American Politics

M.A. Exam

Fall 2015

Directions:

• Please put your Student ID number at the top of each page of your examination.
  **DO NOT** write your name anywhere on the examination.

• Number your pages consecutively for the entire examination.

• Submit a cover page with your responses that lists the following: ID number, type of exam completed (e.g. MA major, MA minor) and examination area, as well as the semester in which you are taking the exam.

• Cite sources throughout your essay, where appropriate, using standard format and provide a single bibliography that includes all the materials used in preparing your answers.

• Clearly label each answer with the number of question you are answering.

• Budget your time carefully, including time to think and organize while preparing and writing the answers. Focus on preparing coherent, well-organized essays that not only demonstrate your mastery of the literature, but also indicate how the literature expands our collective knowledge.

• Students are expected to work independently on this examination and not discuss the essay items and responses with others. Any questions about exam procedures should be directed to the convener.

**NOTE:** MA Majors – please answer four questions, at least one from each section.
MA Minors – please answer three questions, one from each section.
I. Theory

1. Although the American political system is often described as “democratic,” there are significant countermajoritarian elements affecting its operation. Pick any one of the national political institutions (i.e., the Presidency, Congress, or the federal judiciary) and discuss both its majoritarian and countermajoritarian aspects. Is the design and operation of the institution you have selected justifiable under the principles of democratic theory? In your answer, be sure to fully explicate the case, both for and against, the institution’s design and performance.

2. Do Americans support the basic tenets of the Constitution, or do citizens apply rights differently depending upon the situation? What do we know about “tolerance”? According to traditional “Madisonian” theory, the U.S. Constitution ensures the rights of minorities through an elaborate system of checks and balances. To what degree are these formal arrangements successful?

3. In the mid-20th century, the democratic theorist E.E. Schattschneider chaired an APSA committee to evaluate the state of party politics in the United States. The document that this committee produced articulated a perspective on representation that has become known as “responsible party theory.” Critically assess this theory in light of contemporary party politics. Is the American party system today still as “irresponsible” and in need of reform as Schattschneider and his colleagues contended? In general, are political parties even necessary for effective political representation?

II. Behavior

1. Although much of the elite political discourse in this country is couched in terms of a liberal-conservative ideological continuum, many researchers have questioned the value of trying to account for citizens’ attitudes by relying on the concept of ideology. (a) To what extent do citizens organize their attitudes along a liberal-conservative continuum? Describe the various controversies in the research regarding whether citizens are ideological. (b) Some scholars have concluded that it is more fruitful to study other factors (besides ideology) that influence how citizens organize their attitudes. Discuss the research on other factors that might shape citizens’ attitudes.

2. One of the most important and influential works on American politics is Angus Campbell, Philip Converse, Warren Miller, and Donald Stokes’ THE AMERICAN VOTER. For many years after it was published, this book was one of the most influential explanations of American voting behavior. Explain what this book proposed. Why was it influential? Why did it decline in influence? What explanations of American voting behavior have replaced THE AMERICAN VOTER in influence over the last 50 years?

3. The premise that citizens make decisions in politics in order to maximize 'benefits' relative to 'costs' is undeniably appealing, and there is considerable evidence of such 'rational' behavior in many decisional contexts. But can such a premise be used to explain why individuals turn out to vote in major national elections? Based on your reading of the scholarly literature on political participation, is there a 'rational' foundation for turnout?
4. Develop your own explanation/theory for why the American public is generally uninformed about American politics. How does your explanation constitute an improvement over other leading explanations? Now, draw out hypotheses from your theory and describe the empirical support for your explanation and its implications for future inquiry.

III. Institutions

1. The U.S. Congress is a "representative" institution. What are the main strands of research examining the linkage between it and its constituents? Be sure to include mention of specific articles and/or books in answering this question.

2. State judiciaries and legislatures are policy-making institutions. As such, they share a number of similarities. Compare and contrast these two institutions along the following dimensions: (a) their members' linkages to their constituents, (b) the forces affecting the selection of each institution’s members, and (c) the forces affecting each institution’s organizational structure and behavior. You will, of course, make use of the appropriate literature.

3. It is customary when assessing policymaking processes in the United States to divide the calendar into periods of “governance” and periods of “campaigning.” In recent decades, however, a number of scholars and commentators have suggested that campaign institutions are rather permanent; i.e., office holders are perpetually reaching out to the public whether or not an election is on the horizon. Evaluate this claim. Is there in fact a “permanent campaign” within government? If so, what are the implications of this emerging institution for representation and governance?

4. Interest groups have been historically heralded by pluralists such as Truman and Polsby as beneficial to society. On the other hand, economists such as Stigler, Buchanan, Tullock, Peltzman, Olson, Downs and Becker along with some political scientists such as Lowi and jurists such as Posner to name a few, are far more skeptical of the benefits of groups in American politics. Briefly describe these different arguments and the major theories used to characterize the role of interest groups in American politics. Then summarize the insights these interest-group theories provide about the operations of the legislative process, Supreme Court, and the federal bureaucracy. That is, what do these interest-group theories reveal about our major institutions?