

Suggestions for Preparing for UGA Political Science Comprehensive Exams

By Barry Edwards

I am writing this short memo to document some of my experiences preparing for comprehensive exams. I relied on the outlines of students who took the exam before I did but did not add to existing outlines so I feel like I should attempt to contribute something to fellow students who will take comprehensive exams in the future.

Let's use backwards induction to think strategically about this problem:

5. Your goal is to pass comprehensive exams.
4. In order to pass, you must demonstrate competence in your major field.
3. You demonstrate competence primarily by writing three essays in one day.
2. Your essays will total about 28 typed pages (12, 8, 8 on average).
1. You want to prepare to write a 12 page essay and two 8 page essays.

That may not seem very helpful but now think about this very carefully: **If you could find exactly the right study material, how many pages of material would you need to study to write a solid/competent 12 page essay?**

Think about it. Imagine future you gives you the answers using time travel. How many pages of the answer do you need to study to write a 12 page answer?

If you came up with anything more than 12 pages, please return to Step 5 above and think about the goal and how you get there. If you answered 12 pages or less (the correct answer), I hope this little thinking exercise makes you realize that the quality of material you study is far more important than the quantity of material you study. If you focus your efforts and find the right study material, writing a 12 or 8 page essay on any political science question is easy. My specific suggestions follow. Best of luck!

Focus on the Questions (not reading lists).

My first specific suggestion would be to orient your exam preparation to frequently asked questions rather than reading lists or course syllabi. There are more important books and articles written about American politics than you can read in your lifetime. There are a relatively small number of frequently asked questions on comprehensive exams and you will be given a study guide of five possible questions for the morning essay. Preparing to answer specific questions about American politics is a manageable task that you can break down into discrete, focused projects. I reviewed past American politics comprehensive exams and determined that questions frequently addressed five topic areas:

- (1) Growth of presidential powers
- (2) Congressional elections (role of money, incumbency)
- (3) Assessing individual voter behavior (knowledge, turnout, etc)
- (4) Rise and fall of political parties
- (5) Divided government and polarization (causes and consequences)

Prepare to answer questions in these areas as you would prepare to deliver a lecture on the same topic to a section of undergraduate students. If you had to deliver a 50 minute lecture on major changes in congressional elections in the past 60 years, you probably would want to break the topic into a series of slides each with major talking points. You'd probably want to cite some key statistics, talk about a couple major academic findings, maybe add a bit of your own analysis. Many other topics appear less frequently on recent exams; if you took a course on interest groups or studied southern politics you might expect to find a corresponding question on your exam. Another common question type is to discuss the pros and cons of a particular approach to political science (i.e. rational choice, behavioralist, historical, game theory) with reference to a particular substantive area.

I prepared to answer questions in four of these five areas (I did not prepare to write on voter behavior) before we received the study guide (a week before the test). I prepared one more essay after receiving the study guide (on rational choice) and felt I had not done too much or too little preparation before receiving the study guide.

It is my impression that a number of students have wasted time and stressed out thinking they had to read 30 or 40 books plus hundreds of articles before taking comprehensive exams.

Use Secondary Sources, Especially Professional Literature Reviews.

My second suggestion would be to study past outlines on these topics as well as review essays on these topics. I studied a number of review essays from the *Annual Review of Political Science* as well as the *Oxford Handbook Series*. I would particularly recommend: Layman et al. 2006, "Party Polarization in American Politics: Characteristics, Causes, and Consequences," *Annual Review of Political Science*; P. Squire 1995, "Candidates, Money, and Voters: Assessing the State of Congressional Elections Research," *Political Research Quarterly*; K. Mayer "Going Alone: The Presidential Power of Unilateral Action" and R. Waterman, "Assessing the Unilateral Presidency" in the *Oxford Handbook of the American Presidency* (Ed. Edwards and Howell, 2009). Jack Collens recommended wikisum.com to me and that was also useful as a reference on articles.

Know a Few Classics Well.

Third, I would recommend reading or re-reading a few classic works in your field of particular interest. Mayhew's *Congress* and *Divided We Govern* or Krehbiel's *Pivotal Politics* are good examples. Thorough knowledge of a few works is useful to substantiate your analysis of political issues. For example, an afternoon question on my exam required

me to discuss how rules of the game affect political outcomes. Other exam questions considered the rational choice perspective on politics and the approach used by students of American political development. Thorough knowledge of selected classics can provide you with material to illustrate different modes of analysis. For these types of questions, I think it's better to know a few works in detail than have general knowledge of many works. If you know some material well, you can usually make it work in answering a variety of questions.

Distill Your Outlines Down to One Page Each. Less is More.

Fourth, because you only have a limited amount of time to answer questions and cannot use notes, I think less is more when it comes to outlines and notes. If writing elaborate outlines helps you study, that's fine, but I think you want to distill and refine your notes so you can walk into the exam with an outline in mind of the key points and sources. I worked on boiling down the answers I would write to particular questions to *one-page handwritten outlines*. Initially, I worked on computer but found it didn't lend to treating topics in appropriate detail – my one page handwritten outlines captured the “big picture” much better. There are hundreds, if not thousands, of potentially relevant books and articles on every comprehensive exam question. Don't go down the rabbit hole. I know some people are going to prepare 20 page single-spaced outlines for a question, but that is, in my opinion, a foolish project. You can't write out a 20 page outline in 12 pages, which is about all the time you have for writing. You'll only remember a fraction of it walking into the exam and you don't get graded on your fancy outlines, just the essay you actually write. If you do remember the fine points of your elaborate outline and try to write it, you're really heading for trouble – you'll bog down on a few minor points,

won't have time to cover the main points, and will have a hard time demonstrate that you really know the stuff.

Compare Notes with Others.

Finally, I thought it was helpful to discuss the exam with Robert Cooper and Chris Hare who took the exam at the same time I did. We met a couple times before the exams to talk over what we thought were the key points and brainstormed on what we expected in the afternoon. You can get useful information out of a person, particularly people as sharp as Robert and Chris, far more quickly than a book or article, and it was useful to hear what these guys thought were the most important points and sources on the various topics. I understand from talking to a faculty member the main reason students fail comps is getting off track and not demonstrating knowledge of the most relevant concepts/ideas in a given area. Comparing notes with others is a good way to make sure you are on-target with your prepared answers and avoid misinterpreting a question or pursuing tangential/minor points in your essays.