

Study Guide
Comprehensive exams
Spring 2014
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 two more specific (subfield) questions during an afternoon session of the exam.

1. Some scholars have argued that “community” is the core concept of comparative politics. How do some of the contemporary comparativists use this term? How was this term used by the “founding fathers” of comparative politics? Do you agree with that assertion that “community” is the core concept in comparative politics? Why/why not? Be specific in terms of listing the authors, their contributions, and their legacies for today’s issues in comparative politics.

2. “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?

3. 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 the 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 a well known example of each type of approach (one based on rational choice and the other on a culturalist perspective) and report on its findings. Do you think that the differences, if any, are driven by the different approaches? If yes/no, what are the implications?

4. Identify one testable hypothesis you feel the existing comparative politics 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.

5. What would you characterize as the most important theoretical or empirical contribution in comparative politics in the last decade? Why? Defend your answer with reference to the historical and recent development of the field. In explaining the strengths of this contribution, discuss any weaknesses and opportunities for further research.