

**American Politics Comprehensive Exam**  
**May 2007**  
Department of Politics, University of Virginia  
**DAY TWO: American Political Behavior**

You have six hours to answer two of the following questions. Please choose one from Section 1 and one from Section 2. Remember to aim to avoid substantial overlap with what you wrote for Day 1.

**Section 1**

Option 1.

To what extent are Americans' political choices and actions shaped by electoral laws and institutions, compared to pre-political or non-political factors (such as how and where citizens were raised and where they worship and work)? In other words, to what extent have various electoral reforms made a difference (or might further reforms in the future make a difference) in the quality and levels of political information Americans possess and the extent to which they participate in politics?

Option 2.

Do political campaigns make any difference to the outcomes of American elections (or American politics more broadly)? If they make a difference, when and where do they matter most? What factors besides what happens in campaigns shape election outcomes? How important are these factors compared to campaigns?

**Section 2**

Option 1.

In the view of some political scientists, patterns of public opinion in this country demonstrate that Americans are largely "innocent of ideology." Is this a reasonable claim? What sorts of assumptions—regarding the meaning or interpretation of opinion surveys—might lead analysts to accept this claim? What challenges could be raised against these assumptions? Do we care?

Option 2.

Is American public opinion largely responsive to, or mostly immune from, external events and crises? What factors mediate how things that happen in the world (wars, economic downturns, political scandals) shape how Americans think about politics? Do Americans respond to new information, or are they prisoners of pre-dispositions? Are some citizens different from others in how they respond to events and to the factors that mediate the understanding of events?

Option 3.

For citizens in a representative democracy like the United States to understand, evaluate and control the actions of political officials, the activities of government must be transparent to and observable by citizens. How good a job do the media in the United States do in supplying information to citizens? What features or limitations of citizen thinking might the media respond to better?

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**DAY TWO: American Political Thought**

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**Section 1**

Option 1.

The question of executive leadership and privilege is a longstanding one in American political thought and history. Please write an essay that analyzes how the notion of executive authority has changed from the Puritans, through the period of the Revolution and constitutional formation, to Jackson and Lincoln. In your essay, take care to consider how notions of human nature, obligation, and authority influence this development in American political thought.

Option 2.

In terms of political theory, not simply historical facts, compare the thinking of Lincoln and Calhoun on the issues of equality, majority rule, and states' rights. Which of the two, in terms of political theory, was correct on the issue of secession?

Option 3.

Judith Shklar wrote that slavery is the political fact that most distinguishes "American political thought from its cultural neighbors ... Not racism—which is universal—but slavery in a modern constitutional state is truly unique." Examine and compare how the issue of slavery is considered by at least three American theorists.

**Section 2**

Option 1.

"The Progressives sought a thorough transformation of the Founders' political system on every level possible, from its animating ideas to the role of government, to the character of the political institutions and the place of the Constitution." Do you concur with this statement? Explain.

Option 2.

"On the great question of preventing modern political regimes from slipping into despotism, Tocqueville's political science ultimately must be pronounced inadequate. All the remedies he suggests to counteract the dangerous tendencies of democratic times are themselves subject to erosion by those same tendencies." What are the main threats to establishing free regimes in modern times? What remedies or antidotes does Tocqueville suggest to counter them? Do you agree that these antidotes are likely to prove inadequate?