

Ph.D. Comprehensive Examination
AMERICAN POLITICS
May 2021

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 (author and year) to prominent works (e.g., “Zaller 1992”) are acceptable. You do not need to include a reference list of works cited.

Part I (answer two questions from Part I)

1. One traditional hallmark of American politics is the necessity of compromise. As Terry Moe has put it, “compromise ushers the fox into the chicken coop.” In recent times, however, policymakers have taken steps to mitigate the need for compromise (i.e., to keep the fox out of the chicken coop). Unilateral actions by the president and weakening the filibuster are prominent examples. Write an essay that assesses what political scientists have had to say about these changes in American political institutions. Has the focus of American politics research shifted in recognition of changes in institutional policymaking? Regardless of the answer to this question, what are the major contributions that American politics research has made, or might make with a shift in focus, to understanding the causes and consequences of the diminishing importance of compromise in the policymaking process?
2. 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?
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. Robert Dahl long ago sketched a pluralist model of American politics in which “minorities rule.” What is the pluralist model, what are its assumptions, and how well do you think it explains the dynamics of American politics today? If you think it’s still a helpful model, why? And if not, why not?

Part II (answer two questions from Part II)

1. One of the more noteworthy recent developments in the field of American politics has been the increased attention paid to policymaking at the state and local level. Evaluate the current state of research on state and local politics. What have been some of the main theoretical and empirical advances of contemporary research? What areas of research have not yet been adequately assessed by scholars of state and local politics? How would you compare the theoretical and empirical rigor of state and local politics to research at the federal level?
2. When considering substantive and descriptive representation, scholars have often maintained that the latter form of representation is merely symbolic. To what extent does race play an influential role in contemporary elections? And to what extent does race's role manifest in the substantive representation of historically marginalized political populations?
3. While critics may be right that President Trump has overstepped the boundaries of his power, many past presidents have issued executive orders that make meaningful shifts in policy. Compose an essay that compares executive orders to congressional legislation as a source of policy making power. Provide three examples of executive orders that have been important policy shifts. Explain what distinguishes these examples from the actions President Trump took. Where is the boundary between what executive orders can do and cannot? How do executive orders speak to broader issues about the executive branch vis-a-vis the judicial and legislative branches in our separation-of-powers system?
4. In his foundational work on public opinion, John Zaller expressed concerns about "elite domination" of public opinion. To what extent are elites able to dominate public opinion in the United States? Under what conditions is elite domination most -- and least -- likely? What are the distinctions between "elite leadership" and "elite manipulation" of public opinion in this context? And what are the consequences of these dynamics and processes for understanding both "institutions" (e.g., how institutions of government operate) and "behavior" (how citizens form and express opinions, votes, etc.).
5. To what extent do campaigns matter for election outcomes? In your answer, you should discuss the conditions under which political advertising, media coverage, or other campaign activity are likely to influence the way that voters behave. Why are campaign effects likely in some circumstances and for some people, but not others? What should future research on campaigns focus on?
6. Within the literature on political representation, much has been made about the role of rational choice thinking on the part of voters when seeking out representation. Explain the general theory of rational choice within political representation, and its applicability to concepts like political accountability and candidate selection. What, if any, shortfalls are there in using the rational choice theory as an explanation for the behavior of voters in these two domains (accountability and candidate selection)?

7. Why, when, and on what sorts of issues do Congress and the president manage to legislate policy solutions to major public problems? Why at other times is the legislative process mired in deadlock? Be sure to draw from a range of scholarly work in crafting your essay.