Political Theory

Recommended Coursework

Students interested in the subfield should take POLS 701, Political Theory, which is a survey of topics and approaches. Students should also take POLS 709: Topics in Political Theory when that it offered. There are quite a few 500 and 600-level theory courses -- such as POLS 501 (Contemporary Political Thought), POLS 504 (Millenarian Movements), POLS 600 (Feminist Theory), POLS 602 (American Political Ideas), POLS 603 (Democratic Theory), POLS 604 (Religion and Political Theory), POLS 605 (Political Thought in Antiquity), and POLS 607 (Modern Political Theory)-- that graduate students can take, but they will be expected to go beyond the undergraduate requirements in such courses. Finally, there are courses in other departments like Philosophy, Sociology, Religious Studies, and Public Administration that might be appropriate for graduate students. Before taking such courses, please clear them with the theory faculty in Political Science.

The preliminary exam in theory has three sections. Students must answer one of about three questions contained in each section.

A general section will cover major theorists and philosophers and important themes in political theory. Major thinkers in the history of political thought include (but are not limited to) Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Machiavilli, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Burke, Madison, Tocqueville, Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Dewey, and Weber. Major contemporary theorists include (but are not limited to) Arendt, Strauss, Dahl, Rawls, Habermas, MacIntyre, Foucault, Wolin, and Walzer. Important themes include social contract theory, power, justice, liberty and community, citizenship (rights and obligations), legitimacy, political stability and change, ideologies, and epistemological issues. In general, students will be given questions dealing with such themes and will be expected to discuss and evaluate how major thinkers have contributed to our understanding of these themes.

The second and third parts of the theory prelim will deal with more specialized areas within political theory and will reflect the interests and training of students taking the exam. Examples of areas of emphasis that would be covered in these parts of the exam include (but are not limited to): ancient political philosophy, modern political theory, American political thought, postmodern thought, empirical political theory, democratic theory, theories of justice and jurisprudence, global justice, feminist theory, religion and political theory, Marxism, and liberalism.

Students could take course work in these specialized areas at the undergraduate level, in other departments, and through directed readings, but they should understand that they would be held responsible for readings and ideas in these areas beyond what is covered in the particular courses.

The three questions answered on prelims should be distinct. For example, students who indicate that they wish to be responsible for Ancient Political Philosophy on Part 2 of the prelim should not focus on ancient thinkers or themes in the General Section of the exam. Or students who indicate they wish to be responsible for feminist theory on Part 3 of the exam should not focus on post-modern feminists in a broader general question on post-modernism.