US Politics Prelim: Fall 2006

Directions: You must choose three of these sections and write on one question for 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 cite items by the author’s last name, date, an abbreviated journal title or book title, and page number where appropriate, as in (Jones, 1986, APSR, p.15). It is not necessary to include a bibliography in your answer, but you may do so if you elect to. Within one week after submitting your answers, you must submit a bibliography to which the readers of the examination may refer in order to resolve any ambiguities in references. Please limit your answers to approximately 2500 words per question, not including bibliography.

Part I: General

1. In recent years, “Social Capital” has become a prominent idea in American politics research. Discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the scholarly literature utilizing this concept. How does the idea of social capital support or distract from our ideas regarding interest group behavior?

2. Principal Agent theory is commonly used to understand the dynamic relationship between political agents, such as legislators, executive officials, civil servants, and others. Outline the main contributions of this theoretical approach, along with exploring any weaknesses in the “principal agent” literature. After years of testing this theory, are we able to generalize the circumstances under which principals are likely to successfully exert control over agents (and if so, outline these circumstances)?

3. In what ways has American democracy expanded and contracted in the past century? How has the discipline of political science affected and reflected these changes? Be sure to cite the most important literature in the discipline in this regard.

Part II: National Institutions

1. What is the nature of presidential power, and how has the extent of this power changed over the past century? To what extent is the power and authority claimed, and often exercised, by George W. Bush different in amount and form from that claimed and exercised by previous presidents?

2. The U.S. Congress is more dominated by political parties today than at any time for at least a century. Why is this so? How did this condition come about? Will parties continue to dominate congressional politics, or will there be a return to a more decentralized, fragmented politics? Explain.

3. Compare and contrast two theories purporting to explain the institutional relationship between Congress and the bureaucracy. What are the merits and shortcomings of these theories as an explanation for the congressional-bureaucratic relationship? Under what circumstances do these theories work? What research questions do these theories leave out?

4. Discuss the impact of state political affairs on national politics. What sorts of state events have the greatest impact on national affairs? Can you isolate some general conditions under which national
politics appears to be “driven by” or “responsive to” events in the state and/or local governments?

Part III: Political Behavior and Elections

1. Is there such a thing as a real, mass public opinion in the U.S. (as reflected in survey data) or is the old argument about non-attitudes still as problematic as it ever was? Based upon the most recent research and theory as well as the classic literature, outline what we now know about this matter, with particular attention to any contingencies that should shape our conclusions.

2. Evaluate the ways in which campaigns matter and don’t matter in American politics. Be sure to evaluate the implications for democratic theory.

3. The classic texts of democratic theory assume that for a democracy to function properly the average citizen should be interested in, pay attention to, discuss and actively participate in politics. After some five decades of behavioral research, what can we say about this assumption? Are citizens knowledgeable, does it matter whether citizens are knowledgeable, and what are the implications for democratic theory?

4. Examine in detail the literature on media effects during presidential campaigns. Identify the circumstances where media effects are most likely to emerge. Consider both institutional and individual circumstances.

Part IV: Parties and Organized Interests

1. What role does organized interest money play in both the electoral and policy processes? How have changes in the federal campaign laws enacted since the early 1970s impacted the role of interest group financial support for parties and candidates?

2. American political parties have demonstrated a remarkable ability to adapt, survive, and even prosper over the past 175 years. Why is this so? In the end, is there something in the American political culture that has produced a resilient two-party system, or does it depend on the nature of our electoral and governmental institutions?

3. Suppose you want to form an organization to lobby for a national law requiring metal-detecting safety devices in all microwave ovens. What difficulties would you face and how would you overcome them? Cite appropriate literature.

Part V: Subnational Politics

1. Does the literature on intergovernmental relations in the U.S. provide important insights on what happened in the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and on what is likely to happen in the next few years as New Orleans struggles to recover? Drawing upon what you consider to be the best of contemporary research and theory in intergovernmental relations, provide an essay that either (a) shows the limitations of that literature in providing a rich and insightful interpretation of this case, or (b) shows the strengths of that literature in providing rich and insightful interpretations of the Katrina case.

2. Since Madison, we have thought of states as laboratories of democracy in which citizens can experiment with different policies that best fit local needs and preferences. Localities can be viewed in much the same way. Is this really the way our system works? Make an argument based
on empirical research evidence of innovative policy diffusion across subnational governments and from the bottom up (from subnational governments to the national government).

3. “Empirical political theories of urban politics emphasize the importance of interests and power. Normative political theories of urban politics emphasize the importance of the public good and justice.”

What work can be cited as upholding these generalizations? What work can be cited that is contrary to these generalizations? What has urban studies contributed to our understanding of how pure power politics has been constrained by normative and ethical concerns? What has urban studies contributed to our understanding of how the pursuit of the good and just political community is constrained by power politics? To what extent do these studies confirm (or refute) the idea that the best studies in urban politics combine empirical and normative concerns.