

**AMERICAN POLITICS  
COMPREHENSIVE EXAM**

**April 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. Some say that, in the present era of polarized elite politics, mass public opinion is more “rational” than Phillip Converse could have ever dreamed when he published his foundational “Belief Systems” paper in 1964. Others would respond that mass public opinion is more “irrational” than he ever feared. Assess the relative merits of each point of view.

2. The mass media are sometimes referred to as an unelected branch of government; they have substantial political influence and power over individuals' political behavior and opinions. How valid is this assessment? In formulating your argument, be sure to (1) review the literature on various types of "media effects," (2) document the evidence for and against the media's impact (and which types of media are most influential), (3) specify the audience most susceptible to media effects, and (4) assess how the media's influence has changed throughout the last 20 years.

### **Political Institutions (Choose one)**

1. Some see political parties in American politics as creature and slave of those who would use them to gain and hold political office. Others see them as an independent influence and constraint on those who seek to gain and hold public office. Establish each point of view based on the parties literature, and take a position on who is more likely to be correct. Consider the following in your answer: (1) the 2016 presidential nominations for both parties; (2) Congress since the 2016 election, and; (3) the executive branch since the 2016 election.
2. Institutional theory is more fully developed in the study of Congress than it is in the study of the presidency. Why is this the case? In answering this question, be sure to pay attention to various approaches to the study of Congress and the presidency and assess their overall theoretical contributions to the field. Conclude your response with a discussion of where studies of the courts fall. Is the judicial politics scholarship more in line with the theoretical and empirical rigor that is now standard in the study of Congress, or is it more like the study of the presidency?

### **Approaches to the Study of American Politics (Choose one)**

1. Some political scientists like to express, especially under the guise of blind peer-review, the following argument: "without an experiment you have no causal identification, and without causal identification your study is worthless." If you agree, what are some of the key insights in American politics that you attribute to experimental studies alone, and why did the experimental model make these insights possible where observational methods could not? If you disagree, what are some of the key insights in American politics that you attribute to observational research alone, and why are experiments ill-suited to the task?
2. Identify what you deem to be the most important issue that is understudied or poorly studied in American politics. After explaining the limitations of the extant research, lay out a reasonably specific research agenda to address the shortcomings. Be sure to explain the theoretical grounding for your agenda, as well as the necessary data to pursue it.