

Field-Specific Rules for Comprehensive Examinations
Department of Political Science
University of Rochester
October 2013

This document contains detailed information on the format for comprehensive examinations in our Ph.D. program. Please be sure to schedule comprehensive examinations well in advance and to notify the Director of Graduate Studies of the dates for your exams. You will receive the results of your examination from the field within two weeks of the exam date.

International Relations Field

The field of international relations includes the study of international conflict and international political economy, and students are strongly urged to take courses that prepare them in both areas. The training program in international relations emphasizes the combination of strong substantive knowledge of international politics with advanced tools of political science, such as quantitative methods and formal theory. In the comprehensive field examination, students are expected to demonstrate a mastery of the literature in international relations, one focus field, and two electives.

Core Readings

There is one course required of all students taking a comprehensive exam in international relations, which is the International Relations Field Seminar. The Field Seminar provides a broad survey of the literature in the field, including both classics and a sampling of current research. Since it will not ordinarily be offered every year, students planning to take a field exam should take the course when it is offered.

Focus Fields

Each student is responsible for designing a Focus Field in some substantive area in international relations, discussing the Focus Field with a faculty member a few months before the exam, and preparing a reading list. The purpose of the Focus Field is to give the student the opportunity to become expert in a particular substantive area, such as the politics of European integration, US-Soviet relations during the Cold War, or international environmental organizations.

Electives

Students preparing for a comprehensive exam must take at least two electives in international relations in addition to the Field Seminar. One or more of these may overlap with the Focus Field, but need not do so.

Organization of the Field Examination

In principle, the examination may be taken at any point in the year, but students are advised to discuss their plans with the relevant faculty member(s) well ahead of time. The examination generally consists of three essays covering the three courses presented for the examination and the Focus Field. Each question is written and graded by the faculty member who taught the corresponding course. If the Focus Field does not overlap with any of the courses presented for the exam, a fourth question may be required. Barring exceptional circumstances, such as language difficulties, students will be given eight hours to answer each question, and the questions will be administered on successive days. Students are permitted to make use of any resources they wish, but not to discuss their answers with anyone before they are submitted. There is no need to use formal citations.

If an examination scheduled to accommodate a student falls at a particularly inconvenient time for relevant faculty, this may produce a delay in grading. Normally, however, examinations are read and returned within two weeks. Results are reported as "pass" or "fail."

American Politics Field

In the comprehensive field examination, students are expected to demonstrate a mastery of the literature in American politics based on the field seminar plus at least two electives.

Core Readings

The field seminar is required of all students taking a comprehensive exam in American politics. The field seminar provides a broad survey of the literature in the field, including both classics and a sampling of current research. Since it will not ordinarily be offered every year, students planning to take a field exam should take the course when it is offered.

Electives

Students preparing for a comprehensive exam must take at least two electives in American politics in addition to the Field Seminar.

Organization of the Field Examination

The examination will consist of three essays covering the three courses presented for the examination. Although each question will focus on one of the courses, the questions may draw linkages between courses and all relevant course material should be brought to bear on the questions. Students should consult with the faculty writing their exam to ascertain whether there is any prominent literature published since the courses were taken that should be included among their readings. The field examination will be offered once per semester.

Although each faculty member will be primarily responsible for writing the question that corresponds with their course, all three faculty members participating in the exam will consult and agree on the questions to ensure adequate coverage of the field and all three faculty will read all the answers to the questions. Students should expect that the three questions will be written to ensure that both behavioral and institutional topics are represented in the questions.

Barring exceptional circumstances, students will be given eight hours to answer each question, and the questions will be administered on successive days. The length of an answer should be no more than 15,000 characters including spaces—approximately 8 pages. Students are permitted to make use of any resources they wish, but not to discuss their answers with anyone before they are submitted. Students should e-mail their answers to the relevant faculty. Results are reported as “pass” or “fail.”

Comparative Politics Field

In the comprehensive field examination, students are expected to demonstrate a mastery of the literature in comparative politics based on the field seminar plus at least two electives.

Core Readings

The field seminar is required of all students taking a comprehensive exam in comparative politics. This course is designed to introduce some “classic works” and some recent approaches in the various subfields of comparative politics. It will also introduce various methodological approaches and issues in the comparative field, including research design and measurement of important concepts. Since it will not ordinarily be offered every year, students planning to take a field exam should take the course when it is offered.

Electives

Students preparing for a comprehensive exam must take at least two electives in comparative politics in addition to the Field Seminar.

