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EXAMINATION OVERVIEW AND GENERAL DIRECTIONS

Doctoral students sit for the comprehensive examination at the conclusion of all required coursework. The comprehensive examination consists of a written and oral component. The written component of the exam is based on the literature and research in the relevant field of study and on the student’s completed coursework in that field.

Petitioning to Sit for the Examination

Your first step is to petition to participate in the examination. Use the Department’s graduate petition form and include the following information:

1) general statement of intent to sit for a comprehensive examination,
2) proposed primary and secondary fields areas (see below), and
3) a list or table listing all graduate courses completed along with the faculty instructor for the course and the grade earned

This petition should be completed early in the registration period for when the student plans to sit for the exam.

All examinees must select a primary and secondary field from the following list:

- American Government
- Comparative Politics
- International Relations
- Public Policy

After your petition is submitted, you should contact and speak with the chair of the PhD program, Professor Denis Sullivan. If at all possible, this initial meeting should take place prior to the semester when you plan to sit for the exam. Based on this discussion, Professor Sullivan may refer you to other faculty members depending on your proposed field areas and questions. Although there are reading lists and sample questions later in this booklet, faculty may recommend other readings and questions that will help you focus on areas of potential weakness.

Registration

Once your petition has been approved, you must register for POLS 8960, Qualifying Examination Preparation, for the semester you are taking the comprehensive exam. This constitutes full-time registration. Except for special circumstances approved by the Department and the Graduate School, no courses should be taken during the semester when you are sitting for your comprehensive examinations.

The Examination

The examination is offered in the fall semester and the spring semester. The written portion will generally be scheduled in November in the fall and mid March in the spring. The exam is approximately 5 hours in duration (which includes a required break) and consists of a total of three questions, one question from each of three of the following categories:

- general theory and methodology
- the student’s primary field
- the student’s secondary field
The exam must be typed on a computer in Renaissance Park. Students do not have access to notes or other material during the exam. The written portion of the exam is reviewed considering the following criteria: 1) knowledge of the literature; 2) effective communication; 3) synthesis of major themes in the literature; 4) application of theoretical and methodological concepts to current political policies and problems; and 5) independent thought beyond the literature.

The written portion of the exam is not in and of itself graded, though it is assessed by a committee of faculty. If that assessment is positive, the student proceeds to the oral examination. The oral component of the examination is approximately 90 minutes long and is usually given within two to three weeks after completion of the written examination. This exam covers questions and issues raised in the written exam, but it may go beyond that to cover more general topics relevant to the student’s area of study. Discussion may also take place on the student’s likely dissertation topic.

An overall assessment – pass with distinction, pass, or fail – is made after the oral examination. Those assessed as pass or pass with distinction, and who have satisfactorily completed all required coursework, are formally nominated for doctoral candidacy. Students who fail the examination after their first attempt are allowed to petition to re-take the examination in a subsequent semester. Barring extraordinary circumstances, a PhD student will not be allowed to sit for the exam more than two times.

**After Passing the Examination**

A dissertation is required of all PhD Candidates. Once a PhD student has reached candidacy, he/ she has five years to complete and defend the dissertation. Additionally, once degree candidacy is attained, registration must be continuous until graduation requirements have been met.

For each of the first two semesters that a doctoral candidate is working on a dissertation the student must register for POLS 9990: Doctoral Dissertation. For each semester beyond the first two semesters, the student must register for POLS 9996: Doctoral Dissertation Continuation until the dissertation is approved by the Graduate School and is submitted to the University Library. Students do not register for POLS 9990 or POLS 9996 during the summer, unless that is when the defense is scheduled.

Please see the graduate program office or the Department website for general information on preparing your dissertation proposal. This proposal is to be completed within six months after reaching doctoral candidacy and is written in close collaboration with faculty on your dissertation committee. For detailed information on guidelines, rules, and regulations on the proper submission of a completed dissertation please see the Graduate School Submission guide on this web page, [http://www.northeastern.edu/casgraduate/commencement/thesis_guidelines/](http://www.northeastern.edu/casgraduate/commencement/thesis_guidelines/).
COMPREHENSIVE EXAM READING LISTS

Updated — Fall 2016

The written portion of the comprehensive exams consists of three questions:

1) A question in General Methodology and Theory
2) A question from your Primary Field
3) A question from your Secondary Field

Please note, students should review the most recent syllabi of the respective field seminars and, if necessary, consult with the instructor for that course. The required readings in these seminars are an important starting point for reviewing the literature. The readings listed below constitute the other major source for reviewing the literature. In addition, relevant writings by faculty in the Department might also be consulted. This list will be updated periodically.

GENERAL METHODOLOGY AND THEORY


**AMERICAN GOVERNMENT**


**COMPARATIVE POLITICS**


– Tsebelis, George. 1990. *Nested Games: Rational Choice in Comparative Politics*. Berkeley: University of
INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS


**PUBLIC POLICY**


COMPREHENSIVE EXAM SAMPLE QUESTIONS

Updated — Fall 2013

The following questions are typical of those asked in each of the comprehensive exam areas. However, they are samples only. They do not necessarily cover every question or area you might be asked about in your examination.

Sample Methodology and General Theory Questions

1. You have just agreed to teach a course on methods to graduate students in public policy at your local university. Once you’ve met the students, you find that they fall into two warring camps: one group is very quantitatively oriented and loves learning about the application of statistical techniques in policy research; the other group eschews this approach, favoring the methods and insights of qualitative research. How would you teach this course to bring these student factions to some kind of middle ground where both understand and appreciate the use of the other’s approach? In teaching this class, what would you tell students about the kinds of problems or questions that are best handled by each methodology? How would you demonstrate that there are research topics requiring quantitative as well as qualitative analysis for a full understanding
of the policy dynamics involved?

