

American Politics Prelim Exam Rules

Beginning with the graduate class that enters in Fall 2006, the American prelin will have the following format and rules:

- It will be an eight-hour, **open-note, open-book** exam.
- Students must answer three questions. The format for each is listed below.
- Question #1: This will be a general question. It will no longer come directly from a “list of thematics,” and students will no longer be given a list of thematics. Instead, the questions will be general questions to which any well-trained student of American politics should be able to respond intelligently, creatively, and knowledgeably. The questions will not be designed to “test” a student’s knowledge of any specific topic in the American politics literature, but rather, will ask the student to address an overarching debate in the field, for which examples from a variety of topical literatures (such as from political behavior, institutions, and/or public policy) might be marshaled. Students will be given 2-3 general questions and will be asked to answer 1 of them. Sample general questions appear at the end of this document.
- Question #2: This will be a more specific question about a discrete area of research. The content of this question will be drawn from American politics seminars the student has taken, and may require students to integrate content from more than 1 seminar he/she has taken. Students will be given 2-3 more specific questions and will be asked to answer 1 of them.
- Question # 3: Students will be asked to choose a literature in American politics about which they feel they have expertise. They will be given 1 of the following 2 questions (drawn randomly by the field chair), and will be asked to answer it with regard to their chosen literature:
 - Version 1: What is the most undertilled area of the literature, and why is it undertilled? What is the most overtilled area, and why is it overtilled? How might one go about tilling the undertilled?
 - Version 2: Describe what you believe will be the most significant advance in the literature in the next decade. What about the current state of the literature leads you to believe that this will be the most significant advance?

American Politics Prelim Exam Sample Questions

General questions:

The framers created the separation of powers to guarantee that no single branch of government can gain too much power over the others. In the past decade, scholars have derived models to explain the interaction that takes place among the three branches of government, and to predict how each of the branches will behave as they interact with one another. Do these models adequately capture the interaction among the branches? More generally, what have these models taught scholars about the separation of powers?

Are political representation and leadership irreconcilably in conflict? The concept of “representation” has multiple and competing interpretations. Compare the conception adopted by the Framers of the Constitution with alternative interpretations, and use research on American political behavior, institutions, and public policy to assess the relative merits of each interpretation. Is American politics representative?

In what ways does the American political system live up to its democratic ideals, and in what ways does it fail to do so? What accounts for these successes and failures?

We cannot understand American politics without understanding the politics of race, class, gender, and sexuality. We cannot understand the politics of race, class, gender, and sexuality without understanding broad themes in American politics. Discuss with reference to AT LEAST three of the following: public opinion; political behavior; voting and elections; political parties and interest groups; political institutions; and public policy.

The House of Representatives was designed with short, 2 year terms, so that its members would remain "close" to the people they represented and thus represent the passions of the public. Yet, in today's House we see members serving for decades with reelection rates greater than 95%, while public opinion polls reveals that more than a majority of the public is unhappy with the job that Congress is doing. What accounts for this disconnect between public opinion and reelection rates? Does this disconnect undermine the House as a representative institution? Explain why or why not.