

**American Politics Field Exam  
August 2011**

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

**Part A:**

--1) A jarring disjunction occurred between the U.S. election outcome of November 2008 and that of November 2010. What does political science have to say about this? What distinctive strands of illumination can be brought to bear on this disjunction by consulting the ideas of political scientists who have contributed work relevant to it?

--2) You are presented with research relying on the following experimental design:

A representative sample of 1,000 U.S. residents is recruited to participate in a laboratory study in which individuals are surveyed and then assigned to one of two conditions, a news condition and a control condition. In the news condition, individuals are placed in a room with a television playing amalgamated broadcasts of the early evening news. In the control condition, individuals are placed in a room with a television playing broadcasts of early evening entertainment programming. After treatment assignment, a second survey is conducted.

The experimental data are analyzed as follows: Respondents are divided into those who are knowledgeable and not knowledgeable on the basis of the pre-treatment survey. Among those classified as already knowledgeable, being assigned to the news broadcast has no effect on knowledge or interest in politics relative to those assigned to control. Among those classified as not knowledgeable, being assigned to the news broadcast has no effect on knowledge and decreases interest in politics relative to those assigned to control.

On the basis of this pattern, the authors conclude: This experiment demonstrates that the nightly news is not a vehicle for increasing knowledge or interest in politics. In fact, on the basis of these results, we suggest that eliminating the nightly news would have no effect on the knowledge of ordinary citizens, regardless of whether or not they are already knowledgeable, and would increase interest in politics among those who are currently uninformed.

Assess their conclusion and argument. What, if any, alterations would you suggest to their experimental design in order to better test the claim they articulate? In constructing your answer, it may help to consider issues of external validity in the experimental design.

--3) It is claimed that Obama would have won by a larger margin in the 2008 election absent his racial identity. How good is this claim? What kinds of evidence would you consult to test it? Be as specific as possible. Weigh carefully the possible pluses and minuses of any adducible evidence and any possible inferences from it.

--4) 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)?

--5) Ansolabehere et al. ask the question: "Why is there so little money in politics?" After reviewing the existing evidence they conclude that money does not influence how legislators vote and conclude that political donations are a consumption good for the benefit of those making the donation. Is this position convincing? What other explanations are there for why donations might influence politics? What evidence could help show how money matters if it matters at all?

--6) What is the logic behind the "median voter theorem"? Provide four explanations as to why congressional candidates might not locate at the median voting-age member of their district. What does recent empirical scholarship suggest concerning whether candidates do or do not locate at the median of their districts?

## **Part B:**

--1) What are the arguments for and against the creation of majority-minority legislative districts? Should we expect the creation of such districts to lead to more conservative or more liberal public policy? In providing your answer, be sure to discuss theoretical and empirical scholarship that speaks to these matters.

--2) Back in 1960, Richard Neustadt argued that modern presidents could no longer afford to rely on the Constitution for their power and that they would become increasingly dependent on the cultivation of informal skills like bargaining and persuasion to get things done. In recent years, however, behavioral, rational choice, and Constitutional theorists have begun to challenge both arguments. Some have given us reason to doubt that persuasion counts for much in American government; others have begun to stress again the formidable advantages the president holds in government solely by virtue of his constitutional position. Consider the evidence on all sides. Did Neustadt steer us wrong?

--3) What role do parties play in the organization and operation of the U.S. House of Representatives? In answering this question, a) identify dominant theoretical perspectives and b) discuss the evidence deployed to advance those theories. A strong

answer will distinguish between the effect of partisanship on observed legislative organization/behavior from the role of legislator policy preferences.

--4) Suppose one could go back in time and alter some pivotal political event in American history to realize an important counterfactual that has been the subject of prior scholarly debate. a) What key counterfactual would you examine and what are extant arguments about its importance? b) Explain how manipulating this event would inform existing theoretical arguments. Your answer should both be specific about the causal mechanism underlying the importance of the event and describe the conclusions you would reach depending on the outcome you observed.

--5) The policy literature draws heavily on the concepts of feedback, lock in, and path dependence. These concepts tell us how policies can stabilize their environment and become woven into the fabric of American government and politics. And yet, as the deregulation movement of the 1970s and 80s showed us, long-entrenched policies can be upended quite suddenly, and recent developments have been unsettling to many cherished entitlements. Does the policy literature need to be amended? If so, how deep does your revision cut?

--6) What are the possible sources of “incumbency advantage?” Discuss two to three alternative measures of the incumbency advantage and discuss their strengths and weaknesses. Is a high incumbency advantage a sign that the electoral process is working well or working poorly?