American Politics

M.A. Exam

Fall 2014

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. Democratic Theory

1. Describe and analyze three prominent paradoxes, anomalies, and/or puzzles in the study of American Politics and then discuss the literature surrounding them.

2. Principal-agent theories of accountability and responsiveness imply a clear chain of command between the principal and agent. Explain the connection (or disjunction) between principal-agent theory and the U.S. system of separated powers. How is this manifested in the relationship between the federal bureaucracy and the political executive (the White House and its political appointees in the agencies), the Congress, and the courts? To what extent does competition between the political and judicial overseers narrow or widen bureaucratic discretion? To what extent does bureaucratic discretion work in favor of the political executive? To what extent does legal constraint on bureaucratic discretion work in favor of the legislative branch? To what extent does competition between the political institutions affect managerial efficiency in the bureaucracy? How and why? Please be sure to cite relevant literatures.

3. 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; draw out hypotheses from your theory and describe the empirical support for your explanation and its implications for future inquiry.

II. Political Institutions

4. Discuss and evaluate the empirical information surrounding prominent explanations for why special interests are so powerful in American politics?

5. 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 theories reveal about our major institutions?

6. The leadership role of the U.S. president often hovers between “imperial” and “imperiled”. Discuss the constitutional possibilities and limitations of presidential power, the long term trends or fluctuations in the role of the president, the situational conditions that promote or limit the exercise of presidential power, presidential capacities and uses of unilateral power, and the role of individual presidents in assessing and utilizing opportunities. Based on this analysis, how do you assess the polar views of the presidency as being either “imperiled” (powerless) or “imperial” (excessively powerful from a constitutional perspective) or is this contingent upon other considerations such as differences in the nature of presidential agendas, the president’s party, whether there is
unified or divided government, and the policy domains in which presidents seek to exercise influence?

7. 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.

III. Political Behavior

8. The writers of The Civic Culture were concerned about support for the political system (aka political trust). Many political scientists raised during or in the aftermath of WWII were concerned about political support because of the rapid demise of many democracies in the wake of Nazi aggression. They pondered why some democracies failed and other remained intact. Discuss this early literature on political trust. Then explain what we know about the causes and consequences of political support/trust. Distinguish between aggregate-level and individual-level findings, and between trust as the dependent and independent variable in the research you review. Be sure to focus on political trust not social trust.

9. In discussing over-time patterns in voting behavior, it has been popular to use the concept of realignments to explain significant changes in voting. Recently, however, David Mayhew has written a significant critique of these theories. Explain the most important literature employing the realignment concept, and the major critiques of those explanations. Evaluate the effectiveness of the realignment theories in explaining voting patterns over time.

10. Historians studying 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 into a long-term measure? What are the advantages and disadvantages in using party identification and ideology as the long-term components?

11. 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 decision 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?