

Ph.D. Comprehensive Examination
AMERICAN POLITICS
May 2018

Instructions:

Please respond to **four** of the following questions, choosing **two** questions from Part I and **two** from Part II. You have up to eight hours to complete the examination.

Keep the following in mind when constructing your essays. First, you should articulate a coherent argument in answering each question. Merely demonstrating that you have read a literature is insufficient for answering questions satisfactorily. Second, you should view the examination as an opportunity to demonstrate your understanding of multiple literatures in American politics. Because your examination will be evaluated on its overall comprehensiveness, you should select questions and formulate responses that demonstrate the breadth of your preparation. Third, rough cites to prominent works (for example, “Zaller’s 1992 book on public opinion”) are acceptable.

Part I:

1. We often draw a distinction in American politics between scholarship on “behavior” and “institutions.” Choose two scholarly areas within the subfield of American politics in which the line between behavior and institutions is either blurred or non-existent, and discuss advantages and disadvantages of this distinction in terms of creating knowledge about politics and government.
2. Do institutions matter? Explain the scholarly meaning(s) of this question and discuss and evaluate how scholars have applied and answered the question in at least two different areas of American politics research.
3. In recent decades, political methodology has been essential to advancements in our understanding of American politics. Choose two research areas in which you think methodological innovations have been indispensable and evaluate the scholarly costs and benefits of applying these innovations to the study of politics.
4. Rational choice theory is pervasive in many areas of the study of American politics. Write an essay that lays out the assumptions of rational choice theory, and evaluates its strengths and weaknesses in explaining behavior and outcomes in American politics. On balance, has reliance on economic models been a positive development for the subfield? Why or why not?

Part II:

1. In the context of judicial decision making, what is “constraint?” Where do constraints come from and under what conditions do they matter?
2. Is Congress a majoritarian institution? Why or why not? Explain.
3. Policymaking in the executive branch (e.g., regulations, executive orders) has featured prominently in both the Obama and Trump administrations. In your estimation, what are the most important theoretical frameworks that political science (as opposed to nearby disciplines such as economics and public administration) has contributed to understanding the people, processes, and institutions of the executive branch bureaucracy? Critically evaluate these contributions.
4. In “The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics,” Phillip Converse famously argued that most people do not interpret politics through an ideological lens, and thus do not hold clear ideological views. How has this claim stood the test of the time? If it is still true, why? If not, why not?
5. To what extent do voters’ choices in elections reflect their material interests versus other considerations, like social identity? How does the campaign environment affect the influence of these factors?
6. Partisanship is a dominant concept in the study of mass political behavior in the United States. What is partisanship, and how does it influence public opinion and voting behavior? How has the influence of partisanship changed over time? In your answer, be sure to discuss different ways that scholars have conceptualized partisanship.