

Ph.D. Comprehensive Examination
AMERICAN POLITICS
January 2013

Instructions:

Please respond to three of the following questions, one from Part I and two from Part II. You have up to six 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 these 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, “Mayhew’s 1991 book on divided government”) are acceptable.

Part I:

1. Critically evaluate the following statement: “American government is responsive.” In your essay, be sure to define what counts as “responsive” government, and explain the theoretical and empirical bases for your position.
2. “All politics is collective action.” Critically evaluate this statement, drawing on the literature from the study of political behavior and political institutions.
3. Some scholars have argued that political science is nothing more than a derivative of economics, psychology, sociology, and history. To what extent are these critics correct? In your essay, discuss and evaluate the nature of these critics’ arguments. What, if anything, makes the study of politics unique as a social science?

Part II:

4. Do presidential campaigns matter to electoral outcomes? Or can electoral outcomes be confidently predicted on the basis of economic or other fundamentals? Evaluate competing theoretical arguments and empirical evidence that have been offered to answer this question. On balance, which side of the “campaign effects” debate do you think is stronger, and why?
5. In 1993, Keith Krehbiel threw down the gauntlet to legislative scholars when he asked the question, “Where’s the party?” Write an essay that fully evaluates competing theoretical arguments about and empirical evidence for whether or not political parties “matter” in shaping Congress’s policy choices. What are the strengths of the competing camps, what are their weaknesses, and where do you stand?
6. Are U.S. presidents powerful? Evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the relevant theoretical and empirical literature on presidential power. On balance, would you characterize presidents as possessing unilateral power to secure their policy goals or do you

see them as constrained actors dependent on other Washington actors? Be sure to provide evidence suggesting you are correct and evidence suggesting you might be wrong.

7. Is the Supreme Court a counter-majoritarian institution? In answering this question, be sure to specify what it means for a political institution to be “majoritarian,” and critically evaluate the theoretical and empirical evidence regarding the construction and behavior of the Court.

8. Critically evaluate the ways in which scholars have judged the democratic competence of the mass public. To what extent is there evidence that the public lives up to various scholarly standards of democratic competence?

9. Lawmakers, journalists, and political pundits have argued that bureaucrats wield too much authority in contemporary American politics. Construct an essay in which you critically evaluate this argument, being sure to consider arguments and evidence for both political control and bureaucratic discretion.