

**Ph.D. Comprehensive  
Examination *AMERICAN  
POLITICS*  
May 2019**

**Instructions:**

Please respond to **four** of the following questions, choosing **two** questions from Part I and **two** from Part II. You have up to eight hours to complete the examination.

**Part I:**

1. Scholars study American national institutions (Congress, courts, executive branch) in isolation but also how they interact with one another. Critically evaluate the benefits and costs of employing “inter-institutionalist” perspectives to inform literatures that have typically analyzed these national institutions in isolation.
2. Identify the scholarly work in American politics that you believe has had the most impact on the study of American institutions or political behavior. In your answer, define what it means for a work to be “impactful” and elaborate in the context of other studies how this work has shaped the subfield and our understanding of American politics.
3. What is political power, and what are the challenges to studying it well? Choose at least one application in the study of political behavior and one in political institutions to illustrate and support your argument.
4. Political scientists often distinguish between sincere and strategic choices by political actors. Choose an area in American politics and explain how the distinction has been deployed. On balance, how helpful do you think the distinction is for explaining patterns in American political behavior and/or institutions?

## Part II:

1. Some theories of judicial behavior examine how external political forces (the public, the other branches) influence Supreme Court decision making, leading to debates about whether the Court is strategic in its behavior. Other scholarly perspectives examine the factors influencing how the mass public evaluates the "legitimacy" of the Supreme Court. While those literatures are often treated separately, what are the key connections between them? Assess those connections by developing a narrative for how the approaches influence the other.
2. Policymaking in the executive branch (e.g., regulations, executive orders) has featured prominently in both the Obama and Trump administrations. In your estimation, what are the most important theoretical and empirical contributions of political science (as opposed to nearby disciplines such as economics and public administration) to understanding the people, processes, and institutions of the executive branch bureaucracy? Critically evaluate these contributions.
3. Discuss the causes and consequences of the incumbency advantage in congressional elections. In your answer, be sure to address theories and evidence about how and why the incumbency advantage has changed over time.
4. Do voters hold ideologically extreme candidates accountable in American elections? Are there any reasons to believe that accountability has waned in recent years, and does it matter for democratic representation whether or not candidates are held accountable for taking ideologically extreme positions? Finally, discuss where future research on accountability should focus.
5. Many argue that outcomes in American politics favor the wealthy. What are some theoretical factors that might lead the wealthy to receive better representation than working class Americans? What do we know about whether the wealthy receive better representation? Discuss the strengths and limitations of research in this area, and where future research should focus.
6. 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.
7. A common premise in democratic theory is that election outcomes reflect voters' policy or ideological preferences. An alternative view is that voters are more likely to cast ballots on the basis of psychological or social attachments, such as partisanship or group identity. Discuss the extent to which the voting behavior literature supports each of these perspectives. You should also consider how campaign messages or media coverage might influence the factors that voters rely on in making their choices.