2. Congratulations! You have successfully passed your Ph.D. Comprehensive Exams at Northeastern University and you have decided that a “case study” approach is the most appropriate design to use for your dissertation; however, you have been told by your dissertation advisor that you must use a comparative case study approach in this research, given your research question. You are planning to meet with your entire committee to explain your proposed research design. In preparing for this your advisor asks you to prepare a handout with a discussion of each of the following.
   • What is the nature of your proposed research including the research question? (1 paragraph)
   • How and why might you use a “most similar systems” design? (Be certain to relate your response to the nature of your research question.)
   • How and why might you use a “most different systems” design? (Be certain to relate your response to the nature of your research question.)
   • What are the most important factors in deciding which approach to use between these two choices?

3. Scholars in our discipline continue to debate the advantages and disadvantages of studies based on the case-study approach versus the so-called “large-N” studies.
   a) What would you highlight as the advantages and disadvantages of the two approaches?
   b) How do the two lend themselves, or not, to quantitative and qualitative analyses?
   c) Are there ways the two approaches might be combined within a single research design?

   Finally, please discuss how these approaches have been applied in the policy area you are most interested in studying and with what results?

Sample American Government Questions

1. In comparative terms, it is often claimed that American political parties are weaker than parties in most other countries, while American interest groups are stronger. Take either half of this claim and assess it. Are American parties especially weak/interest groups especially strong? If so, what features of American society and the American political system are responsible for this characteristic?

2. The development of public policy at the level of American national government is often portrayed as coming from a clash between Congress and the presidency. Select one of these two branches, and assess its power. What constitutional or other resources does it have? What obstacles does it face? How has its power changed over time?

3. Two key characteristics in American government are the separation of powers and federalism. In general, what impact does each have on public policymaking in the American context? How do such institutional factors figure into contemporary theoretical models of the policy process that focus on topics like agenda setting, policy innovation, and political economy? Use specific examples and make references to the literature where appropriate.
Sample Comparative Politics Questions

1. Choose an important issue regarding a country in which you have a particular research interest. Please explain how at least three theoretical approaches to the study of comparative politics might help us to better understand that issue. Note limitations as well as possible distortions produced by these theories. (You are free also to argue that two of the theories you select are of little help in understanding the issue.)

2. Within Comparative Politics there are three primary approaches: Political Culture, Structure, and Rational Choice. Some contend that the three are mutually exclusive. Others suggest that they might be complementary. Take two of these three approaches and discuss how those two complement each other when it comes to comparative analysis. Back your argument with a discussion of some of the key figures/authors in the two areas you select.

3. Regardless of our research preferences we will always be confronted with scholars who write on our topic area from different theoretical and methodological approaches. As a student of comparative politics, how do you organize this seeming chaos? How do major research paradigms help or hurt in organizing the discipline and our personal research project in light of the rest of the discipline? Provide examples from the scholarly literature on Comparative Politics and/or Methodology when answering these questions.

Sample International Relations Questions

1. Taking one major conflict involving international actors please write an analysis explaining how at least three international relations theories can help us understand that conflict. Also, please note limitations as well as possible distortions from using these theories. (You are free also to argue that two of the theories you select are of little help in understanding the conflict.)

2. Please write an essay explaining how international relations theory can help us understand one political system or political problem in your primary area of research. You should consider all major theoretical approaches you could employ, but you should focus primarily on a theory or theories you consider to be most helpful in understanding your substantive focus. Conclude your answer with a brief consideration of the following questions: What aspects, if any, of your subject area are not amenable to theoretical analysis, and how might the theoretical approach(s) you prefer distort one’s understanding of the subject? How might you prevent or counter such theoretical as well as ideological distortions in your analysis?

3. The September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks spurred unprecedented interest in the study of terrorism. And yet, fundamental questions about today’s terrorism threat remain unsettled. Identify a debate within the study of terrorism, explain its significance to understanding terrorism, and assess the evidence.
Sample Public Policy Questions

1. The literature on problem definition and agenda setting, taken as a whole, has become a major component in theories of the policy process and, even, on approaches to policy analysis. Using the core literature, apply these concepts to a specific policy area of your choice, explaining how the dynamics of problem definition (for example, Stone’s notion of “causal stories”) and of agenda setting shape the nature of policy discourse, the probability of attention by policymakers, and, finally, policy outcomes. What are the limits to which these dynamics of problem definition agenda setting can explain policy processes and outcomes? That is, how much do other factors (e.g., institutional design, process rules) play a role in shaping the outcome in this particular instance? Cite literature where necessary and useful.

2. Policy analysis has been characterized as both an art and a science. Explain this characterization, citing both the scientific and artistic character of policy analysis. Do you agree? Explain.

3. Choose an area of public policy with which you have good familiarity and describe the latest major piece of legislation or regulatory initiative adopted within this domain. Next, briefly outline the alternative policy approaches that were set aside in favor of the actual policy established. Using concepts/frameworks/theories from the literature on problem definition and agenda setting, explain why the policymaking process on this issue developed and turned out as it did. Finally, what implications for program implementation (approach, challenges, likely effectiveness) follow from the fact that policymakers settled on this particular policy design while rejecting more or less ambitious alternatives?