U.S. Politics Preliminary Exam – Spring 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. On deliberative democracy. What are some of the most important works on deliberative democracy as, first, a theoretical ideal and, second, as a set of practices subject to empirical research. To what degree and in what ways do research findings bear out or undermine normative concerns about democracy? What, in the end, is the role of deliberation in a democratic state?

2. Tea Partiers make up the latest set of Americans who revere the American Constitution, and Clarence Thomas seems to be the Supreme Court Justice most committed to an originalist conception of the role of the Constitution in American politics. After a brief discussion of the relationship between Constitutional reverence and "originalism," discuss the positive and negative aspects of the Constitution on American politics. Be sure to discuss the major works stressing the strengths and weaknesses of our Constitution. What contribution have empirical studies by American political scientists made to this debate? Have these contributions been persuasive?

3. Some argue that we can learn about the American political system as a whole by examining one issue or policy area. How would an examination of one issue help us understand political institutions, federalism, the policy process, etc.? Choose one issues and make a careful argument for or against the notion of studying one issue, making sure to clearly state the benefits or drawbacks.

National Institutions: President/Congress

1. Assess the power of the president relative to the Congress, especially as it has evolved over the past fifty years.

2. Review the findings of research on presidential popularity focusing on 1) how presidential popularity is defined, 2) the determinants of presidential popularity, 3) the consequences of presidential popularity, and 4) fitting the Bush and Obama presidencies into this research. Comment on what is left to study in this field.

3. “The U.S. Congress, in its polarization and incapacity to address major issues (debt, energy, among others) requires serious reform, starting with changing the filibuster rules to reduce the potential for gridlock.” Address this statement, either agreeing with it and proposing changes, or disagreeing and providing a strong rationale for your conclusion.
Interest Groups and Parties

1. Is the subfield of “interest group politics” a viable area of study for political scientists. What are its strengths and weaknesses as a subfield? Be sure to articulate clearly your criteria for what constitutes a viable subfield.

2. Assess the role of money in politics as it affects political campaigns and lobbying. Should we be worried about the growing expenses for both campaigns and lobbying in terms of preserving democratic legitimacy? What have political scientists had to say about the impact of money on policy outcomes? Suggest a study that might further our understanding of the relationship between money, political, and policy results.

3. How polarized is the U.S political system, and how does this polarization express itself in partisan politics at the mass, activist, and elite levels. How does electoral politics – in primaries and general elections – relate to the current level of polarization among voters, activists, and elected officials?

Subnational Politics

1. Research on state politics has been growing in the past 20 years. Make an argument for why this research is important. Pay specific attention to research on political parties, interest groups, and legislatures in the states. How should the approach of state politics researchers differ from researchers examining national politics? Explain.

2. Minorities and women have assumed greater leadership roles in states and American cities 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. Do local communities provide settings for effective and strong democracy? In what ways do local communities enhance and undermine democratic performance? Do some sorts of communities have particularly effective (and ineffective) democracies? Be sure to cite the relevant literature when responding to this question.

Political Behavior

1. A fairly small literature on trust in government suggests that there is a link between trust in government and level of political participation. Much of this work is data driven and theory poor, but researchers have used the decline in trust in government over the past 40 years to explain declining levels of political participation. Based on this evidence, speculate on the impact of the 2008 campaign and 2008-2010 ‘Great Recession’ on citizen participation in 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?
3. What do we know about the causes and consequences of the declining turnout in the past 50 years? Second, did the 2008 election provide challenges to this literature and does it offer new theories on voter turnout? Next, what are your predictions for the voter turnout in the 2012 presidential election, based on your reading of the political science literature?

4. What is the role of the news media in creating public opinion? How do partisan predispositions and elite communications factor into this effect?