U.S. Politics Preliminary Exam – Spring 2013

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. The last half century has witnessed what appears to be a revolution in American democratic politics, characterized by such features as the proliferation of interests representing virtually all sectors of American life, more open mediating institutions like political parties, extensive polling of citizens on virtually all contemporary issues and extensive/detailed information made available about the activities of government from all political perspectives. Why then has citizen participation (as measured by such indicators as voter turnout and involvement in group activity) shown only modest growth at best (in the case of turnout) and actually a decline in the case of active citizen involvement in groups? What theoretical explanations may explain these patterns? Does the rise of the social media hold the possibility of moving these patterns in a more democratic direction?

2. Descriptive representation has been shown to increase substantive policy representation for politically marginalized groups. What does the empirical evidence suggest about the influence of descriptive representation on members of the group in the general population?

3. What is republicanism (as a political philosophy that may or may not correspond to the principles of the Republic Party)? How have republican ideals been incorporated into American institutions, behavior, and political culture? Drawing on the literature, discuss the relationship between republicanism and liberalism. In what ways have these perspectives been reinforcing or at least compatible? In what ways have these perspectives been conflicting? What do you think will be the future of republicanism in America? Why?
4. 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.

National Institutions

1. “The filibuster in the Senate is inherently undemocratic and should be reformed so that a minority might be able to stall legislation, but not block it entirely.” Address the issue of the filibuster in terms of its role in the policy-making process, its democratic implications, and how it affects (if at all) the legitimacy of Congress.

2. 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.

3. To a greater (the US House) or slightly less (US Senate) extent, party voting in the Congress has risen to levels approaching that of parliaments in responsible party systems. Why has party voting and polarization increased over the past thirty years? What are the implications for the functioning of a separation-of-powers system of these historically high levels of partisanship? Does this combination of party voting and independently powerful legislative bodies (House, Senate, Congress as a whole) pose a threat to democratic rule, or is it pretty much “politics as usual” within the American system.

Political Behavior and Elections

1. What role does context play in U.S. politics? Draw upon the literature to evaluate how “where you live and who your neighbors are” influence your political attitudes and behavior. Be specific and discuss when in fact location can influence political behavior.

2. The VRA of 1965 helped eliminate many obstacles to minority political participation in the U.S. However, minority electoral and non-electoral participation is lower than Anglos in the United States. Compare and contrast African American, Asian American,
and Latino participation levels. What factors influence this low level of participation for both electoral and non-electoral activities? How can this low rate of minority political participation be increased in the future?

3. For much of the 1950s and into the 1970s, political scientists virtually ignored the role of the media in political affairs, holding fast to the “minimal effects” paradigm. Examine the minimal effects perspective, outlining its key contribution to our understanding of the media and political communications generally. Then, compare and contrast minimal effects with our current understanding, highlighting the agenda setting, priming and framing phenomena. How has this change altered our understanding of the media and its impact on political affairs?

4. It seems that most of our statistical analysis of election behavior is based on a "snapshot" theory of human behavior. We usually ask "what are the conditions now?" and "how will people choose now?" In line with that idea, we study one-time, cross-sectional surveys. In light of research on the durability of social networks, individual attitudes and behavior, the snapshot approach might be problematic. Pick three of the most influential research projects in political behavior and discuss the problem.

Parties and Organized Interests

1. Respond to the following assertion: “Race, not ideology, is the defining characteristics of the principal divide between America’s two political parties.” Draw upon the literature to evaluate the accuracy of the statement at the aggregate or individual level. If true, what implications do you see for the evolution of American politics? If false, why does this perception, the centrality of race over partisanship, persist in academic and political discourse?

2. 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 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)?

3. 
4. Consider the question of influence by organized interests. What do we know about such influence? What do we mean by influence? How successful are social scientists at testing for influence? How would you design a test to gauge the influence of organized interests?

5. Write an essay on the interrelationships among political parties and organized interests. Is it true that party and organized interest strengths are inversely related or is it possible to have both a vibrant interest group system and strong political parties? Why do parties need organized interests and organized interests need parties? How have campaign finance laws affected the party/organized interest relationship?

Subnational Politics

1. Given the research on public opinion and representation, do states better represent the interests of citizens than does the national government?

2. In 2007, a widely discussed article by Sapotichne, Jones, and Wolfe reported that the most cited theoretical perspectives on urban politics were pluralism (associated with Dahl), regime theory (associated with Stone), and a “self governance” perspective (associated with Ostrom). What are the main aspects, stressing the similarities and differences, in these theoretical perspectives? What are the strengths and weaknesses of each? What should be the stance of urbanists about having a paradigm to guide their work?

3. Minorities and women have assumed greater leadership roles in American cities over the past quarter century. Among urbanists, 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?

4. Intergovernmental relations in the U.S. federal system always exhibit elements of conflict as well as elements of cooperation. But at some periods, the ratio of conflict to cooperation seems to be higher than at other periods. Offer at least three explanations to account for the changing balance of conflict and cooperation in the U.S. federal system, drawing upon both literature suggesting these explanations and literature providing evidence that either supports or refutes each.

5. One potential advantage of studying sub-state governments in the U.S. is that the diversity of institutional arrangements for governing might provide insights into how
institutions matter? But do different institutional arrangements actually make a difference, and if so in what way? Drawing from the relevant empirical literature, outline what we know about the impact of differing forms of governing institutions at the local level in the U.S. (Note: Regional institutions as well as city-specific institutions should be considered).