

Public Policy Preliminary Exam, Fall 2009

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. A cynic might be inclined to suggest that the shape and content of American public policy is pretty much a function of interest group power. In what ways is this too simplistic of an explanation of why we have the public policies that we have? Outline at least two distinctive theories that both (a) acknowledge a role for interest groups in policy development but (b) depict other forces or factors that condition the influence of interest groups.

2. Theories of the public policy process differ in their expectations about the role of political institutions and political actors throughout the policy process. In some theories institutions are preeminent, in others, they play a less significant role. Drawing on public policy theories, compare and contrast the relative importance placed on institutions versus actors in the process. Using examples from the field, discuss which approach has produced better research.

3. Based on innovations from the past 20 years what can public opinion scholars teach public policy scholars?

Part II: Stages of the Policy Process

1. Public policy changes occur through two primary mechanisms: substantial disruption and incrementalism. Even though both of these mechanisms involve political institutions, they appear to be unrelated processes. Using specific examples, explain how these disparate processes create policy change? What is the role of institutions in both processes? Specifically, are institutions endogenous or exogenous to policy changes? Can disruption and incrementalism be integrated to create a fuller theoretical understanding of policy change, or should they be understood separately?

2. A number of recent studies of state policy innovation and diffusion have argued that the methodology used in most state policy studies is misleading and does not adjust for a number of statistical problems. Explain how consistent these critiques are with existing theory and whether policy researchers should pay heed.

3. Although we generally think of policy formulation and adoption as something that happens in the major political institutions, bureaucracies are also active in the formation and adoption of public policies. Write an essay in which you discuss how bureaucracies have and/or can influence the formation and adoption of policies by other political institutions. In addition, explain how recent literature describes how different bureaucracies shape policy during implementation. Do the findings have implications for policymaking generally or bureaucratic policymaking specifically?

Part III: Substantive Policy Area: Morality Politics and Policy

1. What is the advantage of studying “morality” issues as a unique policy area? Pick two morality issues and explain the utility of using a morality politics framework to study them. What, if anything, would be overlooked if these issues were studied in terms of conventional policy areas?

2. Is morality policy simply a substantive category of policy – like transportation policy, energy policy, or health policy, with no inherent theoretical import? Or is it simply a category of policy that has a few characteristics that make it theoretically different from such other policy categories? Or, more ambitious still, is it (or could it be) a meaningful component of a policy typology based upon theoretically important dimensions? What dimensions? In responding to the question, you should reference how scholars using the morality policy concept have treated it; but you should also consider the prospects for understanding morality policy within a more formal, theoretically-driven typology and compare that typology with those that have influenced the policy field so far.

3. Have theories of the policy process been able to explain policy developments related to same-sex marriage since 1993? Why or why not?