Introduction:

Preliminary examinations are about demonstrating breadth; dissertations are about demonstrating specialized knowledge. Good answers to preliminary examination questions may illustrate critical points with examples from one or many countries so long as case material (regardless of how many countries it involves) buttresses theoretical arguments. Accordingly, an essay should convey that a student is: (1) well-versed in the key literature and (2) able to knowledgeably apply a case or cases of their own choosing to that literature.

You must answer one question in each section (Sections I-III). Answers for each question should be no more than 2,500 words. You may turn in your reference pages by 1:00 pm the day after your examination. Your reference pages are not counted in the word limit. (Note: the substantive research area that you select in your answer in Section I should be different from the substantive area selected in Section III).

Section I: Comparative Theory (Answer one question in this section)

1. What are the strength and weaknesses of the rational choice and political culture approaches? Include examples on a specific topic in comparative politics. Can the two be reconciled in regard to this topic?

2. Theories often have different expectations about which variables matter. Some scholars emphasize the role of institutions while others focus on the role of actors (e.g., elites and the public). Explain how these theories differ and evaluate how they have helped to advance knowledge in distinct ways.

Section II: Comparative Methods (Answer one question in this section)

1. Has the field of comparative politics become too driven by methods and methodology to the deficit of our theory creation or contribution to normative debates? Discuss.

2. What is the importance of using country-level cases studies for the advancement and refutation of general or midrange comparative politics theories? What are the limitations?

Section III: Substantive and Thematic Area (Answer one question in this section)

1. The decline of mass parties and the rise of so-called “niche” parties in many advanced industrial democracies raise the question how smaller parties find a way to compete successfully for voters. Discuss the diverse perspectives that the research literature has developed to explain the rise of new parties. How does the changing character of party-voter alignment influence the chances of smaller “niche” parties? How does the response, or lack thereof, by mainstream parties influence the electoral success of niche parties? Finally, how does the character of new issues influence their electoral success?
2. What factors shape citizens’ orientations towards liberal democracies? The research literature has developed a broad range of perspectives that take into account the individual-level foundations (e.g., political values, psychological orientations, performance perceptions), group-level factors (e.g., elite cues), as well as country-level contexts. First, discuss the major perspectives at each level. Second, can the extant research literature provide useful guidance in understanding the way that citizens in war-torn countries respond to democratic mechanisms such as elections, personal freedoms, and the toleration of dissent (e.g., in Afghanistan and Iraq)? Specifically, in what ways is the research literature helpful in understanding the way that citizens respond to attempts to establish democratic institutions? And what gaps exist in this literature to comprehend the way that citizens respond to democratizing nations in this region?

3. How important are institutions in our understanding of ethnic conflict? How is the study of institutions and ethnic conflict challenged by regional variation in their context and practice? Are there things we can say generally about institutions and ethnic conflict that transcend regional or country contexts?

4. Many legislative assemblies around the world remain unrepresentative, and are particularly under-representative of women and ethnic minorities, although there is significant variation across countries. Discuss what comparative politics research has found to be important factors that help the representation of minority interests in the legislature. Include in your discussion areas that need further exploration.

5. Regime change may or may not lead to democratization. What are the factors that lead to democratic transition? What are the factors that may lead the transition from one authoritarian regime to another? Within the transition literature and research, is there a general agreement on the important factors? In your answer address why there is a (or is not) a general agreement among scholars?