USIP Preliminary Exam  Fall 2005

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 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.

Section I- General

1. For many years political scientists attempted to formulate a general theory of politics, but these efforts seem to have decreased over the past twenty years. Identify potential candidates that might serve as a general theory of politics and discuss the merits of the specific theory as well as the merits of pursuing a general theory of politics.

2. As political scientists, we often complain that we write about important topics, but policymakers and the public generally do not read or understand our research. If you could choose, what book or article from the last twenty years would you most want the American public to know about? Be sure to establish a list of criteria to support your answer.

3. There is ample evidence that inequalities in material prosperity/security have been increasing in the U.S. for several decades. What do political scientists have to contribute to the understanding of this phenomenon? What theoretical frameworks provide a standpoint for addressing the dynamics of inequality in the U.S.? Are there bodies of empirical research findings that have a bearing on the causes of inequalities? Explain.

Section II- National Institutions

1. Review the recent literature on presidential congressional relations. How well does this literature help us to understand institutional relations during the George W. Bush era?

2. Explain why and how congressional parties have become increasingly strong over the past thirty years. What are the implications of this trend for policy decisions and for presidential-congressional relations?

3. Discuss presidential control over the bureaucracy. How can the president exert control? What are his tools and approaches? What are the goals of and tools of presidential control? Discuss the pros and cons of various tools. How does presidential control relate to congressional control? Be sure to ground your discussion in the literature and in a practical sense of what is likely to be possible.

Section III- Political Behaviors
1. Some recent analyses of the American political environment challenge the notion that the public is as deeply divided as those asserting the existence of a “cultural war” proclaim. What arguments have been put forward in support of each side of the debate? What is your position on the debate?

2. Campaigns can be viewed as important political institutions or as fairly expensive displays of symbolism and show. Using the literature on campaigns and elections, explain the functions of elections emphasizing the citizen, elite, and systematic perspective.

4. Compare and contrast the Rational Actor Model of voting with the Columbia School 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 voters and candidates that emerge from such differences.

Section IV- Parties and Organizational Interests

1. Write an essay on the interrelations among parties and interest groups. Is it true that party and interest group strengths are inversely related? How have the party and campaign finance laws affected the party/interest group relationship? All things considered, are the contemporary relationships among parties and interest groups healthy for the overall political system?

2. Frank Baumgartner and Beth Leech have characterized research on interest groups as “a literature that grows but does not accumulate”. Do you agree or disagree with their assessment? What areas within the study of interest groups reflect the groove of genuine collective knowledge? Within what areas has research progress been lacking? In your view, what areas should be research priorities for interest group scholars?

3. Some scholars believe American parties are institutions in decline, unable to be major forces in modern democratic electoral politics. Others see parties adapting nicely to the contemporary political environment, still playing a crucial role as vehicles for democratic input by citizens. What is your view concerning the role played by 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? How have recent changes in the federal campaign finance laws affected the importance of political parties?

Section V- Subnational

1. From Madison forward 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).
2. Issues of homeland security have presented new pressures and problems in our federalist system. Write an essay that outlines these issues and how existing research on intergovernmental relations might help us to understand and solve problems relating to overlapping jurisdictional boundaries, information sharing, and balancing local, state, and federal government power.

3. The study of urban politics in the U.S. has for many years revolved around the core question of the degree to which politics and policymaking are shaped by economic forces and interests. What are the key theoretical contributions to this core question? What is your assessment of the unfolding of the various research agendas that relate to this core question? Has progress been made? Has the core question been a useful springboard for understanding politics and governance at the local level? Has it invited fruitless controversies?