

American Politics Field Exam
August 2008

Answer **three** of the following questions, **but no more than two from either Part A and Part B**. All answers must be typed.

Part A:

1. The Constitution provides little guidance as to how the House of Representatives should operate on a day to day basis. Why, then, has the House settled on its current organization and pattern of operation with regard to two of the following: majority party leadership, rules for consideration of legislation, and the operation of the committee system, and what does this organization tell us about the preferences (primitive and induced) of members of Congress?

2. Change has become a central theme of the 2008 presidential race, but change can occur along any number of dimensions: personnel, policy, governmental process and procedures, coalitional alignments, etc. What does political science have to say about the capacity of presidents to change such things? What determines the nature and extent of the changes they negotiate?

3. It is common in the analysis of political participation to include measures of a respondent's union status, education, or level of religious attendance as a causal variable. What are the theoretical reasons for doing so? What, in general, is the state of knowledge about the role of education and political participation? Regarding the role of religious attendance, union membership, or education in explaining turnout, what research designs might you propose to help separate correlations from causality in this area (be as specific as possible)?

4. An article you are asked to review presents a statistical model in which the dependent variable is the share of the vote received by incumbent members of the House running for reelection. Here is the regression Table:

	Incumbent Vote Share in District (0 to 1)	
	(A)	(B)
Incumbent Vote Share in Previous Election (0 to 1)	.272 [.129]	.282 [.135]
Partisanship of District (-1 to 1, Positive values indicate voters are aligned with incumbent's party)	.155 [.082]	.198 [.096]
Incumbent's Campaign Spending (\$/1,000)	.020 [.010]	
Challenger's Campaign Spending (\$/1,000)	-.031 [.021]	
Trips to District by Incumbent (Number)	-.020 [.005]	-.019 [.004]
Distance from Washington, DC to District	-.00007 [.00039]	-.00008 [.00041]
Bills Co-sponsored by Incumbent (Number)	-.004	-.003

	[.001]	[.001]
OLS Coefficients with Huber/White standard errors in brackets. N=1012. Data are for all incumbents running for re-election in midterm elections between 1990 and 2006. Separate year-effects and constant not reported save space.		

The author is interested in testing the argument that members of Congress will do better in their quest to retain office if they devote greater attention to popular efforts that are visible to their constituents, including making frequent visits to their district and cosponsoring legislation. On the basis of the above regression, however, the author concludes:

There is no evidence that incumbent members of Congress can improve their electoral fortunes by taking time to return to their district or by cosponsoring many bills. In fact, contrary to the conventional wisdom, we demonstrate that both sorts of activities decrease the vote share of incumbents. We believe this is because voters wisely recognize that visits home and cosponsorship, while visible, are not accurate indicators of efficacious legislative behavior. Members would be better served working diligently in committee on behalf of their district if they wished to convince voters of their true merit.

Part I:

Answer these questions about the regression output displayed in the table:

- 1) According to the regression output reported in column (A) of the table, holding all variables constant, how does a .10 change in *Incumbent Vote Share in the Previous Election* affect the predicted *Incumbent Vote Share in District*?
- 2) Is the coefficient estimate for *Incumbent Vote Share in the Previous Election* statistically significant? How can you tell?
- 3) What does statistical significance mean? is it just a technical way to say that a variable is “important”?

Part II:

Assess this article. Make sure to address these three questions:

- 1) How well does the author characterize the conventional wisdom?
- 2) How well does the author’s recommendation for alternative legislator behavior comport with the state of knowledge?
- 3) How appropriate/convincing is the data analysis, and why?

Part B:

1. Race and racism are often singled out as powerful determinants of the course American political development. Will this received wisdom have to be rethought in light of the candidacy of Barack Obama? If so, how so; if not, why not?
2. "American political life is more polarized these days than it has ever been before." Is this claim true? How would you know whether it is true? In composing an answer, be sure to consider a variety of kinds of evidence and diagnose the strengths and limitations of those measures.
3. In April 2001 Senator Jim Jeffords of Vermont switched from being a Republican to being an Independent and decided to caucus with the Democrats for purposes of organization of the chamber. Prior to the Jeffords switch the Republicans controlled the Senate because the chamber's partisan division was evenly split and Dick Cheney, as vice-president, cast the tie-breaking vote. One of the practical implications of the Jeffords switch is that the Democratic caucus gained a clear majority in the Senate and took control of the Senate. Many researchers have thought of using this switch of a "natural experiment." Is this a good idea or not? Are there some questions for which this switch would be a good natural experiment? If so, give examples; if not, explain why not. Are there some questions for which this switch would not be a good natural experiment? If so, give examples; if not, explain why not. In providing your answer discuss what features are necessary for a good natural experiment.
4. Was there a "New Deal era"? How would we know? What would be the evidence? What should be the rules for evaluating any such evidence? If there was a New Deal era, when and why did it come to an end?
5. Suppose you were given a time machine and could go back and replay American history several times after manipulating a key political event from before 1925. In light of the political science literature, what event would you manipulate and why? What pattern in the data you observe would you expect according to existing theories? What pattern would falsify those theories? Given expansive but still finite resources, would there be any value to repeating your manipulation? If so, why, and how many times?