

**Ph.D. Comprehensive Examination**  
***AMERICAN GOVERNMENT AND POLITICS***  
**January 2006**

**Directions:** Please respond to **five** of the 15 questions listed below. Answer at least two questions from Part I and at least one question from Part II. (This means that you will answer anywhere from zero to two questions from Part III.) You have eight hours to complete the exam. It is our expectation that the questions from Parts I will require more attention and time than those from Parts II and III.

Keep the following in mind when writing your exam. First, you should articulate a coherent argument in answering each question. Merely demonstrating that you have read a lot is insufficient for answering these questions. Second, you should view the exam as an opportunity to demonstrate your understanding of the multiple literatures in American politics. Because your exam will be evaluated on its overall comprehensiveness, you should select questions that demonstrate the breadth of your knowledge. Rough cites to prominent works (for example, “Mayhew’s 1974 book on congressional organization”) are acceptable.

Part I: Please respond to **at least two (2)** of the following questions:

1. Many scholars of economics and politics have suggested that problems of social decision-making are endemic in American politics. Explain how theories of social decision-making have been used to explain two different types of political problems, and evaluate how useful such theories have been in explaining why problems arise and how they can be resolved.
2. Anthony Downs highlighted the importance of the median voter in his *Economic Theory of Democracy*. Does the median voter always win? Discuss the influence of the median voter and potential constraints on his/her influence in at least two political environments (e.g., the electorate, the Supreme Court, Congress, or elsewhere in American Politics). What do you conclude about the value of median-voter theories to the study of politics and political behavior?
3. Rational choice theory has been applied in a variety of political phenomena. For example, rational choice theory has been utilized to explain the decisions made by individual voters and it has been used to explain the nature of the policies promulgated by the legislative and executive branches. Discuss how rational choice theory has been used to explain the decisions that are reached by institutions and individuals. What is the relative utility of rational choice theory in accounting for the decisions made by individuals and by institutions? And what are its limitations? Finally, can rational choice theory coexist with competing theoretical approaches? In other words, can a scholar simultaneously employ both rational choice and either a psychological or sociological explanation?

4. To test the models we develop, political scientists frequently create measures of concepts that are the backbone of our theories. Some of these concepts are “preferences,” “status quo,” “strategic behavior,” and “power.” Why are these concepts important? How have they been used? How have they been measured? Are the measures that have been employed adequate?

Part II. Please respond to **at least one (1)** of the following questions:

5. What are the main controversies in explanations of vote choice in American elections? What, in your opinion, are the current gaps in our scholarly understanding and what kinds of studies are needed to fill these gaps? In answering these questions, make sure to (1) discuss alternative explanatory approaches, (2) contrast vote choice in presidential vs. congressional elections, and (3) address the role of campaigns and the media in affecting choice in both types of elections.
6. Scholars of American politics have increasingly turned to studying the selection and evolution of American political institutions. What theories or approaches have been used to explain the choice of political institutions? What are the strengths and weaknesses of these alternative approaches? Choose one particular political institution and explain how different theories have been used to account for the institution's development. How convincing are these accounts?
7. A central question in the study of the mass public is whether citizens are democratically "competent." Provide an argument about how competent citizens are. In making this argument, you should refer to several ideas: the extent and importance of information about politics; Converse's argument about "ideological innocence"; and the utility of heuristics in political decision-making.

Part III. Please respond to no more than **two** of the following questions. If you have already answered five questions, you do not need to answer any questions from this section. Thus, it is our expectation that you will answer **none, one or two (0-2)** questions from this section of the exam.

8. What is the incumbency advantage, and why and when did it take root? Why do congressional elections today remain so markedly uncompetitive?
9. Much political psychology has been concerned with explaining atrocities such as mass violence and genocide, e.g., the Holocaust. Compare and contrast the personality-based explanation for such atrocities with explanations that center on social influence, obedience, and conformity. Which do you think provides a more compelling account? Or should these approaches be combined into some theoretical synthesis? If so, what would that synthesis look like?

10. One frequently hears laments about how much trust in government has declined. In this essay, first assess whether this characterization of the trend is accurate. Then discuss the factors that do and do not affect trust in government at both the individual and aggregate levels. Finally, discuss the normative significance of trust in government. How and how much does it matter?
11. Conventional wisdom holds that the U.S. Constitution gives the president very few formal powers, and many scholars have argued that the presidency is a very weak office. Are these received wisdoms correct? If not, what sources of power, if any, have presidents used to accomplish their policy goals? Should the conventional wisdom about limited presidential power be revised? Why or why not?
12. States have often been described as "laboratories of democracy." What does this mean? How have scholars assessed the extent to which states play this role? What are their central findings? What questions remain to be answered?
13. The legal policy contained in Supreme Court decisions has changed over time. What accounts for these changes?
14. Are bureaucrats constrained? If so, by what factors? If not, why not?
15. The new wisdom amongst scholars of political parties is that the parties are making a comeback—in elections, amongst the electorate, and in government. Why did the parties decline and what evidence suggest that they have resurged? Are you convinced of the resurgence of party? Why or why not?