

Department of Political Science

Public Policy Minor Field Comprehensive Examination

August 2020

**Directions:** Answer two questions, one from each group listed below. When answering the questions strive to provide theoretical and empirical insights from Politics and Public Policy, as well as other courses you completed as part of your policy sub-field.

**Group 1:** Answer one of the two questions listed below.

1. The institutional structure of American government is the most fragmented in the world. Political scientists who study the policymaking process are interested in the distribution of power between the three branches of the federal government and the distribution of power between the federal, state, and local levels of government. Beyond this, the liberal economic institutions that exist in the U.S. place significant power to influence the material well-being of the population in the hands of the private sector. The response of the Trump administration to the novel coronavirus has been widely criticized in the media as an abdication of leadership. However, President Trump and his allies have said that the primary responsibility for responding to the virus resides at the state level in the U.S., where governors oversee vast public health systems. In addition, the Trump administration has solicited assistance from leading corporations to provide needed health supplies and services. Given the fragmented nature of American policymaking institutions, what is the proper role of the federal government in a public health crisis? Is the media criticism of President Trump unfair? Why or why not? What could the President have done that he has not done?
2. Political scientists have contributed several theoretical perspectives/frameworks to the study of public policy. In your judgment, what are the three most important such contributions (please identify and describe the contributions you judge to be important)? In answering this question, be sure to define the contours of the discipline of political science (i.e., what makes it similar to and different from other, nearby disciplines) and the standards by which political science contributions to the study of public policy are best judged. Bolster your answer with examples drawn from a policy area (or multiple areas) in which you have an interest.

**Group 2:** Answer one of the three questions listed below.

3. Although Paul Pierson (in a *World Politics* article published in 1996) described the distinctive politics of social policy retrenchment, he later suggested that the welfare state was being restructured, not retrenched, as it struggled to adjust to "permanent austerity." Jacob Hacker (writing in the *American Political Science Review* in 2004) criticized Pierson's analysis of welfare state retrenchment for being too narrowly focused; Hacker contended that Pierson emphasized formal revision of policy and overlooked other important ways in which policy can be altered.

Select and identify a nation that is of interest to you. Describe the important social policy changes that have taken place in that nation since 1980. Changes may include alterations to existing conditions and social problems, alterations to existing welfare state programs, shifts to new policy tools, and changes in processes (such as privatization, moving functions from the public to the private sector, and devolution, transferring policymaking authority to levels of government below the national level). Do you think the policy developments you have described amount to retrenchment, restructuring, or something else?

4. Policy in the U.S. is developed and implemented within a system of federal relations. An enduring question about American public policy is why state-level policy varies within this federal system. Identify and explain what past research has found to be important variables to explain inter-state policy variation. Identify what you think are the most compelling explanations and explain why you find these claims to be convincing. Then, select a policy you are familiar with and explain how this policy area illustrates the policy determinants you have identified as compelling explanations of inter-state policy variation.
5. Many theories about how foreign policy is made—including theories of decision-making and theories about the origins of public policy—are grounded in theoretical concepts from American foreign and domestic policy and are usually tested on primarily US data. What are the costs of this US-centric approach? What are the benefits? Going forward, how should scholarship on foreign policy balance these trade-offs? Discuss with relevance both to theory and empirical evidence.