

## Comprehensive Exam Study Guide

Fall 2015

Comparative Politics

Department of International Affairs

The exam for majors and minors in Comparative Politics will include a morning session requiring students to answer one out of two general questions. The morning session will include two questions chosen from the five below. All five questions can be covered during the oral examination. Majors will also have to answer some more specific questions during an afternoon session of the exam.

1. “The primary justification for conducting cross-national comparative research is to develop universal generalizations about political institutions, processes, and behavior. However, it is not possible to develop universal generalizations about politics that are valid across space and time. Therefore, the “science” of cross-national comparative research will always be weak and unsatisfying, and researchers would accomplish much more if they were to turn their attention to the study of particular, timely questions in a country or region of special interest.”

To what extent, and in what specific ways, do you agree or disagree with the above statement?

2. For each of the past four decades (the 70s, 80s, 90s, and 00s), identify the most important article or book published in comparative politics. In terms of the promulgation of knowledge, why are each of these articles particularly important? In addition, how did each article help to shape the state of research in the field?
3. Identify one testable hypothesis from your area of comparative research that you feel the existing literature has not adequately addressed. Then:
  - a) state and discuss the hypothesis.
  - b) design a comparative research project to test your hypothesis using one of the following approaches:
    - i. most similar systems design
    - ii. most different systems design
    - iii. statistical approach
    - iv. a single-country case study

Discuss which particular country or countries you would analyze and why. Also, discuss why you picked a particular approach from i.-iv. above. Why did you choose this approach instead of the other three? In the process of doing this, you should discuss the relative advantages and disadvantages of each approach, both in general and as applied to the testing of your specific hypothesis.

4. Compare and contrast “culturalist” and “rational choice” explanations as central approaches to comparative politics. Describe in detail the degree to which you think they are different or similar by first clearly describing the central claims they make (by referencing the most important authors in both arenas) and then focusing on their

differences or similarities, if any. Do you believe that, depending on the substance of one's research, one approach is preferable over the other, or do you believe that such a claim is contradictory? Provide an example where the findings from research on a similar topic, but conducted using the different approaches, diverge. Do you think that these differences are driven by the use of the different approaches? Why or why not?

5. In recent decades, comparative politics research has focused a lot on the input side of politics (things like parties, elections, and electoral systems), and perhaps less on the output side (things like public policy and voter turnout). Do you feel that there are good theoretical and methodological reasons for this focus, or is such an imbalance problematic for the field? Explain your answer.