American University Department of Government
M.A. COMPREHENSIVE EXAMINATION
American Politics
Spring 2020

This exam consists of questions drawn from the field of American Politics and questions drawn specifically from our Applied Politics concentration offered through the Public Affairs and Advocacy Institute and the Campaign Management Institute.

DIRECTIONS: You will write three essays. Be strategic in your selection of questions, choosing those that allow you to show the greatest breadth and depth of your knowledge. Notice that, in almost every case, you are expected to demonstrate your knowledge by drawing on a range of appropriate scholarship. When doing so, be sure to cite the scholarship you are drawing upon explicitly.

All students must answer **one** question from **Section I**.

Applied Politics students must:

-   Answer **one** question from **Section II** and **one** question from **Section III**.

Students **not** in Applied Politics may either:

-   Answer **two** questions from **Section II, OR**
-   Answer **one** question from **Section II** and **one** question from **Section III**.

Clearly identify the questions you choose to answer. Please use 12-point type, double-spaced, and standard margins when preparing your essays.

SECTION I

1. Consider the statement: "Economic elites and organized groups representing business interests have substantial independent impact on U.S. Government policy, while mass-based interest groups and average citizens have little or no independent influence, as shown with tax and environmental policy in the U.S. In the United States the majority does not rule, at least not in the causal sense of actually determining policy outcomes. When a majority of citizens disagree with economic elites or with organized interests, they generally lose."

   Do you agree or disagree with this statement? What evidence is there supporting this observation with respect to specific policy areas in 2020? Use readings, lectures, and your research to confirm or disconfirm this generalization/hypothesis.

2. Describe the process of null hypothesis significance testing in the context of examining the effect of macroeconomic performance (i.e., economic performance in the aggregate or at the national level) on the vote share of an incumbent US president seeking re-election. Be specific. Which of these concepts is the independent variable, which is the dependent variable? How might you operationalize the concept of macroeconomic performance? What type of relationship might you expect between these concepts, and why? What would it mean to commit a Type 1 or Type 2 error in this context? Finally, what type of test statistic might you compute to make an inference about the relationship between economic performance and presidential vote share? How might you tell if there is a relationship between these variables from looking at the test statistic?

SECTION II

1. Choose two of the following approaches to the study of the presidency: psychological, administrative, or "new" (neo) institutional. Assess the strengths and weaknesses of each approach for understanding the source and nature of presidential power. Illustrate with examples from either the Obama or the Trump presidency.

2. In comparing the powers of the three branches of our government, James Madison wrote in Federalist #51 that "the legislative authority necessarily predominates." Few would argue that today's Congress plays that central role. Describe the key powers of Congress and how they have evolved over time. Why, and in what ways, has the legislative branch become weaker relative to the executive and judicial branches? How could it reclaim some of the influence it has lost?

3. Explain the social-psychological (Michigan) model of voting behavior. What are the pros and cons of this model? What hypothesis about voting behavior in a presidential election or elections might this model reliably confirm or not? How would you organize a research project to test your hypothesis using key variables from one or more ANES surveys?

SECTION III

1. Describe the major dimensions of issue advocacy/lobbying campaigns in U.S. politics using examples from lectures and the academic literature. How are they similar or different to candidate campaigns? In his presidential campaign, President Trump attacked lobbyists and promised to "drain the swamp." How has he succeeded and failed in changing the way lobbying campaigns work in Washington? Is Trump era lobbying helping or hurting our American democracy? Specify your evaluation criteria and apply them to what you have learned from speakers, readings, and research. Make sure you refer to the relevant academic literature, lectures, and primary sources in your answer.

2. You are the campaign manager for a competitive House race in the 2020 general election. Given the pandemic, how do you plan for the general election? What issues do you take into consideration? Does this change if your candidate is an incumbent, a challenger, or running in an open seat race?