Organization of the Field Examination

The field examination is a written examination. In principle, it may be written at any point in the year, but you are advised to discuss your plans with a relevant faculty member well ahead of time. The exam will consist of two parts, with a choice of questions for each part. Barring exceptional circumstances, students will be given eight hours to answer each part, and the parts will be administered on successive days. A strict word limit will be specified for each part. The syllabi from two of your required substantive courses (not including the Field Seminar) will be used to generate the questions for the exam. In general, the examination will be written and read by the faculty members who taught the courses used to generate the exam.

If an examination scheduled to accommodate you falls at a particularly inconvenient time for relevant faculty, this may produce delay in reading and returning the examination to you. Normally, however, examinations are read and returned within two weeks. Results are ultimately reported as “pass” or “fail.” In indeterminate cases, the examining faculty may offer you the opportunity to rewrite part of the examination before a final decision is reached.

Formal Theory Field

Requirements

The formal political theory field exam can be taken by students who have successfully completed PSC 407, 408, 584, and two additional 500 level courses selected from PSC 575, 582, 585, 586, and 588. Students must have received an average GPA of 3.20 in these classes. Students who wish to apply different courses toward the fulfillment of these requirements must receive the permission of the formal theory faculty.

Timing

The formal political theory field exam is administered up to two times during the year, once in the summer and once in the winter. The exact timing is determined informally, depending on the schedules of students taking the exam and the involved faculty.

Format

The student has eight hours to complete the exam, which is in-class and closed-note and consists of three sets of questions. One set is based on the game theory course (PSC 584 and other relevant portions of other classes), and the other two sets are based on the two other 500 level courses used by the student to fulfill the requirements of the field.

Political Methodology Field (Page 1 of 2)

The field in political methodology requires students to demonstrate mastery of statistical and econometric concepts and their applications. The knowledge required to pass this field is primarily conveyed in the lectures and reading materials taught in the department's graduate-level methods sequence.

Core Courses and Readings

The comprehensive examination in political methodology is for students who have successfully completed PSC 404—Probability and Inference, PSC 405—Linear Models, PSC 505—Maximum Likelihood Estimation, and one advanced methods elective (PSC 504—Causal Inference, PSC 506—Advanced Topics in Methods, PSC 571—Quantitative Approaches to International Politics, or another course approved by the methods faculty). Students with appropriate prior training may, in rare instances, obtain permission to skip one or more of the 400-level courses. PSC 505 and the advanced methods elective will not be waived as we require students to be exposed to the link between substantive political science and statistical modelling.

The Field Examination in Political Methodology

The field exam in political methodology is given after completion of the necessary coursework by a committee typically comprising the instructors of the department's methodology courses. Students who wish to take the methodology field examination should discuss their preparation with the methods faculty well in advance of the exam.

The methodology field exam comprises a methodology paper and an oral exam that takes the paper as its starting point. Topics covered in the oral examination draw on both the paper and the syllabi of the four required methods courses. Students who pass the exam demonstrate sufficient mastery of both the paper and the content of the required courses.

The Paper

The paper is the heart of the political methodology field examination. A paper, to be eligible, must make a contribution to political methodology. The contribution may take a number of different forms including, but not limited to the following:

1. **New Estimator.** Design a new estimator, test, or technique. Some information should be given concerning the properties of the estimator, in part as justification for using it.
2. **Analyze the Properties of an Estimator.** Using analytical techniques and/or Monte Carlo simulations, investigate the small sample or asymptotic properties of an estimator.
3. **Critical Assumptions.** Demonstrate that the performance of a known estimator or test depends crucially on a hidden assumption. Show how the performance differs when that assumption is changed.
4. **Tech Transfer.** Find a technique used elsewhere (statistics, economics, etc) that would be useful to political scientists. Show how to use it. Demonstrate how it would change our inferences in political science.

Political Methodology Field (Page 2 of 2)

The Paper (cont.)

A paper may, of course, combine different aspects of the above. For example, one might find a technique in another field that appears relevant to political science (tech transfer). However, in order to apply it, it may need slight modification (creating a new estimator). If the modifications are significant, one might also want to analyze the properties of the estimator.

The paper will be evaluated based on (1) the potential impact on substantive research, (2) the quality of the execution, and (3) the attainment of the paper's stated goals. Early and extensive consultation with the methods faculty is a necessity for successful completion of the methodology field exam.

As a side note, although any of the above (or combination of them) are fine for the methods comprehensive exam, there are a few things you should keep in mind concerning the job market. First, a purely negative result (e.g., item 3 above) is a good start and is an acceptable goal for this paper. However, it may be difficult to publish. A better strategy is to demonstrate what people have been doing wrong (the negative result) *and then provide a better solution* (the positive result). Second, although tech transfer is widespread in political methodology, it is not as innovative as creating your own estimator or technique. Finally, you will ALWAYS have an easier time convincing people of your contribution (and therefore publishing your paper) if you can demonstrate it using an *empirical example*.