Comparative Politics Preliminary Examination, Spring 2002

Answer one question in each part. Part I stresses methodology, bibliography, and general theory. Part II emphasizes comparison and mid-range theory. Part III consists of region-specific questions and how political events support or undermine theory.

Please note that strong examinations show breadth as well as depth. We therefore advise you to choose questions that will allow you to show your knowledge across different sub-fields and areas of comparative politics. Good Luck!

Part I: Methodology and Bibliography

1. Variables representing democracy are often used in comparative political research as independent and dependent variables. However, some scholars have pointed out that common operationalizations of democracy are plagued by systematic bias. In your answer, comment on the following:

   a. How has democracy been measured in comparative politics and what are the potential shortcomings of these measures? Specifically focus attention on problems associated with measurement.

   b. How can scholars address these errors and incorporate "democracy" into their analyses?

   Be sure to illustrate your answer with examples from the comparative politics literature.

2. Does a single case study involve a fundamentally different methodology than a statistical study? Why or why not?

3. In a recent political science listserve, a political scientist asked, "What explains the ascendancy of quantitative methods?" His answer: "Its attractions are objectivity, precision, and generality." As he explained it, quantification seems more objective than other methods because mathematics, and not the human mind, produces the theoretical result. The essence of quantitative methods is the avoidance of scholar's judgments in favor of a judgment rendered by mathematical calculations. "Indeed," as he put it, "if statistical methodology did not surpass the unassisted human mind in its analysis of numbers, what purpose would it serve?" Is this a fair and accurate representation of quantitative methods? Review the strongest arguments in the discipline regarding the strengths and weaknesses of quantitative methods. How would advocates of qualitative methods or methodological pluralism respond? Defend your own position on the matter with reference to a variety of authors.

Part II: Comparison and Mid-Range Theory

1. You have been selected to advise a newly independent state on the design of its constitution. Your goal is to provide the best advice, based on the comparative politics literature and the experience of other states, about how to maximize the level/quality of democracy. In your response you should:
a. Comment on how institutional choices (specifically the choice of a presidential or parliamentary system and federal or unitary state) might affect democratic quality;

b. Identify other factors that you would want to know about the country when designing the constitution and why these factors might affect your recommendations about the optimal choice of political institutions; and

c. Assess the most serious threats to achieving the goal.

2. What accounts for the widespread transition to and consolidation of democratic institutions and practices in some countries of the world and not in others?

3. What options are available to a country with multiple ethnonational groups within its borders to incorporate and represent the identities of these groups? What kind of relationship needs to exist between the state and these communities to minimize or eliminate intergroup conflict? Are certain types of political structures more or less successful in navigating this difficult terrain?

4. What purpose does culture—norms, ideas, ideology, identity, media framing, religion, etc—serve in the study of protest and social movements? Review both the political culture literature addressing protest and social movements and its critics. Then proceed to develop and support your own position on the matter.

Part III: World-Region Specific

1. What role(s), if any, do public opinion and interest groups play in the creation and implementation of domestic policies in one region of the world? Can you explain this theoretically?

2. Given world regions, at specific historical moments, appear to favor particular types of political regimes—Bureaucratic-authoritarian military regimes in Latin America in the 1960s and 70s, Personal rule in Africa in the first three decades of independence, monarchies in the Middle East to this day, and others. Choose one such type of political system in a world region of your choice; describe its primary defining features. Do you agree or disagree that such a pattern exists in the region you have chosen?

3. How applicable are theories of contentious politics to recent instances of ethnic conflict? Choosing a region or regions of the world with which you are most familiar, discuss the fit between theory and actual instances of ethnic protest/conflict in the contemporary world.

4. Since September 11, 2001, the mass media has given much attention to the influence of religion upon politics. Evaluate whether that focus is merited, focusing on one region. What are the major theoretical approaches to religion in comparative politics? What sorts of effects can be attributed to religion? How does religion weigh as an influence compared to other factors evaluated in comparative politics, such as economic development or institutions?