

**American Politics Field Exam**  
**August 2015**

Answer THREE of the following questions, but no more than TWO from SECTION A or SECTION B. All answers must be typed. Your exam will be evaluated as a whole, so try to avoid repeating yourself and allocate your time appropriately across questions.

SECTION A

1. Barack Obama has generated considerable criticism for acting unilaterally in matters of war, health care, and immigration. (A) To what extent do Obama's actions follow or depart from the behavior of other recent presidents? (B) Consider the unilateral politics model associated with the work of Howell. Describe that theory and its predictions. Are these predictions confirmed or challenged by Obama's actions? (C) Describe a basic account of presidential unilateralism that poses an alternative to Howell's perspective. Does it do a better or worse job of predicting the conditions under which presidents act unilaterally?
2. 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.
3. Bartels and Achen argue that democracy doesn't seem to work very well because voters respond to bad events, including those that are presumably beyond the incumbent's control (like shark attacks and bad weather), by punishing the incumbent at the polls. (A) From a theoretical perspective, is this a good argument or not? What has the literature come to say about it? (B) From an empirical perspective, how strong is the evidence to support these views about "blind retrospective" and what are the best criticisms of the Bartels/Achen line of work?
4. The American welfare state is claimed to be distinctly different from that of other similarly developed countries in both scope and form. (A) Describe and characterize these differences. (B) What theoretical perspectives best explain this "American exceptionalism"? Your answer evaluating these perspectives should discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the empirical evidence presented to support or call into question each account.
5. Barack Obama, America's first African-American President, was elected in 2008 and re-elected in 2012. Despite these majoritarian electoral victories and hopes that they signaled a period of racial transcendence, white and black Americans hold remarkably different attitudes on important political issues. (A) What are these important differences? (B) Why do they exist? (C) What effect, if any, do they have on important political outcomes? (D) Are these differences likely to persist, why or why not?

## SECTION B

1. Partisanship seems important to understand the contemporary organization of the U.S. House of Representatives and the voting pattern of its members. (A) What are the dominant theoretical perspectives about why and how parties matter? (B) What are the alternatives to any claims that parties per se are important in causing these outcomes? (C) What is the best empirical evidence to support these different views? (Hint: A strong answer will try to separate the effects of parties on observed legislative organization/behavior from the effects of legislators' policy preferences.)

2. When policies persist despite widespread opposition to them, two prominent explanations in American politics research are (1) claims of path dependence and (2) claims that policymaking is a non-majoritarian practice where certain actors can protect unpopular policies through their control of the agenda or their veto power. (A) What are the microfoundations of each explanation? (B) How could you test the veracity of each model and/or distinguish between the two? Is there a particular area where change or lack thereof in policy demonstrates that one explanation is superior to the other? In making your argument, be sure to address the likely arguments of the other side.

3. There are two dominant theoretical views about the role of partisanship in mass political behavior. One view is that partisanship represents a summary of beliefs about appropriate policies and past party performance. An alternative view is that partisanship is more akin to a social identity that directly shapes preferences and attitudes. (A) Describe the theoretical underpinnings of each perspective. (B) What evidence is presented to support each perspective and what are the best criticisms of each view? (C) Overall, how important is each perspective for understanding contemporary American politics and why?

(Question 4 appears on the next page)

4. An article you are asked to review presents a statistical model in which the dependent variable is the quality of the challenger who runs against an incumbent members of the U.S. House. Here is the regression Table:

	Challenger quality (scaled 0 to 100)
Incumbent Vote Share in Previous Election (0 to 1)	-3.72 [1.129]
Partisanship of District (-1 to 1, Positive values indicate voters are aligned with incumbent's party)	-1.55 [.820]
President's Popularity x Incumbent Party (-1 to 1, Positive values indicate popular president of incumbent's party or unpopular president not of the incumbent's party. Measured 1 year prior to general election.)	-2.32 [.822]
Trips to District by Incumbent (Number)	-.920 [.115]
Bills Co-sponsored by Incumbent (Number)	-.045 [.221]
Incumbent's number of terms in office	-2.700 [.201]
Incumbent's war chest (Cash on hand 1 year prior to general election, in \$/1,000)	.340 [.010]
Notes: (1) N=1012. (2) OLS Coefficients with Huber/White standard errors in brackets. Results are substantively similar if functional form is instead Tobit, with challenger quality truncated at 0 and 100. (3) Data are for all incumbents running for re-election in midterm elections between 1990 and 2006. Results are substantively identical if include cases where incumbent retired and include quality of opposite party's candidate in open seat election. (4) Coefficients for incumbent's age, incumbent's age squared, separate year-effects, and constant not reported to save space.	

Building on the well-known finding that incumbents are far more likely to lose when challenged by high-quality candidates, the author is interested in testing the argument that incumbents can ward off such challengers if they devote greater attention to fundraising . 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 scaring off stronger challengers) if they take time to build up a war chest. In fact, contrary to the conventional wisdom, we demonstrate that incumbents who raise large sums of money are more likely to face quality challengers. We believe this is because challengers wisely recognize that fundraising is not a good indicator of efficacious legislative behavior. Members would be better served cosponsoring bills, visiting their district, or working diligently in committee on behalf of their district if they wish to deter such challengers.

(Question 4 continues on the next page)

Part I:

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

- A. According to the regression output reported in the table, holding all variables constant, how does a \$2000 change in *Incumbent's war chest* affect the predicted *Challenger quality*?
- B. Is the coefficient estimate for *Incumbent's war chest* statistically significant? How can you tell?
- C. What does statistical significance mean?

Part II:

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

- A. How well does the author characterize the conventional wisdom?
- B. How well does the author's recommendation for alternative legislator behavior comport with the state of knowledge?
- C. How appropriate/convincing is the data analysis, and why?