

**American Politics Comprehensive Exam
Practice Questions - Spring 2016**

Please read the instructions carefully. You have six hours to complete the exam, not including a half hour for lunch. Please divide your time strategically, allowing yourself adequate time to devote to each question. **Make sure you marshal evidence from appropriate scholarship and provide examples when necessary. You should identify the relevant theoretical and methodological contributions for each question.** You may not consult any notes, readings, or any other person during the exam. You may not use cell phones (except in emergencies) or the Internet during the examination. Answer the questions in a single file, making sure you number each question so it is clear what questions you are answering. Please save your work frequently to the flash drive (Do not save anything to the computer). When you are done, please return the exam (flash drive) to Dr. Newmark, Dr. Love, or the office staff (no later than 3:35 pm). Cheating of any kind will not be tolerated, and you are required to abide by the university honor code. Answer three questions—one from each section.

Section 1—Required

1. Develop a research question dealing with some issues related to either Congress or the presidency as institutions. Briefly discuss some of the critical literature/research that has been published on this topic. Develop one or more hypotheses and discuss a research design that would allow you to test your hypotheses. What kind of study would you conduct and why? Make sure you address issues of validity and reliability in your answer.

Section 2—Choose one of the following

2. Since Converse's seminal assessment of the political understanding of Americans, much research has focused on how relatively unsophisticated voters can make reasonable decisions. Implicit in much of this research is the notion that political sophisticates make superior vote choices. Are sophisticates better at making rational, unbiased voting decisions? Are there some conditions under which non-sophisticates can arrive at better--or at least comparable--decisions than sophisticates?
3. Discuss the origins of political attitudes and behaviors. Be sure to discuss genetics, identities, self-interest, values, and partisanship in your answer. Which of these matter the most and why?

See next page--

Section 3—Choose one of the following

4. Political scientists who study comparative politics often complain about the setting apart of American politics as a subfield. To what extent is American politics exceptional and deserving of being set apart like this? What are the key differences between the US and other advanced democracies that make comparisons less useful? Has American politics become more or less exceptional over the last few decades? Areas you could address in your answer include, but are not limited to, the workings of Congress, political parties, and elections.

5. By far, the most common empirical means of analyzing Supreme Court decision making has been to examine justices' decisions on the merits. Most theoretical accounts agree that justices' policy preferences play a significant, and perhaps dominant, role in decision making. But one key event/preliminary process seems to underlie how the justices decide cases on the merits: the nomination/confirmation stage. Discuss key factors that influence how a president nominates a person to the Supreme Court and how the Senate confirms that nominee. Then connect this preliminary process to how the Court decides on the merits. In other words, how do the factors that influence the nomination stage have an impact on the justices' merits decision making? What would the justices' merits decision making look like if different sets of factors mattered more at each stage?

6. How would you evaluate the state of the state politics literature? What areas have developed theoretically and methodologically? What areas have lagged behind? In your answer, you should address where the state politics literature has built on similar topics in national-level scholarship, where the state politics literature lags behind the national-level scholarship, and where it has advanced beyond it.