preliminary Exam – Fall 2012

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.

General

1. How democratic is the American Constitution? What prompted the founders to incorporate various democratic and undemocratic features in our constitution. What undemocratic features have been removed via the amendment process, and what prompted these changes? What undemocratic features remain and why do these continue in effect?

2. Are we living in a post-racial era? Make an argument based on the literature on race and politics.

3. Much of the theoretical literature on democracy highlights the importance of deliberation and citizen input. However, the growing literature on deliberative democracy suggests that deliberation only hardens preexisting positions for most participants. How do we reconcile the empirical research with our theoretical ideals of democracy?

4. We have a separation-of-powers political system. We increasingly have a highly polarized electorate and an even more polarized legislative branch, with partisan voting patterns that approach those in parliamentary systems. We have major policy/structural issues before us, including but not limited to health care spending and delivery, global warming, education, and social security. What does the political science literature tell us about whether and how our politics can address policy stalemate? Are there institutional fixes for our inability to address these issues? If so, what are they? If not, why not?

National Institutions

1. There are many debates on how to best increase minority political representation. What is your position in the debate over the need to create and implement more majority-minority districts? Is one kind of representation better than another for minorities? How can someone determine whether minorities are well represented in the U.S. political system?

2. Has Terry Moe won his argument against the Neustadt perspective on understanding the presidency?
3. The public’s approval of the Supreme Court has fallen below 50% in recent years. How does the public’s view of the Court affect the Court’s behavior and the Court’s role relative to other branches of government?

4. The House is a pure majoritarian institution; the Senate is anything but. How do these core institutional elements affect the congressional policy process? Using the political science literature, assess three possible institutional changes that might make congressional decision-making more effective.

Political Behavior and Elections

1. Compare and contrast Morris Fiorina's theory of retrospective voting with the Columbia sociological model. How does each theory conceive party identification? What inferences about the voter and campaigns can be drawn from these conceptions of party identification? What theory do you regard as most fundamental to understanding American politics today? Why?

2. Citizens often seem uninformed about politics and policy. However, research from the past 15 years argues that citizens can still make voting choices that are consistent with their preferences. How can both statements be true?

3. Identify any gaps in the identity politics literature with respect to elections and campaigns. Offer a direction for future research. Do you think it is necessary to parse out research on elections and campaigns according to identity?

Parties and Organized Interests

1. How do organized interests affect public policy? Address both electoral and lobbying approaches. How do you assess the current state of the political science literature in dealing with the organized interest-policy linkage? Briefly outline one study that you think would improve our understanding.

2. A major debate in the study of American political parties concerns the state of the parties as crucial components of a democratic polity. Some argue that the parties are in decline as institutions, no longer able to meaningfully contribute to the functioning of a modern democracy. Others argue that parties have adapted to a changed environment and are not in a declining state, and remain valuable contributors to American democracy. Write an essay on the role of contemporary parties in the American political system, discussing the functions they perform and assessing their contributions to democracy. Should political parties be strengthened as institutions in either the policy or electoral processes? Do you have any suggestions for party reforms?

3. Prior to the 1970s organized interests, with the notable exception of unions, played a relatively minor role in electoral politics, with political parties having a virtual monopoly on campaign activity. Today, organized interests are prominent throughout campaigns, from the
selection of nominees to funding candidacies to ground and air wars during the general election campaign. What factors have led to the expanded role of organized interests in campaigns? Is this expanded role a positive or negative from the perspective of a healthy democracy?

Subnational Politics

1. The literature regarding state and local government attempts to ‘race to the bottom’ in a variety of policy areas appears to draw conflicting conclusions. Summarize this research and make an argument as to which side provides the strongest evidence.

2. In the U.S. federal system of government, states are supposed to serve as “laboratories of democracy”. Considering recent research, discuss how states succeed and how states fail in fulfilling this role.

3. Elinor Ostrom won a Nobel prize for her work on decentralized “self-governance” mechanism as effective devices for solving collective action problems. Elaborate on her theory and discuss the ways in which she has informed research on subnational governments. Have political scientists in this subfield given adequate attention to her work? If so, what have been the effects for our understanding of politics? If not, why has her work not had a larger impact?