



AMERICAN UNIVERSITY

WASHINGTON, D C

To: Comparative Politics Students in Department of Government

From: Comparative Politics Faculty

Date: Effective 1 January 2005

Subject: Guidelines for Preparation for Comparative Politics Comprehensive Examinations, both
Maser's and Doctoral

In preparing for comprehensive examinations students should begin by reviewing their course notes, by re-reading important books and journal articles assigned during the courses, and by consulting with the Comparative Politics faculty. Students are expected to develop a broad view of the Comparative Politics field, in addition to the specific courses they have taken, and are expected to engage with important works in the field of Comparative Politics even if those works were not explicitly assigned as required reading in course syllabi. The goal of the comprehensive examinations is to give the student opportunity to summarize, expand, and consolidate her or his knowledge of the Comparative field, and to be able to apply that knowledge effectively to specific issues, both conceptual and practical. In addition students should take into account the following more specific points.

1. The chosen question should be answered specifically, analyzing the central ideas involved and bringing rigorous logic and appropriate literature to bear on the response. This advice may sound obvious, yet students sometimes prepare 'generic' answers to questions they hope will be on the examination, and fail to tailor their answer to the actual question rather than the predicted question. Faculty readers, whatever their various approaches, all emphasize the importance of direct, detailed answers to the question asked.

2. The best answers are those in which the student takes a position on the issue raised by the question, demonstrates understanding of both sides of the debate, and effectively marshals evidence in support of his or her position.

3. Literature citation should be ample. A graduate education is designed to make students into members of an academic community, and familiarity with the major and important books in the field is the litmus test for this familiarity. Students need not give complete citations, but should provide enough information so that the reader can identify the exact work to which they are referring: author, title of book or year. Do not give just an author's name; authors may have many books to their credit, and readers should not have to guess to which one the student is alluding.

4. Literature should be cited conceptually and analytically, showing how individual authors fit into the larger scheme of discourse in the comparative discipline. Do not use shapeless 'laundry lists' of authors, but engage with the specific works and their relationships to one another, both positive and negative.

5. Students find it extremely useful, in preparing for comprehensive examinations, to study in groups. The exercise of formulating questions for others, and responding to questions others ask, encourages agility of mind and broadens the intellectual ability to work with the materials in innovative ways. But while group work is often useful, students should avoid group-think, that is, taking too narrow a focus on specific books or issues. Competitive discussion is the best route to comprehensive examination preparation.

6. Remember the examination will give the student a wide range of choice, so that the student is not forced to answer questions relating to topics with which the student is unfamiliar. But remember also that answers should not be directed to a specific faculty member (the one who taught the course) but to all faculty in the Comparative Politics field.

7. Diversity in question answering is also important. Avoid using the same concepts or authors in more than one answer. Slight overlaps are acceptable, but in general each question is designed to elicit different literatures, and students will be judged on this criterion.

8. Logical coherence of answers to the comprehensive examination questions is important. This should go without saying, but a reminder is perhaps useful. If you have further questions, either general or specific, please feel free to consult with members of the Comparative faculty who will be pleased to discuss with you your concerns.

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