

Masters Comprehensive Examination
AMERICAN GOVERNMENT AND POLITICS
May 2008

Directions: Please respond to **three** (3) of the 11 questions listed below. Answer at least one question from Part I and at least one question from Part II. You have up to 8 hours to complete the exam (although it may not take you that long).

Keep the following in mind when writing your essays. 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. Third, rough cites to prominent works (for example, “Mayhew’s 1991 book on divided government”) are acceptable.

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

1. Some scholars have argued that political science is nothing more than a derivative of economics, psychology, sociology, and history. Are these critics correct? In your answer, discuss and evaluate the nature of these critics’ argument. What (if anything) makes the study of politics unique?
2. The framers of the Constitution developed a republican form of government, one in which designated representatives serve on behalf of the general population. Given what political scientists know about representation, how well do you think our current system lives up to this principle? In your answer, think broadly about the different arenas in which representation is at issue, including national political institutions, political organizations, and mass and elite electoral behavior. Discuss as many of these issues as you feel are necessary to make your case.
3. To test the models we develop, political scientists frequently devise measures of concepts that are the backbone of our theories. These concepts include the notions of *preferences*, *norms*, *strategic behavior*, *power*, and *dimensionality*. Choose two of these concepts and write an essay that explores the following questions: Why are these concepts important? How have they been used in research on American politics? Conclude with an evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of the measures often chosen to tap these concepts.
4. Over the past decade or so, there has been an historical turn in the social sciences, particularly within political science. Explore and evaluate a broad range of literature on American politics that takes an historical turn. Why have so many political scientists turned to history as a mechanism for studying American politics? What theoretical, methodological, and empirical gains, if any, have been

generated by historical analyses of politics? Should this vein of research still be encouraged? Why or why not?

Part II. Please respond to **at least one (1)** question from this section.

5. Why do parties exist and do they matter? To whom or what might they matter? How do we know? In answering this question, be sure to address the strengths and weaknesses of recent research on this question.
6. How important are political campaigns in affecting the attitudes and behaviors of Americans? In answering this question, make sure to (1) discuss both voter turnout and vote choice and (2) contrast vote choice in presidential vs. congressional elections.
7. Rational choice theory is ubiquitous in the study of the U.S. Congress, ranging from explanations of legislators' behavior to legislative organization. Exploring a broad range of this literature (including studies of behavior and organization), write an essay that evaluates the benefits and the costs of this turn to economic-style theorizing about legislative politics. What is the value-added of rational choice explanations? What are their limitations?
8. Some scholars have commented that Supreme Court justices make decisions on the exclusive basis of their policy preferences. Evaluate this claim discussing relevant theoretical arguments and empirical evidence.
9. 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?
10. 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?
11. Are bureaucrats constrained? If so, by what factors? If not, why not?