

Summer 2014
AMERICAN POLITICS FIELD EXAM

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. You run an Ordinary Least Squares regression predicting welfare expenditures, hypothesizing that Democratic presidents spend more on welfare than Republican presidents do. You think this may be true only when the House of Representatives is also Democratic, so your specification allows the effect of a Democratic president to vary depending on the partisan breakdown of the House. The results are below:

| | OLS Coefficient | Standard Error |
|----------------------|-----------------|----------------|
| Democratic President | -.28 | .30 |
| Democratic House | -1.42 | .35 |
| Dem. Pres*Dem. House | 1.67 | .38 |
| Economic growth | .33 | .10 |
| Constant | 1.00 | .03 |

You run the regression using data from 1985 to 2010. The unit of analysis is a fiscal year. The first two predictive variables are indicator variables. Economic growth is measured as the change in GDP from the previous year. The dependent variable is billions in the federal budget allocated to discretionary welfare spending.

- a) Is the effect of *economic growth* statistically significant? How can you tell? What does this mean?
- b) Using the results shown above, how would you evaluate the claim that Democratic presidents spend more on welfare than Republican presidents, when the House is Democratic? Be precise. Give a point prediction of the effect of Democratic presidents on welfare expenditures when the House is Democratic. (You don't have to give the standard error on this point prediction.)
- c) Using the results shown above, how would you evaluate the claim that House partisanship has no effect on a president's welfare spending? What do your results say about this?
- d) Are welfare expenditures higher when the President and the House are both Democratic, rather than both Republican?
- e) What do you predict welfare spending to be when GDP growth is 0, the President is a Democrat, and the House is controlled by Republicans? Give a point prediction. (You do not have to worry about a standard error.)
- f) Suppose a newspaper reporter asked you what this would mean for federal spending depending on the outcome of this year's midterm election. What would you tell the reporter, and how confident would you be in your answer?

2. Recent research on institutions and mass behavior has focused heavily on “polarization.” First, define polarization as a phenomenon applied to legislatures. Second, define polarization as it applies to mass opinion and behavior. Then, evaluate several proposed explanations for the rise of *elite* polarization. Specifically, (1) evaluate an historical explanation related to the Southern realignment; (2) evaluate an electoral explanation related to contemporary election laws; and (3) evaluate an institutional explanation related to the incentives of party leaders in the legislature. How persuasive are these explanations? Would you conclude that polarization is driven primarily by political elites or by the preferences of ordinary citizens?
3. Many scholars have examined whether cues and other “shortcuts” help people compensate for their lack of knowledge about politics when they make critical political decisions. Some of these scholars are optimistic about people’s capacity to use cues and shortcuts to overcome problems posed by their lack of knowledge. Other scholars are pessimistic. Review and critically evaluate the most prominent arguments made by each side. Are there additional factors that help explain why cues and shortcuts are sometimes an effective remedy for lack of knowledge and sometimes not?

SECTION B

1. Many states elect trial court judges in competitive partisan elections. Some policymakers believe the judicial system would be improved if these judges were appointed for life as they are at the federal level—i.e., if they were nominated by the executive branch (in this case, governors) and consented to by the legislative branch (in this case, state legislatures). What does political science have to say about the relative merits of partisan elections and appointment? Begin by using the normative literature on the courts and jurisprudence to define “better”: what should trial court judges be doing to play their proper role? How might partisan elections help or hinder these goals relative to lifetime appointment? What is lost, if anything, in moving away from partisan elections? Reference the general literature on elections and responsiveness to answer these questions.
2. In his rise to power, Barack Obama criticized his predecessor for overreaching his constitutional authority and acting unilaterally. Now, as president, Obama stands accused of doing the same thing. Based on the literature on the lawmaking process and executive power, what do we know about the incentives of presidents to act unilaterally and how do these incentives translate into action—that is, *when* should we expect unilateral action, *why*, and of *what form*? Does Obama’s performance in this regard conform to these expectations? Given your answer to the last question, how can we explain the sharp reaction to the president’s exercise of unilateral power?
3. Discuss the design and perform of the American government from a principal-agent perspective. Apply the P-A perspective first to interactions across the branches and then to the relationship between voters and the government. What are some similarities across these relationships, and what are some differences between them? Why do some rely on *ex ante* controls and others on *ex post* controls? Do these relationships differ in any way from the classic P-A setup?