

U.S Politics Preliminary Exam Fall 2010

Directions: You must choose three of the 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. According to many political scientists, formal and informal institutions are vital to understanding political processes in American government. Discuss two specific examples of institutions that have clear effect on the outcomes generated by an electoral, legislative, executive, or judicial political process. Why was the rule or institution established? Does the rule or institution still work as it's creators intended? Can/should the rule or institution be changed or reformed?
2. Democracy has been central to American public philosophy, but its meaning and role in public life has varied over time. Drawing on the relevant literature, write an essay, "The Life and Times of Democracy in America" in which you discuss how American intellectuals, leaders, and citizens have understood democracy and how they have furthered and hindered the realization of democratic values and principles.
3. We appear to be living an age of intense political polarization and this is assumed by many to be a bad thing. What explanations can be offered to explain why such a condition has come about? What, if anything, can be done to decrease such polarization? What about the argument the polarization is actually healthy for the political system, giving citizens a real choice over the policy direction of the country?

Congress/Presidency/Judicial

1. What is the role of parties in the U.S. Congress? How do parties influence the policy-making process in Congress? Where do parties derive the power to exert this influence.
2. The United States government operates under a system of separate powers. Discuss the relative power of the three branches in today's government and discuss how these have changed over time. What structural advantages and disadvantages do each branch process in their attempts to gain more power over the federal government? How does today's system of separation of powers differ from that envisioned by the Founding Fathers?

3. The powers of the president have greatly expanded since Franklin Roosevelt; modern presidents are now expected to handle a wide array of roles and duties. How did President Bush, and now President Obama, expand on the presidential powers? Assess the Bush and Obama presidencies through the lens of Paul Light's "No Win Presidency" thesis.

Sub-National

1. Has research on state direct democracy contests allowed scholars to test theories of public opinion and behavior that cannot be tested in other contexts? Be clear about theoretical and empirical contributions.
2. In the U.S. federal system of government, states are supposed to be important (a) as "laboratories of democracy"; (b) as appropriate venues for handling redistributive matters that local governments are constrained from pursuing; and (c) as more appropriate venues for morality policy-making than the national government. Choose any two of these normative claims and answer the following questions for each: What empirical evidence is there that states are fulfilling this function? What does the empirical research reveal about the limits of states' capacity to fulfill these roles?
2. Identify two important biases that are evident in city politics. Drawing upon classic and contemporary research, provide evidence to support your contention of the existence of each bias. What theoretical framework(s) best accounts for the existence of each bias?

Political Behavior

1. The classic texts of democratic theory assume that for a democracy to function properly the average citizen should be interested in, pay attention to, and understand our political system. Since Converse's seminal piece about citizen capacities, students of political behavior are rather skeptical of citizen's prominent role in democratic theory. In fact, it is difficult to maintain that success of our democracy hinges on knowledgeable and interested citizens when in fact empirical work suggests otherwise. Starting with Converse, outline the theoretical and empirical research in this area. Which theories do you find most persuasive and why? Finally, given your understanding of this body of research, comment on the state of our democracy and the role of citizens in it.
2. Voter turnout in the 2008 presidential elections is argued to be substantially higher than recent elections. First, what do we know about the causes and consequences of the declining turnout in the past 50 years? Second, did the 2008 election provide challenges to this literature and does it offer new theories on voter turnout? Next, what are your predictions for the voter turnout in the 2012 presidential election?

3. What are the relative impacts of the economy and moral/social issues (the so-called “culture war”) on electoral campaigns and political choice? What’s the Matter with the simple view that the voter’s choice depends on his or her personal economic stake in the election? Be careful to specify the domain of your analysis and the research on which it is based.

Parties/Interest Groups

1. Outline the basic tenets of the theory of electoral realignment. Why is the theory not held up in its attempt to explain the longitudinal patterns of American party/electoral history? Are there any competing theories that better explain party and electoral change over time? What theories, if any, are particularly useful in explaining party/electoral changes since the demise of the New Deal coalitions?
2. The National Association of Realtors is among the most politically active organizations in the United States. Their PAC usually raises more money than any other voluntary professional association and their lobbying presence is felt in almost every Congressional office on a wide variety of issues. We wonder how political scientists might become a political powerhouse to rival the NAR. Your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to map out a strategy for the APSA to become important and influential! Outline the challenges that you expect to face and present your plan. Conclude with an analysis of the principal weaknesses in your proposal.
3. Discuss the role of organized interests in funding political parties and electoral campaigns since the campaign reform laws passed in the early 1970s. How important have political action committee expenditures, soft money expenditures, and issue advocacy been to the electoral process? How has the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act of 2002 (BCRA) changed interest group activity in elections? Do you expect the Citizens United vs. FEC case to have a major impact?
4. Take a stand on the challenge that interest groups exert too much control over the electoral and policy process. What empirical research evidence can you use to support your position?