

**Department of Government, American University**  
**MA Comprehensive Exam in Comparative Politics**  
**Spring 2020**

*Directions:*

*Answer THREE (3) questions: one question from Part I, one question from Part II, and one question from Part III.*

*Your answers will be judged for their responsiveness to the specific question, their skilled and ample citation of the relevant literature, and their clarity of organization. Any arguments you advance should be defended against plausible counterarguments. The material used in your answer to any question should not substantially overlap with the material used in other questions.*

*Be sure to organize your answers and allocate your time carefully.*

**Part I Synoptic Questions on Field (Answer ONE and only one question from section)**

1. Harold Laswell famously asserted, in 1936, that politics is about “who gets what, when, and how.” To what extent is this adage a suitably complete account of the political realm, and how might this vary across different political systems, historical periods or segments of a polity? What, if anything, is fundamental but left out of that formulation?
2. The study of comparative politics was once largely undertaken from a regional lens: the field was divided into European politics, Latin American politics, African politics, East Asian politics, and so on. Over the past quarter century, that regional approach has fallen largely out of favor, with political scientists specializing not so much on places as on phenomena and processes – social movements, institutions, electoral behavior, violence, and so on. Please identify two major themes where the consideration of region as a basis for analysis might still be valuable, and explain why this is so, noting at the same time, if you wish, some respects in which cross-regional comparisons regarding those themes might productively complement a regional gaze.
3. Many political scientists focus on how formal rules created by the state shape individual behavior, while others stress the importance of "informal institutions" as creating different kinds of order and constraint. What role do informal institutions play in shaping important political outcomes, such as collective action or government accountability?

**Part II Specific Topic Questions (Answer ONE and only one question from section)**

4. Explanations of political violence can be split into structural, rationalist, and psychological approaches. Which of these approaches do you find most convincing and why? Support your argument with illustrations from one or more cases of political violence.

5. It is commonplace across the Global South to hear versions of the lament that “country x is so blessed with natural resources, yet so underdeveloped, it’s all because our politicians are corrupt.” Please reflect on this way of seeing matters of economics and politics in the developing world. Is it the case that abundant natural resources should be seen as a foundation for prosperity? Why or why not? Is corruption a persuasive explanatory factor for a failure to translate resource wealth into well-being, or might other factors be more compelling drivers of disappointing performance, from Argentina to Zaire to points in between? (Feel free to discuss any cases, but you must discuss at least three.) And to the extent that you see patterns in the relationship between natural resource endowments and development, what might account for exceptions to the typical trajectory?

6. Consider the following perspective: “Populism is the ultimate expression of accountability by politicians to their electorates. Why are so many academics so critical of regimes which are clearly looking out for peoples’ interests? Why don’t populist politicians get the credit they deserve?” Please reply using literatures on democracy, representation, and populism, and considering a range of world regions.

**Part III Practical Applications (Answer ONE and only one question from section)**

7. Does a nation’s regime type (democratic/authoritarian/hybrid, etc.) have a bearing on its ability to act during a worldwide coronavirus pandemic? More specifically, using descriptors from the democratization literature relating to how democratic a country is and how accountable it is to its citizens through democracy-promoting institutions (as opposed to clientelist or populist ones, or others favoring incumbency rather than democracy), discuss what the comparative democratization literature might anticipate regarding the pandemic responses of China, Italy, and the US.

8. Some scholars argue that ethnic violence is inevitable in the absence of a strong state; others suggest that it will only occur under particular conditions, regardless of state strength. What is your view? Answer with reference to at least two concrete cases; a strong state and a weak state.

9. Modernization theory has come into and out of fashion as a means of explaining political phenomena. Does modernization theory explain events in the real world. Consider the interaction between democracy and economic inequality. Has the rising levels of inequality worldwide over the last few decades impacted levels of democracy, or not? Why?

**Remember to Answer Three**