

**Ph.D. Comprehensive Examination**  
***AMERICAN POLITICS***  
**May 2022**

**Instructions:**

Please respond to **four** of the following questions, choosing **two** questions from Part I and **two** from Part II.

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 the relevant literature is insufficient for answering 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, “Zaller’s 1992 book on public opinion”) are acceptable. (You do not need to include a reference list of works cited.)

**Part I**

1. A cranky political scientist complains that “political science too often siloes ‘institutions’ and ‘behavior’ research.” To what extent do you think that statement is accurate in the context of American politics? What are the pros and cons of such isolation? Provide examples of work that connects institutions and behavior and how such work contributes to knowledge about politics and government.
2. How would you evaluate the quality of American democracy today? What are its major problems? What are the most important causes of those problems?
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?
4. Choose your favorite work in American politics and explain what makes it such an important contribution and/or what you think is so good about it. Focus on all aspects of the work: the research question, the literature to which it contributes, theoretical innovations, research design, empirical analysis, and the new knowledge it generates.

**Part II**

1. Many scholars within political science make strong claims about the way that low information voters seek out certain kinds of shortcuts to inform their political decisions. Within this debate there are questions as to what constitutes low versus high information. Discuss both sides of this debate and speak to whether low information voters actually lack relevant political information

when making their choices? Or have we, as scholars, placed the bar of political sophistication too high? Moreover, what role might external sources (i.e., the media) play in the information provided?

2. With the proliferation of social media as a new way for representatives to communicate with their constituents, what new obstacles are introduced in the domain of policy congruence and formal understandings of political representation?

3. The time it takes governments to make and implement decisions is often important from economic, environmental, public health, and other perspectives. For example, the speed with which COVID vaccines were developed, manufactured, and distributed has been a source of both praise and criticism of various government organizations. How does research in American politics inform understanding of the timeliness of government action? To what extent and in what particular institutional contexts has the American politics literature focused on timeliness as a topic of interest? What are the main findings of this literature? What questions remain for future research to address?

4. Do elections serve to hold political leaders accountable? What do voters hold elected officials accountable for? What factors make accountability more or less likely?

5. “Policy shapes politics,” but under what conditions is this true? While policy feedback scholars point to Social Security as mobilizing senior citizens into a high participation group, why haven’t we seen equal mobilization around other social welfare policies? Can these conditions — defined as the policy’s structure, the recipient’s characteristics, and the larger political environment-level — help us understand the support for the Affordable Care Act since it was passed? Finally, how should we reconcile the expectation of positive policy feedback with the theory of thermostatic public opinion?

6. It is often observed that the locus of decision making in American national politics has moved away from Congress and toward executive and judicial decision makers. What does research on American politics say about this supposed trend? Does research confirm this trend? Has research on American politics itself moved toward deemphasizing the study of Congress in favor of a focus on the executive and judicial branches?

7. Assuming something similar to the leaked draft Supreme Court opinion in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization* (overturning *Roe v. Wade* and *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*) is issued this June, should political scientists be surprised? Why or why not? What does political science suggest will be the likely public reaction and what will its impact be on the Court?

8. What would be the likely downstream consequences of abolishing the filibuster in the United States Senate? In your answer, be sure to evaluate the consequences for the legislative process, lawmaking, political representation, and elections.