

**Ph.D. Comprehensive Examination**  
***AMERICAN POLITICS***  
**May 2017**

**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. What is “political power”? In your essay, explain how the idea of political power has been studied in two areas in the field of American politics. On balance, do you find the work persuasive? Why or why not? If not, how do you think power should be studied?
2. 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.
3. 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.

**Part 2:**

4. Race, not class, is the defining issue underlying the contemporary American party system. Evaluate this argument, including with reference to the 2012 and 2016 presidential elections.
5. Critically evaluate the ways in which 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?

6. What is the role of the Supreme Court in American government and American politics? Discuss both normative perspectives on the "proper role" of the Court and empirical perspectives on the actual role the Court plays. Do empirical perspectives jibe with normative perspectives? Compare and contrast.
7. Why are both mass and elite level American politics seemingly more partisan today than in recent decades? Write an essay that explains what it means for politics to be more "partisan," explores the recent rise in partisan behavior, and evaluates competing explanations for this trend.
8. Spatial models are ubiquitous in the field of legislative studies. Write an essay that explores and critiques a basic spatial model of legislative outcomes. In your essay, you should describe the component parts of the model and analyze the persuasiveness of the model as a guide to understanding legislative politics.
9. A recent article by Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson ("'After the 'Master Theory': Downs, Schattschneider, and the Rebirth of Policy-Focused Analysis") proposed that the study of American politics should be reoriented around policy-focused research. What are the advantages and disadvantages of replacing the median voter theorem with a more policy-focused approach as a key focus of American political research? Do you agree or disagree with Hacker and Pierson and why or why not?
10. Accountability is one of the central standards by which the executive branch is evaluated. Compose an essay in which you consider what we know (and don't know) about accountability from American Politics research on the executive branch. What is/are the main theoretical perspective(s) that scholars of American Politics have used to study executive branch accountability? To what extent does empirical evidence provide support for, or fail to support, this/these theoretical perspective(s)?