

FALL 2009 AMERICAN POLITICS FIELD EXAM
FALL 2009

Answer **THREE** of the following questions, but no more than **TWO** from **SECTION A** or **SECTION B**. All answers must be typed.

SECTION A

1. Political scientists have famously claimed that partisanship shapes political perceptions and opinions. Describe this argument and the evidence produced to support it. Evaluate the argument and that evidence with particular attention to the strength of the empirical evidence.

2. In U.S. presidential elections since World War II, the party holding the presidency has kept it eight times but lost it eight times. Why hasn't there been more partisan stability in this electoral realm?

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. In the 1950s and 1960s, research on American public opinion tended to emphasize the apparent irrationality and political ignorance of American voters, suggesting that their shortcomings were so substantial as to make representation meaningless. Later research countered that the threat to representation is not as grave as it had seemed, partly because Americans are better informed than they had seemed and partly because they could use easily-obtained cues as "information shortcuts" to act as though they were well informed. Research within the last decades suggests that both of these schools of thought are alive and well. Which is better?

5. 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)	.372 [.129]	.382 [.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 [.001]	-.003 [.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.

This is a two part question.

Part 1:

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 2:

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?

6. In both formal and informal analyses of legislative institutions, the threat of electoral reprisal is said to influence everything from how legislators vote in committee to how they handle mail from their constituents. At the same time, few legislators face serious challenges, and most legislatures return more than 90% of incumbents who choose to compete. Review the theory and evidence regarding the electoral connection. Do legislators respond to constituent preferences? If so or if not, do their decisions appear to follow a rational calculation about the threat of electoral reprisal?

SECTION B

1. A recurring debate in American politics is about the relative strengths and weaknesses of the president as a policymaker in our separation of powers system. What are the sources and limitations on presidential power? In particular, what actions can the president take and how are those actions affected by/constrained by the actions of others (e.g., the American public, Congress, and the courts)? In constructing your answer you should be sure to describe (1) an existing model of presidential authority, (2) the evidence presented to support or refute that perspective, and (3) the conditions under which presidents will have more or less power, vis-a-vis others.

2. Suppose one could go back in time and alter some pivotal political event in American political history to realize an important counterfactual. What theory (or theories) deserves this special attention? What event would you manipulate, and how would the resulting outcome inform the theoretical arguments? Your answer should be specific and should describe the conclusions you would reach depending on the outcome you observed.

3. Why does Congress have committees. Sketch a theory, address recent developments in this area of research, and comment on conditions under which a committee system explained in this way would flourish and under which it would decay.

4. Following up on the intuition that time and timing play a significant role in determining outcomes, analysts have been seeking to elaborate a "motion-picture" view of politics. Identify three outcomes in American politics that turned on questions of time or timing and show how other explanations less attentive to these factors fall short.

5. The election of Barack Obama, the confirmation hearings for Sonia Sotomayor, and the arrest of Henry Louis Gates are all said to have generated a national conversation on race in America. Evaluate the prospects for elections, political appointments, or sensational events to leave a lasting effect on race relations? Is there any evidence of such effects? What, if anything, does political science have to say about effecting a change in mass attitudes on race?

6. Analysis of the failure of health care reform in the Clinton administration spawned a cottage industry in the field of public policy assessing the problems and prospects for negotiating major legislative breakthroughs in the American system. Examine a few of those assessments with an eye to what they would predict for the fate of the

current health-care reform effort. What, if anything, has changed to alter the prospects for a major policy breakthrough today? How, if at all, would you revise those earlier accounts in light of recent events to more accurately predict policy outcomes?