

AMERICAN POLITICS
COMPREHENSIVE EXAM
November 2018

Rules and Instructions

- You have 72 hours to complete this examination.
- Please answer 3 questions – each from a different section.
- The answers to all questions combined may be no more than 20 double-spaced pages (with one-inch margins all around and a twelve-point font).
- Make sure to answer the questions you choose fully – you should draw on the extant literature, provide examples, and pay particular attention to relevant controversies in the literature, discipline, and subfield.
- The material you use and cite in the answer to any one question should not substantially overlap the material you use in other questions.
- Because it's a take-home exam, your answers should be relatively polished and well-substantiated.
- You should include a Works Cited section (which does not count toward the page limit).
- Please email the completed exam to Bob Briggs, in .doc format.

A Couple of Things to Keep in Mind

- It will work to your advantage if your responses include: a clear thesis/argument; a well-defined structure; a capable, comprehensive, yet concise summary of arguments; appropriate citations; an effective synthesis of disparate topics; analytical insight; and a clever application of current events to theoretical arguments
- It will likely work to your disadvantage if your responses are: unnecessarily wordy; hyper-specific with respect to authors' arguments; too heavily reliant on summary, as opposed to analysis; larded up with tangential discussions of current events

Good Luck!

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Political Behavior (Choose one)

1. Contemporary politics, some argue, are driven by “identity politics,” suggesting that, at the mass level, individuals’ racial, gender, ethnic identities dominate individual political choices and behaviors. Assess this general claim with respect to evidence on individual voting behavior and attitudes: to what extent does research on American political behavior affirm this sentiment? Theoretically, do classic and contemporary theories of political behavior account for the (claimed) dominance of identity politics?

2. Political Scientists disagree as to how competent U.S. voters are. Some see widespread ignorance and irrational thinking, whereas others see sufficient knowledge and an ability to “get to the right answer” via various shortcuts. Taking into consideration a variety of studies and perspectives on this topic, how confident are you in the competence of U.S. voters and, by extension, representative democracy?

Political Institutions (Choose one)

1. Define the incumbency advantage, and outline theories explaining how it works and the factors that generate it. Why did the incumbency advantage increase dramatically between the 1950s and the 1980s and why is it falling now? Does the incumbency advantage make incumbents more likely to win re-election than in the past?
2. Political scientists have fiercely debated party polarization in American politics. Has polarization increased in (a) Congress, and (b) the electorate? Why or why not? Be sure to reference the literature on partisanship at length.

Approaches to the Study of American Politics (Choose one)

1. The “value” of formal approaches to the study of American politics is viewed by some as an “even/or” choice: either formal approaches are required to advance our knowledge of politics OR formal approaches are detrimental to advancing our knowledge of politics. Describe the basic arguments on either side of this argument. Then identify two or three research questions that political scientists have studied that illustrate the contributions or limitations of formal theory to the questions at hand. Do these examples suggest any “middle of the road” positions on the value of formal theory?
2. Lab experiments. Field experiments. How has the increased use—and some might say dominance—of these research designs generated new knowledge about American politics? Identify one example of what experimental designs have added to extant knowledge of individual behavior (based on observational approaches), to understanding mass behavior, and one example for elite behavior. How much, and how valuable, is the empirical evidence and substantive conclusions derived from these new approaches?