Political Behavior & Institutions

M.A. Exam

Spring 2012

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.
Section 1 – Theory

1. Madison warned of majority tyranny and, on paper, the national government of the United States is subject to control by majorities everywhere. But Dahl (Preface to Democratic Theory) and others—for example, Lowi (The End of Liberalism), Olson (The Logic of Collective Action), and Stigler (“The Theory of Economic Regulation”)—have raised counterarguments. Describe the arguments for why the U. S. is more subject to minority than majority rule.

2. A fundamental issue in democratic theory is the notion of equality of influence. Assess the extent to which this is realistic. What are the impediments to equality of influence from the perspective of U.S. governing structures, the distribution of social, political, and cognitive resources, and the means by which influence-seeking is organized? Placing your analysis within the context of the elitist-pluralist debate about democracy, assess the extent to which democracy is merely an illusion, or must the premises of democratic theory be reformulated to account for the inequalities noted above? Considering studies of participation in other liberal, competitive political systems, to what extent, in principle, could some of these inequities in participation be alleviated?

3. The U.S. is often said to be “exceptional” in the sense that there are important aspects of the American polity, society, and policy that are unusual among countries that are both constitutional and have similar standards of living. Some of these characteristics were chronicled by the French journalist, Alexis de Tocqueville, in the 1830s as he witnessed the practices of democracy and cultural leveling within American communities. But just precisely how “exceptional” – if at all – is the U.S.? Considering sociological characteristics of American society, belief systems, political institutions and political norms, and policy outputs, make a case for and against U.S. exceptionalism.

4. The American system is widely regarded as democratic. Yet, there are significant countermajoritarian elements infecting 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.

Section 2 – Political Behavior

5. Political trust is an area of great concern not just in the United States, but also in new democracies around the world as well as in Europe. This concept was first developed in The Civic Culture to explain why some democracies were more stable than others. There have been disagreements about the meaning and effects of trust in government. Discuss the literature on trust in government and organize your discussion around the level of analysis (aggregate or individual) on which the research was conducted as well as on the findings. Also, discuss both what causes political trust and what political trust influences.
6. It is frequently the case that journalists and opinion commentators (pundits) interpret the meaning of elections by emphasizing that voters are voting for conservative or liberal ideas or policies. What is the evidence that this is so? Assess the evidence for possible limitations of this parallelism between the political debate among elites and the cognitive understandings of mass publics. Note two things: (a) the extent to which publics can be differentiated in regard to their comprehension of the political debate among elites and identifying the predictors of this differentiation, and (b) the possible impacts of party polarization in regard to the capacity of mass publics to link to the political debate among elites.

7. Journalists and commentators often identify states as red (Republican or conservative) or blue (Democrat or liberal). For example, one liberal commentator, Thomas Frank, has written a book called *What’s The Matter With Kansas?* In it, he claims that the voters of Kansas (a vintage red state) must be lured by non-economic issues to vote against their economic interests. On the other hand, a statistician and political scientist, Andrew Gelman, has an article entitled, “What’s the Matter with Connecticut” (a wealthy but blue state). Similarly, Larry Bartels, has noted a dynamic that tends to differentiate blue from red states having less to do with the median (or below) income voter and more to do with more affluent voters.

Assess in regard to these propensities for states to go Republican (red) or Democrat (blue) the extent to which electoral outcomes in states are a function of an overall homogeneous disposition or whether they result from the differential distribution across states of populations more or less favorable to one or the other party, the relative likelihood of voting turnout and political mobilization among those populations, and the disposition of the more educated and higher income strata across states such as Kansas and Connecticut or, more generally, consistently red and blue states. Regarding, the latter point, the political sociologist, Seymour Martin Lipset, observed that democratic elections were an expression of class struggle. What do the findings about who votes for whom in red and blue states have to say about Lipset’s observation?

8. What concepts should be included in a model explaining the voting behavior of Americans? As you specify your model, be sure to fully discuss each of the concepts you have chosen to include — i.e., what each concept will contribute to the explanation of your dependent variable and how each of the independent variables are related to one another. Finally, is your proposed model likely to be properly specified for all levels of electoral contests in the United States? Why or why not? You will of course make abundant use of the appropriate literature in your answer.

9. Some political scientists claim that the apparent polarization in American politics has not occurred among ordinary voters, but only among political elites, while others marshal evidence to the effect that polarization also has taken place among citizens generally. Given this theoretical backdrop, please write an essay in which you (1) conceptually and empirically define “polarization,” (2) describe the process by which polarization has evolved, and (3) explain the consequences of the type of polarization you have identified. Be sure to incorporate relevant literature in your essay.
Section 3 – Political Institutions

10. 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?

11. Over 50 years ago, Norton Long declared that the fundamental problem of the U.S. political system was that there was no definable boss. Or, to put that a bit differently, there are multiple bosses each with some measure of control over their agents. This is known in principal-agent theory as the multiple principals problem. With respect to the bureaucracy in American government, as in any government, it is an agent that is delegated authority to implement policy and to interpret statutory authority but it is also responsible for being responsive to its principals and accountable to the laws under which it governs. Classic administrative theorists in the U.S., such as Luther Gulick and Woodrow Wilson (the latter later becoming a U.S. president) had noted the importance of clarity and stability of authority for the administrative arm of the government to be effective. In view of the ambiguity of authority in the U.S. created by the constitutional separation of powers, what are the problems associated with delegating authority, responsiveness to authority, and legal accountability between political leaders and the government bureaucracy? Does the ambiguity of authority potentially provide the bureaucracy with opportunities that might be less likely under conditions where authority is clear and certain?

12. 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?

13. 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.

14. Political pundits, politicians, scholars and citizens in general decry “gridlock,” which may be greatly exacerbated during periods of divided control. Below three very short video clips may provide a bit of the sense of frustration over procedural tactics, policy implications and a general sense that we need to fix the mess resulting from putatively dysfunctional institutions.

Please craft an essay in which you (1) define gridlock, (2) identify the causes of this stalemate, (3) discuss the consequences of gridlock, and (4) propose a course of action to address the problem. Be sure to draw upon the relevant extant literature.

Senator Klobuchar (D-MN) February 15, 2012 [First 4 minutes]  
http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/SenateSession4972&start=15212

Senator Dean Heller (R-NV) February 14, 2012 [First minute]  
http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/SenateSessionPart163&start=5152

Professor Susan McManus (University of South Florida) January 28, 2012 [First couple of minutes]  
http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/PPre&start=408