

Ph.D. Comprehensive Examination
AMERICAN POLITICS
May 2016

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 if anything makes the study of politics unique as a social science? How and why does it differ, if at all, from other major social sciences (economics, psychology, sociology)?
2. 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?
3. 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.
4. 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:

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? Please identify and describe the factors that amplify or inhibit the Court's power.
8. 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.
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. 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. Do you agree or disagree with the suggestion that policy-focused research should displace the median voter theorem as the central focus of American politics research? Why or why not?