

Fall 2021

Comparative Politics Comprehensive Exam

Morning Questions

Q1

Existing literature has examined elections as both retrospective and prospective tools. For example, elections may be “mechanisms of political accountability” that prevent politicians from shirking through the threat of repercussions at the ballot box. Elections may also (or alternatively) allow voters the opportunity to select a “good type” of politician, where a good type of politician is one who will act in the voters’ interest. Debate the relative merits of these two views. Your answer should consider what sort of evidence would be required to evaluate each model, and what sort of test, if any, would allow a researcher to distinguish between the two.

Q2

Previous scholarship has questioned whether it is reasonable to attribute causal effects to political institutions. More pointedly, Przeworski (2004) asks if “one can stick any institutions into some particular conditions and expect that they would function in the same way as they have functioned elsewhere.” Provide your answer to this question. Is it reasonable, in your view, to see institutions as having an independent causal impact? Provide a few examples to illustrate your points.

Afternoon Questions

1. Suppose that you are designing a study about representation. How would you define the concept? What do you think are the most important questions related to representation? To answer one of these important questions, what measure or measures would you use? How does your approach differ from others in the literature? How might different measures affect the conclusions you draw?
2. Discuss the tensions between structural and actor-centered explanations in an important area of comparative politics. For your given area, think about arguments that emphasize the role of institutions or the “rules of the game”, and contrast those with arguments that focus on individual choices and agency. In the area you have chosen, is there a clear divide between these two approaches? Which side do you find more convincing and why?
3. Most political systems, including all democracies, have more than one political party. What explains why some countries have many parties and others have few. Further, why do political parties sometimes use programmatic strategies (creating public or publicly provided goods directed at a large proportion of the populous) but other times use particularistic strategies that provide selective incentives to smaller groups? You may focus on institutional sources of variation, behavioral sources, or both.