

## **US Politics Comprehensive Exam Questions – Eric Merkley Fall 2015**

If this is your *major* field, you must choose TWO (2) questions from the CORE and one question from each of your SUBFIELDS, for a total of FOUR (4) questions. The questions are of equal value. The exam must be completed in FIVE (5) hours.

The exam allows a great a deal of choice in the substantive topics you deal with. However, you should avoid extensive repetition of topics or analysis from one answer to another.

### **US Politics Core (Choose two questions)**

- 1) A major theme of the current presidential nomination contest, at least on the Republican side, is promises that a president can impose his or her will on Congress, the administrative agencies, the courts, and would receive support and compliance from various groups and the general public. What does the literature of American politics tell us about the limitations on a president's ability to impose his or her will? What circumstances facilitate greater presidential success in this regard? And what are the prospects for the next president to have favorable circumstances for such leadership?
- 2) What are the biggest surprises in the literature of US politics—that is, the findings or claims (including theoretical claims) that differ most significantly from what ordinary citizens would expect. Identify 4-5 distinct findings or claims, from at least three different areas of literature and spell out the theoretical and/or evidentiary support for each such surprising claim. Discuss how each of these findings or claims differs from the (in your estimation) probable beliefs of ordinary citizens. Do the incorrect citizens' beliefs have any themes or general directions—systematic tendencies to misperceive the political system in consistent ways—or are they idiosyncratic and unrelated? Did the surprising findings surprise scholars too, or have they generally fit comfortably with existing scholarship?
- 3) Some scholars argue that a major cause of economic inequality in the US is the nature of American politics; that is, certain policies promote the growth of economic inequality, and certain features of American political processes or institutions facilitate the adoption or maintenance of those policies. An alternative view, however, is that although US citizens have not been culturally disposed to promote equality as such, American political processes and institutions are in themselves quite open to egalitarian policies, as well as others. Use the literature that addresses the politics of inequality, along with any other relevant literature or considerations, to provide a coherent statement: Do American political process and institutions, generally or at least recently, present distinct barriers to egalitarian policies? Provide a wide-ranging discussion of how various elements of the political system are likely to affect egalitarian measures.
- 4) Does polarization change everything? As a preliminary matter, define and briefly describe the polarization of political parties in the US, both for masses and elites. Then discuss the likely effects of such polarization in 3-4 areas of American politics that are relatively

removed from legislative parties, general-election voting, and public opinion. Some possible areas to consider include: party nominations for president; floor procedures in Congress; presidential advisory processes and decision making; judicial appointments and decisions; the policy agenda; administrative structures, personnel and activity, and others. (Discuss a total of 3-4 such areas.) For any area that you select, describe some of the long-term behavior, presented in the literature, that might be transformed by a highly polarized political context. What changes due to polarization, if any, would you anticipate finding in a current study in each area?

### **US Politics: Public Policy (Choose one question)**

- 1) Assemble and compare the evidence for the following two views of US policymaking institutions: 1) they are designed and managed primarily to make deliberative choices to serve the interests of the public; and 2) they are designed and managed primarily to serve the political interests of elected or appointed office-holders, by enabling them to bestow benefits on well-organized or otherwise advantaged constituencies. In doing so, make reference to literature on Congress, the presidency, administrative agencies, and judicial review (even if it does not directly address the conflicting views). Propose your own resolution of these contradictory claims.
- 2) We would like to know the relative influence on policy of various kinds of actors, in different circumstances: interest groups, public opinion, particular groups of citizens (high-income individuals, ideological movements), and experts. Making reference to a range of relevant literature, provide a tour of the methodological difficulties of assessing such influence. Identify what you think are one or two fairly solid conclusions about such influence, and suggest how we might go about adding some precision or enhanced certainty to some of these assessments.

### **US Politics: Political Behaviour (Choose one question)**

- 1) Economic voting may be the clearest example of an accountability mechanism at work in US elections. If so, why is economic voting so uniquely prominent in the US? And to what extent are voters really calling elected officials to account?
- 2) The picture of the American voter in the classic book by Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes seemed to rely on features of the context—geography, religion, race relations, party positioning on issues, party finance and organization—that no longer hold. Yet many observers argue that the fundamentals of voters' choice are much the same now as then. Are they right? If so, how can this be?