

Ph.D. Comprehensive Examination
AMERICAN POLITICS
September 2015

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.

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 a 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.

Part 1:

1. In the study of politics, what does it mean for an individual to be “strategic?” What does it mean for an individual to be “sincere?” Using two areas in the field of American politics, evaluate a body of work (assumptions, expectations, and evidence) that emphasizes strategic behavior on the part of individuals. In the end, do you think strategic theories sufficiently explain individuals’ behavior? Why or why not?
2. Agenda setting is key phase of decision making in all governmental institutions. Does there exist a unified theory of agenda setting that allows us to understand and explain the politics of agenda setting across institutions? Use the extant literature to support your answer.
3. Are political institutions endogenous or exogenous? In what ways might they be both?
4. Critically evaluate the following statement: “American government is responsive.” In your essay, be sure to define the concept of responsiveness and explain the theoretical and empirical bases for your position.

Part 2:

5. Race, not class, is the defining issue underlying the contemporary American party system. Evaluate this argument, including with reference to the 2008 and 2012 presidential elections.
6. Are the mass media—the press, broadcast media, political advertising, and so forth—more accurately described as having “massive” or “minimal” effects on

- public opinion and political behavior? What is the evidence to support your contention? Have recent technological developments, including the rise of social media, altered our understanding of media effects? In your answer, be sure to discuss evidence from both the study of campaigns and debates over public policy.
7. In thinking about the linkages between the U.S. Supreme Court and politics and society at large, how *powerful* is the Court?
 8. Are parties—at both the mass and elite levels—polarized? Why or why not? Write an essay that explores degrees of polarization in contemporary American politics and evaluates competing explanations for its rise in recent decades.
 9. “The fact is that no theoretical treatment of the United States Congress that posits parties as analytic units will go very far” (David Mayhew 1974). Is Mayhew’s claim valid as a theoretical and empirical statement about parties in the contemporary Congress? Why or why not?
 10. Alternative theories of (interest) group formation seem to go to the heart of judgments about the nature of democratic politics. Write an essay that reviews the development of these alternative theories and discuss their implications for the nature of democratic politics today.