US Politics: Preliminary Examination
February 2008

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. 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.

I. General

1. American democracy is often thought of less as “rule by the people” than “popular control by the people.” From the perspective of “popular control by the people,” is American democracy stronger now than it was a half a century ago? In your answer, be sure to take into consideration research on the vehicles of citizen input such as elections, parties and interest groups, as well as political institutions such as Congress, the presidency and the courts.

2. In the past, textbooks on American government were often organized by such “grand theories” or “analytical frameworks” as pluralism and systems analysis, and it was hoped that research guided by such paradigms would yield more consensual understandings of American politics. Did any of these older paradigms bear fruit? Has a new paradigm emerged that offers much promise of dominating the study of American politics? In short, describe and analyze the major contenders – past and present - for “paradigm” status in the field. What are the implications of this state of affairs?

3. As George Bush pushed presidential powers beyond previous boundaries, and while the Congress has proved apparently incapable of (or unwilling to) rein in the executive, has the American political system of checks and balances become irretrievably unbalanced? Or are the growth of the executive, and the decline of the legislature, simply a natural response to expanding national and international responsibilities? What theoretical perspective best allows us to examine these questions? Why?

4. According to political scientists, the rules of the game have consequences. Across legislative, electoral, executive, partisan arenas, note at least three instances in which institutional rules directly affect the political or policy outcomes produced by a political institution. Were the consequences intended or not? Should we care, either as scholars or citizens?

II. National Institutions

1. More than thirty years ago, Richard Fenno stated, “It is the members who run Congress. And we get pretty much the kind of congress they want. We shall get a different kind of Congress when we elect different kinds of congressmen or when we start applying different standards of judgment to old congressmen.” In terms of the development of Congress over the 1950s through the present, evaluate how Fenno’s statement [updated to include both legislators both male and female] contributes to our understanding of the institution.

2. 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. After the Bush presidency, should we rethink our theories of political capital?

3. 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.

4. British political scientist John Owens has labeled contemporary U.S. politics as “Parliamentary government, American style.” What does he mean by this? What evidence supports his broad assertion? What evidence might contradict it? Can presidents and their political parties govern in a roughly parliamentary manner? What, ultimately, determines whether American politics can work in this way over the long term?

5. Recently there has been an explosion of research on judicial decision-making 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 decision-making be revised to account for this new body of empirical findings?

III. Political Behavior and Elections

1. Some scholars have argued that citizens have little meaningful information about the political world. Other researchers argue that citizens are reasonably informed and competent to make decisions. How well developed and coherent are the political belief systems of citizens? How do partisan predispositions and elite communications factor into this debate?

2. Compare and contrast any two models of voting: The Columbia Model; The Michigan Model: Rational Actor Model, the Cognitive Model. Assess the relative strengths and weaknesses of each model, employing examples and relevant literature when appropriate. Importantly, examine the major differences between models and address the alternative conception of the voters and candidates that emerge from such differences.

3. “The presidential nomination process is in disarray and should be reformed.”
Do you agree with this opinion? Cite research that supports and undermines your own view and then provide a recommendation for the type of primary system that would be optimal. In your discussion consider the effects on primary voters, candidates, financial contributions, news media, special interests, and elected public officials.

4. If you could sum up the voting research of the 1990s by a single word, it would probably be "information." How did the study of voting benefit from the introduction of that concept? How did it help researchers to answer old questions? Did it generate new, interesting questions?

IV. Parties and Organized Interests
1. John Aldrich asks the question, “Why Parties?” A related question is: “Why Interest Groups? Drawing on your knowledge of the constitutional framework, group formation, group activities, and group influence, respond to this question. Are organized interests integral to American politics? If so, in what ways?

2. Outline the basic tenets of the theory of party realignment. Why has the theory attracted such vehement defenders, while at the same time undergone so much criticism in recent years? What is your view of the worth of realignment theory as an explanation for historical patterns of party and electoral change? What alternative explanations for longitudinal party/electoral change might better fit the data?

3. There is a pervasive belief in certain elements of society that interest groups are out of control and continually subvert the public interest in both the electoral and policy processes. Others believe that the power of interest groups is overrated; they are merely a scapegoat for any of the system’s failings? What is your view on the matter? What empirical research evidence can you bring to bear in support of your position? Why is it so?

4. Mancur Olson’s Logic of Collective Action is considered by many to be the most influential book ever written about how group arise and survive or fail. What are some of the key propositions put forward in the volume that challenged the so-called conventional wisdom about group mobilization and development reflected in works such as Truman’s The Governmental Process? How well have Olson’s theoretical propositions held up empirically after nearly 40 years of research on group mobilization ad and maintenance? In your view, does Olson’s Logic of Collective Action deserve its status as a scholarly work?

5. Some scholars believe American political parties are institutions in decline, unable to be major forces in a post-industrial society dominated by the mass communications industry. Others see parties adapting nice to the contemporary political environment, still playing a crucial role as vehicles for democratic input by citizens. What is your view concerning the role of political parties in contemporary American politics? Is it possible to have a weakened party influence among the electorate, while at the same time having a heightened impact by parties in government policy making? Should efforts be made to strengthen contemporary political parties (eg., such as changing the nomination process, the campaign finance laws)?

V. Subnational politics.

1. It has been some time now since commentators on the state of intergovernmental relations in the United States first spoke about the “devolution revolution.” Now when commentators provide descriptive accounts of the state of intergovernmental relations covering matters from welfare reform to Homeland Security initiatives to the No Child Left Behind Act to developments in the environmental and health care arenas, readers are left with a confused muddle as to whether there is more or less “devolution” in the intergovernmental system than there was. If indeed there has been both devolution and re-centralization of authority in the past two decades, does it suggest any grounds for theorizing about either the circumstances or the kinds of policies that are most likely to evoke devolution and the circumstances or kinds of policies that are most likely to evoke centralization pressures? Or is the whole matter of devolution versus centralization in the American federal system bogus? Explain

2. What are the most important concepts, generalizations, and findings of regime theory? How did this theoretical perspective arise and how has it evolved? What are its strengths and weaknesses? Is there any serious theoretical alternative to regime theory to guide urbanists today? If so, would you expect regime theory to emerge as the prevailing paradigm in the field or to recede into the dustbins of history?
Why?

3. The studies of city politics and racial politics have long been intertwined. What do you regard as the major works intersecting these fields, and what do you see as their major contributions to both the study of urban racial politics and to affecting the way that African-Americans have been marginalized from or incorporated into city politics? Do you think that such racial politics is receding? Is it being replaced by other sorts of ethnic politics in our increasingly global cities? What scholarly work do you find helpful in understanding these issues today? And what work remains to be done in this area?

4. Some scholars find the literature on state policy diffusion to be shallow and incomplete. What are the main theoretical and methodological problems in this literature and how might they be overcome?