

Public Policy Preliminary Exam, Spring 2010

Instructions: Answer one question from each part of the examination for a total of three answers. Please identify the question you are answering at the beginning of each essay. You are limited to 3000 words for answering each question.

Strong answers make coherent and forceful arguments, are grounded in scholarly literature, and make use of relevant examples. They show an understanding of current research and issues. Weak answers often fail to make an argument or do so without reference to relevant literature. Exams are graded as a whole; repeating arguments in response to different questions weakens the overall exam. Good luck!

Part I: General Public Policy Questions

1. In the United States, there is considerable debate and tension regarding the proper size and scope of government authority. Currently we are witnessing an interesting dichotomy. On the one hand, with the advent of homeland security and our on-going war on terror, there has been a substantial expansion of government authority. At the same time however, there is a concerted and long standing effort to use market forces to distribute public goods whenever possible – hence a move toward privatization on several fronts. Can policy scholars explain these two divergent trends? If so, how, and if not, why not? Use both theory and empirical evidence to address this question.
2. A critical component of the scientific method is having clear and logically interrelated sets of propositions, some of them empirically falsifiable. Compare and contrast two public policy theories and discuss to what extent each ascribes to this critical component of the scientific method. Drawing on existing research, Be sure to assess the unique contribution of each theory as well as a critical appraisal of where the respective theories fall short when applied to research.
3. Some recent work suggests that we should not expect consistent or strong linkages between public opinion and public policy. Explain the findings of some of this recent research and highlight how it outlines directions for enhancing our understanding in the future.

Part II: Stages of the Policy Process

4. Provide a brief overview of the agenda setting literature. Critically assess what, if any, questions remain unanswered?
5. List the best three implementation studies in the past 15 years. Explain either 1) how these studies suggest that this is a dead field, or 2) how these studies suggest there is still much to understand in this field.

6. In 2009, Elinor Ostrom was awarded the Nobel Prize in Economics for her long-standing research in “governance”. Outline the theoretical contribution of Ostrom’s Institutional Analysis and Development Framework (IAD) and describe the strengths and weaknesses of the empirical research underpinning IAD.

Part III: Policy Specialty (K-12 Education Policy)

7. Is national education policymaking in the U.S. (from the 1960’s onwards) consistent with punctuated equilibrium theory? Provide a comprehensive assessment.

8. What have we learned about school choice from program evaluations? Be sure to comment on the strengths and weaknesses of the studies that were done. (b) What have we learned about the role of policy evaluation when a politically divisive policy is at stake and about the nature of the politics of policy evaluation?

9. Given the U.S. experience with reforming K-12 education, describe what improves educational outcomes? Discuss the strengths and weaknesses of both the theory and the empirical literature in this area.