

U.S. Politics Preliminary Exam – Spring 2010

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.

Political Parties and Interest Groups

1. Political scientists who study political parties longitudinally have argued over the merits of various theories to explain what appears to be a reoccurring pattern of the rise and decline of party coalitions. The most prominent theory has been the theory of political realignment, which is vehemently defended by some scholars and just as vehemently dismissed by others. Outline the basic tenets of realignment theory and evaluate its worth. What alternative theories and explanations have been offered in its place? Do any seem to better explain changes in the electoral order?
2. How have changes in the campaign finance laws since the early 1970s altered the role of both organized interests and political parties in campaigns and elections, as well as the influence both mediating institutions have on elected decision-makers in the policy process. Is the recent Citizens United v FEC decision likely to alter these roles? Using the literature, explain what this might mean for interest groups, political parties, and democratic politics.
3. How will changes made by the Supreme Court in 2010 decision to block bans on corporate campaign finance restrictions impact the power of interest groups in America? How will this decision affect the relationship between interest groups and parties? How will President Obama's plans to challenge the Supreme Court decision affect the country's separation of powers?

Political Behavior

1. Has research on direct democracy 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. 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?
3. Identify alternate perspectives on public opinion that inform our study of the media. Based on empirical research, what are the most powerful linkages, and what are the implications for understanding the role of media in American politics.
 4. Are voters stupid? Does it matter if they are? Assess the contention and the evidence that an often ill-informed, uninterested electorate can produce – as a whole – responsive and coherent decisions. In your view, does the evidence hold up? Why or why not?

Institutions

1. 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 their presidential powers? Do those expanded powers lead to an enhanced capacity to govern? Explain.
2. Krehbiel, Mayhew, Cox and McCubbins, and Rohde and Aldrich (among others) have all posited theories to explain congressional behavior. Which of these authors generally does the best job of helping to explain the politics of health care reform in 2009-2010. Why? To the extent that your favored theory has shortcomings, which of the other scholars helps most to fill in the gaps?
3. Why did we originally establish the Electoral College? Why do we still have the Electoral College? Based on the relevant literature, develop an argument that (a) defends the existing institution; (b) offers reforms to the institution; or (c) seeks to abolish it and replace it with another system. Who benefits from the current system? What benefits would accrue to the American political system of the choice you made?

Subnational

1. Minorities and women have assumed greater leadership roles in states and American cities over the past quarter century. 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?
2. Do local communities provide settings for effective and strong democracy? In what ways do local communities enhance and undermine democratic performance? Do some sorts of communities have particularly effective (and

ineffective) democracies? Be sure to cite the relevant literature when responding to this question??

3. Since the Federalist Papers 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).

General

1. 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. Which conceptions and theories of democracy do you believe have been best and worst for furthering good government in America?
2. We appear to be living in 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 and historically not uncommon for the political system, giving citizens a real choice over the policy direction of the country?
3. Much of the theoretical literature on democracy highlights the importance of deliberation and citizen input. However, the growing literature on deliberative democracy suggests that deliberation only hardens preexisting positions for most participants. How do we reconcile the empirical research with our theoretical ideals of democracy?
4. “The United States, circa 2010, appears to be ungovernable.” Do you agree or disagree with this statement. Defend your answer first by addressing the issue of what “ungovernable” means and then by using relevant literature to defend your position.