

Ph.D. Comprehensive Examination
AMERICAN POLITICS
August 2025

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. This is an open-book, open notes exam.

Part I:

1. Doug Arnold wrote long ago of “under-tilled” and “over-tilled” areas of research on American politics. Identify two over-tilled and two under-tilled areas of scholarship today, explain why they are over-tilled, and make an argument for potential theoretical, empirical and/or methodological gains that might come from exploring the under-tilled areas.
2. Critically evaluate the following statement: “American government is responsive.” In your essay, be sure to define “responsiveness,” explain the theoretical and empirical basis for your position, and identify and discuss any factors associated with variation in the level of governmental responsiveness.
3. Is mixed-methods research dead? Not long ago, a common formula for American politics research was a combination of (a) statistical analysis to unearth general patterns and (b) qualitative investigation (e.g, interviews, process tracing) to generate insight into the underlying causes of such patterns. In the current age of causal identification methods (e.g, experiments, difference in differences), do students of American politics have less of a reason to conduct interviews and in-depth case studies alongside quantitative analysis? Why or why not? Be sure to discuss not only methodological considerations but substantive research in various traditions as well.

Part II:

1. Critically evaluate the ways 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?
2. Is the public’s view of the “legitimacy” of the Supreme Court immutable or susceptible to change? Review the debate over Supreme Court legitimacy and explain why scholars reach

divergent conclusions. Finally, choose a side: Which argument and evidence do you find most persuasive and why?

3. Policy, it seems, is increasingly made in the executive branch, through executive orders, regulations, and other instruments. This development has persisted across recent administrations of both parties. Since executive branch actors (other than the president) are not elected, does this development inherently raise issues of democratic legitimacy? Be sure to ground your answer in research on the executive branch. What does this research uncover regarding transparency, participation, and responsiveness (or a lack of these) in executive branch policymaking?
4. What role does identity play in the American public's attitudes and behaviors? Choose two identities and explain how they influence the mass public's attitudes and behaviors.
5. In 1974, David Mayhew argued that "No theoretical treatment of the United States Congress that posits parties as analytic units will go very far." Was Mayhew correct back then? Regardless, is he correct today? In your essay, be sure to explain what Mayhew meant and how persuasive legislative scholars have been (or not) in assessing the impact of parties on legislative outcomes.
6. An important concern in the making and implementing of policy is the extent to which decision makers in government organizations are representative of the individuals who they impose costs upon and deliver benefits to. Evaluate the state of research on representative bureaucracy. What are the key forms of representation considered in this research? What are the main methods used to conduct studies of representative bureaucracy? What are the primary findings regarding aspects in which bureaucracy is and is not representative of the public?
7. What are the foundations of presidential power? Review competing accounts of presidential influence, and evaluate their theoretical and empirical rigor. Should we consider the presidency a powerful institution? Why or why not? Your answer should include some discussion of the extent to which the actions of the second Trump Administration are likely to affect the power of the presidency.
8. What is the role of partisanship in voting? What changes would we see in election outcomes if all elections were nonpartisan? Are these changes desirable for democracy?