

Ph.D. Comprehensive Examination
American Politics
Spring 2005

Directions: You must answer three of the following five questions. Your answers to all questions combined may be no more than twenty double-spaced pages, with one-inch margins all around and a twelve-point font. You have eight hours to complete this examination. For each question, make sure that you answer it fully, draw on the relevant literature and pay particular attention to any relevant controversies with the literature, discipline, and subfield.

1. Some claim that the post-war professional study of American politics is approaching a truly “scientific” understanding of politics. What have been the most important advances in this period? How has the field changed? What useful new debates have emerged and why are they useful? Finally, what in your scholarly opinion is the most glaring gap in the academic study of American politics and why is it an important one for the field to address?

2. Research on public policy agenda setting and the policy process has often failed to meet the standards of contemporary political science, including the careful definition and measurement of concepts, the rigorous specification and testing of propositions, and the use of empirical theory to develop hypotheses and explain findings. This presents a striking irony: a very important process in American politics is the one that political scientists understand the least. By reviewing the scholarly literature on the domestic U.S. policy making process, comment on whether and how political science has gone beyond description of the policy process to an attempt an explanation of behavior and reach generalizations instead of ad hoc analyses.

3. Political parties are widely considered to be necessary for modern democracies. Few have challenged Schattschneider’s (1942, 1) half-century-old proposition that “democracy is impossible save in terms of parties.” However, there is a controversy among congressional scholars that challenges the widespread assumption about the centrality and influence of parties in legislative policymaking. Outline the debate over the importance of parties in Congress. What functions do parties traditionally play in legislatures? Have congressional scholars presented clear evidence for the importance or unimportance of parties? Consider the challenges to establishing clear empirical evidence of party influence in Congress and propose an answer the question of whether parties matter in the U.S. Congress.

4. How does the relationship between the producers of news and politicians change over time? Who has the upper hand at any one time and why? Consider the lessons in Cook (1998), West (1999), Page (1996), Kingdon (1995), Kernell (1986), Segal and Slotnick (1998), and Baum and Kernell (1999) as well as other relevant scholars. Do these authors provide a consensus view? What inconsistencies emerge in their findings? Why?

5. Assess our understanding of congressional operations and behavior, and of the scholarly literature on Congress by discussing two of the following: leadership, committees, parties, representation, rules and structure (both formal and informal), individual decision making on roll call voting. Include in your essay discussion of how the literature has changed over time; whether changes parallel or differ from the changes in congressional literature overall; and the strengths and weaknesses of the literature. Is the literature on the two topics in any way inter-connected? And does reading the literature on one of these topics contribute to understanding on the other topic? Finally, assess where we are today on understanding of these topics (and of congressional operations and behavior), and on developing middle-range or overall theory. What further research, including what methodologies, offer promise for the future – on these topics or for understanding congressional behavior and operations overall?