

Ph.D. Comprehensive Examination
AMERICAN POLITICS
May 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. Scholars of American politics often see themselves as students of either political institutions or behavior. In what core ways do these research traditions differ? What do they have in common? Do you think it is healthy or harmful for the subfield to divide ourselves along this line? Explain why.
2. Economist Albert Hirschman highlighted the roles that exit, voice, and loyalty can play in stemming the decline of organizations. Are these useful concepts— separately or in tandem— for explaining dynamics of political behavior or changes in institutions? Choose one domain (behavior or institutions) and explain the strengths and limits of applying Hirschman’s model.
3. Choose two research areas in American politics and discuss why contemporary tools of causal inference matter for creating new knowledge about those areas. In light of the causal inference emphasis in American politics, what is the place of qualitative inquiry (including historical inquiry, American political development, and rigorous case studies) in current and future research in American politics?
4. The notion of “polarization” is widespread in scholarly treatments of American politics. What exactly is polarization, and how has it changed over the past half century amongst both the mass public and elites? To the degree that there have been changes in polarization, what are the consequences for elections, policymaking, and representation?

Part II:

1. Legislative scholars have reached divergent conclusions about whether and why Congress and the president struggle to solve major public problems today. Compare and contrast competing explanations and empirical measures. Which account do you find most robust?

2. The Trump presidency seems exceptional in many ways. Identify and outline at least one prominent theory of political behavior, public opinion, or institutions that has been challenged by Trump's election and/or presidency. What assumptions of or inferences from this theory has the Trump presidency challenged? Outline a research design and evidence that could be used to explicitly test this perspective.
3. 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?
4. Measuring the preferences of institutional decision makers has long presented methodological challenges for researchers in American politics. Such efforts go back at least decades to measures of congressional ideology such as DW-NOMINATE scores. More recently, researchers have developed alternative measures of congressional ideology, as well as measures of the preferences of executive and judicial branch decision makers. Write an essay discussing the strengths and weaknesses of three different measures of institutional actor preferences. In your view, what are the most promising avenues for further development of ideology scores and for their use in applied research?
5. Do elections serve to hold political leaders accountable? What do voters hold elected officials accountable for? What factors make accountability more or less likely?
6. 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?
7. Is political persuasion possible? Why or why not? When answering, discuss the quality of relevant evidence.