

American Politics Field Exam
January 2009

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 2008 presidential election challenged longstanding arguments about the powerful manner in which racial attitudes shape vote choice. Review the arguments of two of the following authors -- David Sears, Lawrence Bobo, Paul Sniderman, Tali Mendelberg, Howard Schuman -- about the origins and expression of racial attitudes and explain how these arguments are affected by the 2008 election outcome.

2. It is common in the analysis of public opinion and political behavior to include measures of a respondent's education as a causal variable. What are the theoretical underpinnings of doing so? What, in general, is the state of knowledge about the role of education in explaining opinion and behavior, and how persuasive is this evidence of a causal relationship? Discuss with reference to at least one specific behavior and one area of opinion.

3. 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.

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?
4. Converse's (1964) "nonattitudes" thesis is that Americans often lack meaningful views of even the most important political issues. Achen (1975) writes that "democracy loses its starting point" if Converse is correct. Is Achen's normative point correct? What about Converse's empirical point? When answering these questions, discuss Zaller's modification of Converse and its empirical and normative implications, if any.

Part B:

1. Appraise the theory and practice of studying congressional roll call voting. What kinds of useful illumination have been gained, or might be gained, by the study of roll calls? And what are the limits: That is, what kinds of useful illumination might not be possible through the study of roll calls?
2. Richard Neustadt argued that presidents cannot depend on their constitutional powers to generate the leadership needed to make modern American government work. He suggested that they should, instead, develop their skills for informal bargaining with others in the Washington establishment. Later on, Sam Kernell argued that the diffusion of power in the Washington establishment had rendered bargaining strategies ineffective and that presidents were better advised to court public opinion to sustain their leadership. Now scholars are showing that the ability of presidents to manipulate and change public opinion has been wildly exaggerated. Looking back at the Clinton and W. Bush administrations, how would you reassess the relative weight of Constitutional power, bargaining skill, and “going public” as resources for presidential leadership? Looking ahead in light of that evaluation, how would you assess the President Obama’s leadership prospects?
3. Thinking as a political scientist of today, consider the argument expressed in Federalist #51--that is, the case for setting governmental institutions against each other in an array of ambition checking ambition. How would you try to frame that case in today's terms? Using the various empirical knowledge available to you today, how would you assess the validity and overall value of that case?
4. 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.