U.S. Politics, Institutions, and Policy Prelim

Questions, Fall 2002

Directions. You must answer one question from the general section and must choose three of the remaining sections and write on one question from each. You are expected to support your arguments with adequate citations to appropriate literature, all in the context of answering the questions that are asked. Please limit your answers to approximately 2500 words per question.

Section I. General

1. In many areas of US politics, it is a problem that our observations and theories about individuals do not match up with our aggregate observations and theories. The problem has touched diverse areas, ranging from electoral partisanship to judicial decisionmaking. Choose 2 research areas and discuss the problem.

2. For many years political scientists attempted to formulate a general theory of politics, but these efforts seem to have decreased over the past 20 years. Identify potential candidates that might serve as a general theory of politics and discuss the merits of the specific theory as well as the merits of pursuing a general theory of politics.

3. Of the political science research projects, including books or articles, on U.S. politics written in the last decade, which will become a “classic” – will define the field for years to come? Be clear in explaining how your choice will make a significant impact on the field by describing the work that lead up to it and what work has come after it.

Section II. Congress and Presidency

1. Since the 1994 off-year elections, there has been near-complete partisan parity in the U.S. Congress. This complements the extended phenomenon of divided government, which has been the dominant condition of American national government since 1969. Based on the work of political scientists, what accounts for the partisan parity? In what ways does it flow from the same sources as those that produce divided government? Offer two scenarios that the political science literature would suggest as to how the era of partisan parity might end.

2. In recent years, the U.S. Senate has received an increasing amount of attention from congressional scholars (Lee and Oppenheimer, Schiller, Binder and Smith, Sinclair, Swift, among others). What do we know now – in 2002 – that we didn’t know a decade ago? Assess the role of understanding the Senate within the overall task of understanding legislative bodies. To what extent is understanding this chamber crucial to our overall understanding of: (a) Congress and (b) legislatures in general?

3. Scholars of political behavior and executive politics have long understood the notion of “rally effects,” whereby major crisis lead to surges in presidential popularity. The literature on presidential popularity and policymaking suggests that presidents enter office with limited political capital and that this capital will disappear whether a president actually “spends” it for specific purposes or not. Capital can be refreshed to some extent by major events, including crisis. However, scholars have often argued that this refreshed capital is itself of only limited usefulness by the president in his battles with Congress and the bureaucracy. Interestingly, in the case of President George W. Bush the rally effects of 9/11 appear to be particularly long lasting and have been effectively used by the president to gain congressional support for a number of policy proposals. Does this pattern suggest that we should rethink our theories concerning rally effects? How about our theories of presidential power and political
capital? Be sure to outline the literature and take a clear stand, perhaps stretching the limits of what we
currently think we know.

4. In the aftermath of 9/11, some have argued the need for expanded presidential control of the
bureaucracy, particularly those agencies involved in homeland security. What tools does the president
wield in controlling bureaucrats? What challenges remain? Is the president truly the “chief executive”?

Section III. Political Behavior

1. How useful is the concept of "social capital" to understanding citizen participation, orientations, and
policy outcomes in American politics? What are some of the major critiques of the use of the concept as
discussed by Robert Putnam? What areas of political science research might be enhanced if "social
capital" measures were included in the analysis?

2. Recently the debate over whether partisanship is declining has received renewed attention by political
scientists. Students of Congress point to increasing levels of partisanship in legislative voting, while
students of political behavior among citizens have generally suggested that party identification plays less
of a role in vote choice. Review the evidence and 1) make an argument as to whether partisanship is
increasing or decreasing, 2) discuss the question of whether two sets of research findings are really
asking the same question, and 3) do you think partisanship is still a useful concept for understanding
American politics?

2. Some scholars have argued that voters have little meaningful information about the political world.
Other researchers argue that voters are reasonably informed and competent to make decisions. How well
developed and coherent are the political belief systems of voters? Are voters capable of choosing
candidates effectively? How do the demands on voters vary in the different models of voting used by
scholars?

Section IV. Subnational

1. The field of comparative state politics has been characterized as both a body of research in disarray,
lacking coherent theory and direction, and as a vibrant growing field with important contributions to
political science as a discipline. Critique these two differing perspectives on state politics. In particular,
discuss the important contributions of this field to the discipline, as well as describing any weaknesses in
the field.

2. Cities are thought of as places of “culture and civilization” yet our theories of urban politics have
focused largely on the political economy. How have urbanists used the concept of culture as a
complement to and as a challenge to prevailing theories of urban politics? How should urbanists bring
culture into their understanding of city life in order to build more complete and accurate theories of
urban politics?

Section V. Parties and Interest Groups

1. Explain how changes in partisanship, campaigns, and campaign finance have changed the role of
political parties in American politics and government since 1960.

2. To what extent is the study of organized interests (or interest groups) central to the study of American
politics? You should explore the relevance of pluralism here as a model, as well as the roles of
organized interests in electoral, legislative, and regulatory politics. Why, in your estimation, have there
been so few recent attempts to use organized interests as a central concept for understanding American
politics?

3. Although the interest group literature has changed little in the past few years, a new body of work is being constructed around the issue of coalition formation among interest groups. Explain the theories employed in this emerging literature and discuss whether this literature tells us anything new about interest group formation, maintenance, and role in the policy process. Be sure not to simply review the literature but to also take a clear position on this new body of research. Also, discuss what we think we know and possible avenues for future research in this area.

Section IV. Public Law

1. Glendon Schubert proposed an attitudinal model of judicial decisionmaking in the late 1950s. Research on judicial making since then has gone all over the map, ranging from an emphasis on personal background, psychological uncertainty, personal partisanship and ideology, legal training, coalition building, and so forth. Still, most lawyers we meet insist that such studies are entirely a "waste of time" because judges interpret the law, rather than acting on the basis of their personal opinions. Discuss the contributions of modern social science to the study of judicial decisionmaking and address the criticism that has been expressed by so many lawyers.

2. Recently there has been an explosion of research on judicial decisionmaking at the state level. How is this research similar or different from earlier work at the national level? And how have, or how should, theories of judicial decisionmaking be revised to account for this new body of empirical findings?

3. Discuss the recent literature on agenda setting and institutional signaling between the U.S. Supreme Court and the other branches. Does one institution dominate?