

Spring 2019: Comparative Politics Field Exam

Field Committee: Emily Beaulieu (chair), Tiffany Barnes, Abby Cordova

The following exam has three sections. You are expected to select one question from each section to answer—for a total of three answers. Each of your three answers should be labeled according to the number of the section and letter of the question you select to answer.

Note: You can only answer ONE question from each section.

Section 1: Comparative Behavior: Answer one of the following two questions

- A. In many democracies across the world, citizens turn out to vote at low rates and only rarely engage in other political activities. Moreover, even in countries with relatively high political participation, some citizens participate in politics more than others. What explains these disparities in political participation across and within countries? When citizens lack the political knowledge needed to make an informed decision, some scholars suggest that abstaining to participate might be less harmful to democracy than engaging in politics. Do you agree with this view? Why? What can democratic governments do to increase political participation and make it more meaningful? **(Make sure to address each point raised in this question)**
- B. Scholars of comparative political behavior have empirically observed a strong correlation between a myriad of political values and attitudes and the extent of democracy in a country. What are the main theories that have been put forth by these scholars to explain this correlation? In what direction does this association appear to run? (i.e., do we have evidence of a causal effect?). What political values or attitudes are the most important for building a strong democracy? (Discuss the empirical evidence). What can governments do to promote a political culture supportive of democracy? **(Make sure to address each point raised in this question)**

Section 2: Comparative Institutions: Answer one of the following two questions (continued on pg.2)

- A. Copious research in comparative politics is dedicated to understanding how the structure and design of domestic political institutions shape policy outcomes and in particular the provision of public goods. **Identify four features of domestic political institutions** that have the most profound impact on the policy making process and explain why—i.e., how do these institutions structure political outcomes and what political outcomes are most influenced by the institutional designs? Be sure to discuss the tradeoffs of the design/institution (that is, what is the alternative design or institution and how would it produce different outcomes?). Finally, for one of the four institutions, identify the biggest limitations of research on the relationship between the institution and political outcomes and describe the most promising way forward for overcoming this limitation and advancing our understanding of how institutions structure policy outcomes.
- B. Legislators worldwide tend to be drawn from a narrow group of citizens—disproportionately representing upper class men from the (economically) dominant racial or ethnic group. Indeed, one of the greatest challenges of democracies in the twenty-first century has been uncovering ways to increase the diversity of those who serve in political office. Explain how marginalized groups gain access to governmental decision-making bodies and how the descriptive representation of marginalized groups shapes the policy making process/policy outcomes. After reviewing the major findings from the literature, consider whether the relationship between descriptive representation of marginalized groups and their political behavior in office is a product of their pathways to power or if we have strong theoretical reason to believe that differences observed in their behavior is a product of their preferences over policy outcomes. Given that the pathways to power for representatives from these groups typically diverge from the pathways of the dominant group, explain the limitations of current research for distinguishing between these two mechanisms (i.e., preferences vs. institutions) and describe the most promising way forward for overcoming this limitation and advancing our understanding of how preferences and pathways to power structure the policy-making process.

Section 3: Comparative Methods: Answer one of the following two questions

- A. The popularity of experimental methods has increased in recent years in political science. How have experimental methods affected the study of Comparative Politics in particular? What research agendas in comparative politics have been advanced with experimental methods? For what research agendas in comparative politics are observational methods still preferable? Your answer should be sure to highlight research design considerations that are unique to this particular subfield of political science, and should include examples from each research agenda you discuss.
- B. Regional studies in are common in comparative politics, with a justification that they optimize some level of both variation and control or consistency. It remains debatable, however, the extent to which any particular study in comparative politics is most appropriately focused at the regional level. This question asks you to critically evaluate recent research that focuses on Latin America. **Identify, and critically evaluate three strains of research situated in Latin America—One that you believe is most fruitfully focused on the region as a whole; one that you believe would be more usefully focused at a country level, and one that you believe is more appropriately studied at a global level.** Your argument for the appropriate level of analysis in each of these three cases should address both the nature of the research question and practical considerations of research design, and should include citations of works that address each issue in Latin America.