American Politics Exams
Fall 2003

Student ID

Direction: Do not print your name on the examination. For identification, please use your student ID number in the space indicated above and on your written exam. All examinations are in-class and closed-book. In all your answers, be sure to cite and discuss relevant literature.

M.A. Major: 4 questions (at least one from each section), 6 hours.

Ph.D. Major: 5 questions (at least one from each section and no more than two from any section), 8 hours.

I. Political Institutions

1. A major debate in recent years has centered on the health of political party organizations in the United States. Some scholars have argued that parties have been weakening and are in decline, while others argue that parties are gaining in strength and are evolving into a different type of party system. Discuss the parameters of this debate and provide a basis for its resolution.

2. Third parties have always been a part of American politics, but typically they are just minor players in elections and governance. In general, why are third parties in the United States so weak? In spite of their weaknesses, do such parties contribute to political representation in any significant or meaningful ways?

3. Evaluate the state of our knowledge about congressional elections. What do we know from many years of research on congressional elections? Discuss what remain as important areas of research in this field.

II. Political Process and Behavior

1. Much has been written about how sophisticated or unsophisticated American citizens are when they think about politics. Given your reading of this literature, what is
2. Public Opinion researchers have examined the role of race in American politics. What do we know about how racial attitudes influence public opinion? Also, how have recent methodological advances (such as survey-based experiments and non-obtrusive measures of prejudice) allowed scholars to get a better handle on the nature of racial attitudes?

3. Historians of voting typically focus on candidate or issue explanations of election outcomes, while political scientists emphasize long-term components of voting. What is the gain of hypothesizing a long-term component of voting? What features do you think should be incorporated in a long-term measure? What are the advantages and disadvantages in using party identification and ideology as the long-term components?

III. Democratic Theory

1. How effectively democracy functions may depend upon underlying political culture values. Equality and tolerance are two such values. Drawing upon the extant literature, describe how these two cultural norms operate in the American political system, and discuss their impact upon American politics.

2. Is Judicial Review justifiable under the principles of Democratic theory? Discuss arguments for and against the Supreme Court's exercise of judicial review, and explain how (or whether) this can be reconciled with the majoritarian principles of the U.S. Constitution. Be sure to consider the forces that affect the Court's use of the power.

3. The term "representation" is one of the most commonly used concepts in the study of US politics. Authors often differentiate between "descriptive representation," "representation as trusteeship," and "representation as delegation." In a well-reasoned essay, discuss the meaning of these three different perspectives. Following this, address the question: "How representative is contemporary American politics?" You will of course support your answer with reference
to the literature.

4. Robert Dahl (A Preface to Democratic Theory) contends that "majority tyranny is a myth." Why is this so and what are the implications for majority rule in the United States?
American Politics Exam
Spring 2003

Student ID

Directions: Do not print your name on the examination. For identification, please use your student ID number in the space indicated above and on your written exam. All examinations are in-class and closed-book. In all your answers, be sure to cite and discuss relevant literature.

M.A. Minor: 3 questions (one from each section), 4 hours

M.A. Major: 4 questions (at least one from each section), 6 hours

Ph.D. Minor: 4 questions (at least one from each section), 6 hours

Ph.D. Major: 5 questions (at least one from each section and no more than two from any section), 8 hours

I. Political Institutions

1. Traditionally, political scientists have focused their attention on the U.S. House of Representatives. There is, however, a fair corpus of literature examining the Senate. Discuss the discipline’s findings concerning the “upper chamber” in terms of the following: a) constituency and elections, b) members’ behavior, and c) the role of the leadership.

2. Popularity, public standing, and prestige are among the most important resources a president can claim. Presidents and scholars alike recognize this fact. What affects the president’s approval among the public? Have the forces changed over time? Does presidential popularity make any practical difference? What can a president do to shape public perceptions?

3. Discuss the phenomenon of divided government. What “causes” it? What political forces might benefit from it, and who are the likely losers? Finally, choose a specific event where the executive and legislative branches interact (e.g., passage of legislation, vetoes, judicial nominations) and address the question: “What effect does divided government have on executive/legislative relations?”

II. Political Process and Behavior

1. Over the last two decades a great deal of research has challenged the “minimal effects” notion that the mass media do not have a significant impact on citizens. Briefly explain why the minimal effects model became accepted. Then, discuss the recent challenges to this model — do the mass media influence citizen opinion? Along the way, be sure to discuss the methodological issues that have
shaped this debate.

2. Empirical studies of American voting behavior have had to account for a significant degree of stability at both the aggregate and individual level. Some have argued that the sources of this stability lie in long-term demographic forces (the Columbia School: race, social class, group memberships), while others assert that the stability is the product of social-psychological dispositions (ideology or, more often, partisanship). Recently, however, the long-term stability of partisanship itself has come into question. And this, in turn, brings into question its utility in models of voting. The controversy is well-framed by Niemi and Weisberg: “Should partisanship be seen as stable? Or is it unstable, either at the individual or the aggregate level? Does it vary much with other political variables and with public satisfaction with the economy? Or is it like approval of presidents and prime ministers, which varies with the economy in some circumstances but not others?” (Niemi & Weisburg 2001, 333). In a well reasoned essay, fully address this controversy. Be sure to draw upon the relevant literature.

3. Why do organized interests rise and decline? And why are some groups more influential than others? For that matter, what are the difficulties faced by political scientists when they attempt to gauge the influence of interest groups? In a well reasoned essay, discuss the origin, maintenance, and influence of organized interests. In your essay, be sure to make reference to appropriate literature.

III. Democratic Theory

1. The term “representation” is one of the most commonly used concepts in the academic study of US politics. Authors often differentiate between “descriptive representation,” “representation as trusteeship,” and “representation as delegation.” In a well reasoned essay, discuss the meaning of these three different perspectives. Following this, address the question: “How representative is contemporary American politics?” You will of course support your answer with reference to the literature.

2. Much of the elite political discourse in the United States is couched in terms of a liberal-conservative ideological continuum; yet, several scholars have argued that citizens do not think along those same lines. Discuss the research that addresses the question of whether citizens are ideological. Within your answer, be sure to discuss how race and racial issues come into play when determining whether citizens are ideological. Also, if it is not ideology that constrains public opinion, then what does constrain it?

3. How do political scientists define “power” and “governance”? Do these definitions permit systematic research? Which definition is the most suitable description of, or prescription for, the American political system? You will of course make use of the literature in your answer.