

Masters/Minor Field Comprehensive Examination
AMERICAN GOVERNMENT AND POLITICS
May 2009

Directions: Please respond to **three** (3) of the 10 questions listed below. Answer at least one question from Part I and at least one question from Part II. You have up to 5 hours to complete the exam.

Keep the following in mind. 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.” Do you agree or disagree? In your answer, discuss and evaluate the nature of these scholars’ argument. What (if anything) makes the study of politics unique?
2. "All politics is collective action." Evaluate this statement, drawing on literature from the study of political behavior and the study of political institutions.
3. Write an essay about the concept of political preferences. What are political preferences, where do they come from, why are they relevant to the study of American politics and how well have scholars answered each of these questions? Conclude with an evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of the measures often chosen to measure preferences.
4. Historical institutionalism has taken root in the study of American politics. Explain what is meant by historical institutionalism, and evaluate the theoretical, methodological, and empirical gains, if any, that have been generated by historical analyses of politics. .

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

5. Can today’s political parties solve social problems? Why or why not?
6. Are members of the American public competent to fulfill their role as democratic citizens? Answer this question with reference to research on "ideological innocence," political information, and heuristics.
7. 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.
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. Write an essay that discusses the theory of group formation. How far has this endeavor progressed in your judgment? What improvements still need to be made? And, are we best off with some combined theory or does one theory appear most elegant to you?

10. What does the political science literature tell us about Sonia Sotomayor's nomination, probable confirmation, and potential record on the Supreme Court? In answering this question, evaluate the strengths and limits of existing political science work that bears on this question.