

Comprehensive Exam: Comparative Politics

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Methods Questions (select one question):

1. Define the small-N problem in case study analyses. Discuss methods tools or strategies for mitigating this issue that do not require expanding the number of countries studied. Reference at least two case study analyses employing distinct methodological strategies to address the small-N problem. How do these studies tackle the "small N-problem"? What are the benefits and drawbacks?
2. Nearly six decades ago, amid the ongoing behavioral revolution in political science, Karl Popper used the metaphor of "clocks" versus "clouds" to describe the difficulties of applying a single logic of scientific explanation to the messy realities of the social and political worlds. Some phenomena (clock-like) are predictable, orderly, and deterministic, while other phenomena (cloud-like) are more unpredictable, disorderly, and indeterminate. Write an essay that reflects on the implications of these metaphors for research methods in the field of comparative politics today. Your essay should address the following specific questions:
 - Which research agendas concern dependent variables that are best thought of in clock-like terms, and which research agendas concern dependent variables that are more cloud-like?
 - To what extent do these differences matter for the types of research methods and tools that can be usefully brought to bear on different research questions?
 - Are there important research questions in comparative politics that simply cannot be answered at the current time? Why or why not?

Substantive Questions (select two questions):

1. Why do civil wars occur? To what extent do you consider the scholarly consensus on this question to be settled? Choose two countries in the world – one that has experienced a recent or ongoing civil war, and one that has

remained peaceful – and discuss the extent to which prevailing theories of civil war onset provide compelling explanations for the differences in observed outcomes. If prevailing theories do not provide a compelling explanation, describe how a future research agenda might repair those theories.

2. Attack or defend the utility of political culture as an explanatory variable in comparative politics. You may offer a general response to this question, or a response suited to a subset of issues in comparative politics. Either way, your essay should critically engage with at least 3 specific pieces of research, as well as the theories and evidence found in that research.

3. Since Skocpol and Co. “brought the state back in,” how have scholars attempted to capture the relationship between state performance and state capacity? Identify 3 key lessons from this literature. When doing so make sure you illustrate your arguments by referring to specific pieces of work, as well as cases. What do we still have to learn?

4. There is an ongoing debate among scholars that is illustrated by this quote—
“There is a widespread perception that we are witnessing a period of democratic decline, manifesting itself in varieties of democratic backsliding [...]. Yet others are more optimistic and have argued that democracy is in fact resilient, or that we are observing coinciding trends of democratic decline but also expansion” (Bartel et al. 2023). By using the literature on political regimes as a starting point, on what side of the debate are you on?

To answer your question, examine two countries from distinct regions and discuss the processes and mechanisms responsible for explaining your chosen outcome (i.e., backsliding or stability/expansion). This analysis should integrate perspectives from the democratization and authoritarianism literatures, and also explore how institutional design and international factors either impede or promote democratic decline.