

**Ph.D. Comprehensive Examination**  
**AMERICAN GOVERNMENT AND POLITICS**  
**May 2008**

**Directions:** Please respond to **five (5)** of the 12 questions listed below. Answer at least **two (2)** questions from Part I and at least **one (1)** question each from Parts II and III. Your 5<sup>th</sup> essay can come from any of the sections. You have eight hours in which to complete the exam. Part I focuses on broad questions about the study of American politics, Part II focuses on questions about parties and political behavior, and Part III focuses on political institutions and arrangements.

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 two (2)** of the following questions:

1. Rational choice explanations pervade the study of American political institutions and behavior. What is rational choice theory, what are its assumptions, how has it been used to explain decision-making in political institutions and by political actors, and what are the strengths and limitations of rational choice as a theory of American politics? Your essay should conclude with a discussion of alternatives to rational choice theory and of whether or not such alternatives can be coherently integrated with rational choice explanations.
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 areas as you feel are necessary to make your case.
3. 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?
4. 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.

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

5. 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.
6. E. E. Schattschneider wrote famously in 1942 that "Modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of the parties." Explain what Schattschneider meant, making reference to parties both inside and outside of legislatures. Based on your reading of the literature, is Schattschneider's claim still valid in the U.S. today? Why or why not?
7. The centrality of racial identity in American politics has given rise to a large literature that attempts to explain white attitudes toward blacks and towards policies that affect blacks. In this essay, discuss and contrast the alternative theoretical perspectives on racial attitudes. Which do you find most persuasive, and why? Finally, can these perspectives be fruitfully applied to the study of white attitudes towards other ethnic groups, notably Latinos and Asians? Why or why not?"
8. 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 **at least one (1)** of the following questions:

9. 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?
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. 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.
12. Are agencies designed to be controlled by elected officials or are they designed to be impervious to outside influence? In general, what are the implications of agency design for the accountability and performance of public bureaucracies?