U.S. Politics: Preliminary Exam
February 2000

Directions: You must respond to the general question; you 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, but you are reminded to respond to the questions that are asked.

Section I. General - Choose one of the following:

1. The “rational choice wave” swept over interest group politics research in the late 1960’ and congressional research in the late 1970s and 1980s. It hit the courts and the presidency in the 1990s. What have been its most important contributions? In what ways was rational choice unsuccessful or unhelpful? Why?

2. What elements of the American political system have demonstrated the most stability over time? What explains these elements of stability? What have been the most marked changes in the American political System in the past 50 years? What are the causes of these changes?

3. In 1982, journalist (and later, Clinton aide) Sidney Blumenthal concluded that we had reached the era of the “permanent campaign” in American politics. In terms of the president, the Congress, parties, interest groups, and the media, what does the notion of the permanent campaign mean? How does it affect representative democracy? Should we be concerned, or is it just one more catch-phrase, masquerading as analysis?

Section II. Congress and Presidency

1. At the last APSA meeting, Keith Krehbiel won “best book” awards from both the legislative and executive sections for his Pivotal Politics. Among congressional scholars, Krehbiel is often regarded as provocative, stimulating, rigorous, smart, and wrong in his theorizing/analysis of the Congress and the outcomes of its decisions. In particular, those folks who see parties as important (Rohde, Sinclair, Cox-McCubbins, Aldrich) dispute Krehbiel’s conclusions, even as they honor his work. Your job is to summarize the argument between Krehbiel and his critics. What is the bone of contention here? What is the evidence, and the quality of evidence, on both sides? Who is right? Why? Does it matter who’s right? Why or why not?

2. A graduate advisor once said, “If you want to study the presidency, you are in serious trouble because N is 1.” Researchers 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. Analyze each of these elements in terms of their relative importance in shaping the contemporary presidency. What are the relevant indicators that are useful in identifying and measuring the distinguishing characteristics of each basic element? To what extent have we solved the “small N” problem?

3. Mayhew’s “electoral connection” shaped a generation of research on Congress. Does the treatment of congressional organization, member activity, and representation that was framed by Mayhew and his adherents apply to the modern, closely divided Republican House as well as it did to the Democratic Congress of the 1970’s and 1980’s?
Section III. Political Behavior

1. Suppose you could take on the mindset of Campbell, Converse, Stokes, and Miller (assuming they were one entity, of course). What would CCSM think are the most dramatic improvements in our understanding of electoral behavior and public opinion in the 1990’s? What research agendas would they think are utterly useless or wrong? Do you personally agree with the opinion you attribute to CCSM? Why or why not?

2. More open, accessible, and undemanding processes characterize recent reforms in election administration. Early voting, voting by mail, automatic registration – Motor Voter – and now internet voting looms on the horizon. Given these changes, and the prospect of more, what do we know about their effects on the voter? Do they (or are they likely to) enhance the implicit goal of more effective and equal participation – better democracy? If so, how? If not, why not?

3. In contrast to the so-called minimal effects paradigm, contemporary research on the media has been able to demonstrate a significant link between media content and viewer judgements. Discuss and critique the two central theoretical notions that underlie much of this recent work – i.e., agenda setting and priming. In your opinion, how does this and related work on the media advance our understanding of American Politics?

Section IV. Parties and Interest Groups

1. Some political scientists describe the regular and periodic nature of electoral realignments. How do we know when a realignment has taken place? Are there different types of realignments? Are electoral realignments similar to issue evolution? What is the role of issue evolution in electoral realignments? Make an argument concerning the usefulness of realignment as a meaningful concept.

2. The role of organized interest in the policy process and upon elections is a matter of heated debate. Some believe that such interests, particularly moneyed interests, dominate both spheres, often at odds with the broader public interest. Others believe that organized interest activity is not nearly as determinant in either elections or the public policy process as some would claim. Write an essay on this debate, incorporating the existing literature that deals with interest group impact. Why is it so difficult to assess the impact of organized interests? Under what circumstances is interest group impact the greatest? What factors constrain the role of organized interests in both the electoral and policy processes?

3. Citizens are simultaneously represented by political parties and by interest groups. Over the past forty years, parties and groups have evolved substantially. Trace the major changes and assess how both parties and groups represent citizens in contemporary American politics. Do “money in politics” issues greatly affect your response? Why or why not?

Section V. Subnational

1. At the beginning of the “devolution evolution,” many analysts offered prognostications about the implications for state-local government relations. Now that the revolution is well under way, we should be able to move from prognostications to evidence about actual patterns and trends. What are the trends
in state-local relations in the U.S. in the last decade or so? To what extent can these be attributed to federal devolution of programmatic and financial responsibility to state government? Are there other factors that should be taken into account in trying to interpret the causes for the changes in state-local relations that have been observed?

2. Assess the proposal that cities such as Lawrence should have a “strong mayor” – someone directly elected and having enhanced policymaking powers. On the basis of urban theory and research, what would be the likely consequences of this change? Would such a change affect democratic performance, service delivery, and economic conditions?

3. Research on state politics has been growing in the past decade. 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?

Section VI. Public Law

1. A number of studies have examined the extent to which changes in Supreme Court jurisprudence and policy making are influenced by changes in public opinion. Without exception, these studies find it easier to establish correlation than causation. Identify the major studies in this area and evaluate the extent to which they have succeeded in explaining the causal relationship between public opinion and policy making on the nation’s highest court.

2. A recent book on judicial decision making posits that “justices’ actions are directed toward the attainment of goals; justices are strategic; and institutions structure justices’ interactions.” The theory is regarded by some as a ground-breaking analysis of Supreme Court decision-making. How, if at all, does it differ from past theories, and how does it affect our understanding of the judicial process in the Supreme Court? And where do we go from here?

3. What do we know about the impact of judicial decisions on bureaucracies? What should be the next steps in research on this topic?