U.S. Politics: Preliminary Exam
September 2001

Directions. You must respond to the general question 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 – choose one of the following.
1. Clearly, political behavior scholars study many of the same phenomena that are examined by students of chief executives, legislatures, and bureaucracies. The dividing line between the two groups of scholars is often hazy, although we can usually recognize it. What are the strengths of a broad focus on institutions instead of a narrower one focused on individuals? Thus in what ways is research on institutions able to create unusual knowledge? Alternatively, what is the value to institutional scholars of research more focused on individuals?

2. The adequacy of our process of selection the American president was challenged in 2000. What aspects of this process have been portrayed as especially undemocratic? Evaluate these claims drawing upon both democratic theory and relevant research. What reforms in the process are most likely to enhance American democracy? What proposed reforms are least likely to be effective and perhaps even counter-productive? Explain your views carefully, drawing upon relevant disciplinary literature.

3. American politics is often portrayed as “centrist” or moderate—as extremist candidates and policies have less chance of succeeding here than elsewhere. Evaluate the truth of this claim. What factors promote centrist politics and what factors promote extremism? Do you expect centrisim to continue to characterize American politics? Why or why not? Can a case be made that “extremism in the pursuit of justice” would be helpful to the future functioning of our system? Why or why not?

Section II. Congress and the Presidency
1. Formal modelers have fought one of their major battles over the role of parties in the US Congress, and especially the House. Lay out the major arguments of the argument here, in terms of the importance of the median legislator and how legislative parties move the body away from the policy outcomes that might be predicted from the location of the median member. What scholar or scholars make the most sense here? Overall, is this controversy important? Why or why not?

2. Ten years ago David Mayhew wrote Divided We Govern and concluded that divided government did not much affect the ability of the government to make major policy decisions. Since then, divided government has become a major research topic for many students of American politics. What do we know about divided government? Why has it occurred such regularity over the past thirty years? To what extent does it affect the composition of policies? In the end, how significant is divided government for our understanding of American politics and policy making?

3. Even though scholars of the presidency are faced with a small N problem, many argue that the basic forces shaping the presidency include, 1) the type of person occupying the office, 2) the nature of the office, and 3) the external environment of the office. Take a position concerning the relative usefulness of developing a “theory” of the presidency or presidential behavior. How likely is it that we can develop a theory of the presidency that specifies variables, hypotheses concerning relationships among these variables, and conduct empirical tests of these hypotheses? Use the existing literature to defend your answer.
Section III. Political Behavior
1. Drawing from the relevant literature(s), provide us with answers to these important questions. First, why do people vote? Second, why has voting declined? Third, does the decline in voting matter?
2. Some researchers suggest 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. Discuss the utility of cognitive dissonance as a means for understanding individual political behavior.

IV. Political Parties and Organized Interests
1. Interest group scholars continue to debate the impact of organized interests on both the electoral and policy processes. Write a scholarly-litterature based essay assessing the evidence offered in the debate. Why is it so difficult to evaluate the impact of organized interests? Under what conditions and circumstances is interest group influence Is there any evidence to suggest the impact of organized interests is greater than it was a quarter of a century ago? All things considered, has the proliferation of organized interests moved us closer to the pluralistic ideal?
2. The importance and role of political parties in the nation's political life is a hotly-debated issue among those interested in the influence of mediating institutions. Some believe that political parties no longer are important democratic institutions serving the interests the mass public, having become mere “service-vendor” organizations for party incumbents. Others argue that parties have simply adapted to the realities of contemporary politics, and still play an important democratic role, especially in organization politics in government. What is your position in this debate? Can the contending positions be reconciled? How is it possible to have parties weak in the electoral process while the party-in-government seems to be growing in strength?
3. We keep seeing studies of the religious right, environmental groups, minority rights advocates, trade associations, women’s organizations, gay rights advocates, and countless other specific types. After we finish creating the catalogue, there will be the question of whether they even belong together under a single academic title. Will “interest groups” be a meaningful field? Or maybe we will need a classification scheme of the sort used in biology (kingdom, phylum, class, genus, species...). Or perhaps we will have a unified theory of waves and particles (oops, organizations and groups) that brings it all together. What do you expect is the most likely outcome? What do you expect will actually happen?

Section V. Subnational politics
1. Although research on state politics has been growing in the past decade, many scholars appear to believe that state politics research is “minor league.” Make an argument for why this research is important. How should the approach of state politics researchers differ from researchers examining national politics, if at all? Explain.

2. During the 1980s and early 90s, urban political analysis seemed to focus on economic development and redevelopment. Now a great deal of urban analysis focuses on public schools. Compare and contrast the theories of urban governance that have emerged from these two bodies of literature. Can theory and research from these two areas of studies be integrated into a broader theoretical perspective on urban politics? If so, how?

3. The literature sometimes portrays local communities as places of widespread citizen activism and participation, but it also sometimes suggests that citizens are little involved in community affairs and are
politically powerless. What are the most important studies depicting “local citizen activism” on the one hand, and “local citizen quiescence” on the other. Is there any urban theory that successfully integrates these contrasting images? If not, can you suggest such a theory and sketch a research project that might develop and/or test such a theory.

Section VI. Public Law
1. Tocqueville observed that in America, the “judicial authority [is] invoked in almost every political context.” Bush v. Gore is yet another example of Tocqueville’s point. Why, in apparent contrast to the experience of many other countries, do courts play such a prominent role in American politics, and what are the consequences for our political processes?

2. The field of judicial politics is experiencing a renewed vibrancy of theoretically-driven research. Various scholars favor versions of behavioralism, rational choice theory, and “new institutionalism.” Focusing on the Supreme Court, summarize examples of research drawn from each of these theoretical approaches, and explain how the theories differ. What are the strengths of each of the theories? What are the weaknesses? Where should young scholars be putting their energies in developing new research?