Comparative Politics (GL 261)
Midterm Exam Study Guide

The midterm exam will cover all material presented in the course to date, including all lectures and reading (Kessellman, et al. Chapters 1-5 and 7). The test will consist of TWO ESSAY QUESTIONS drawn from the list of possible questions below. Make sure to read the questions carefully and answer all parts of the questions. Again, your weekly tests have focused on specific questions about these political systems. The emphasis of these essays is on analysis, not simply the regurgitation of previously covered material. Each requires you to compare and contrast across political systems, be able to articulate the relative strengths and weaknesses of different structures, and draw reasoned conclusions based on your analysis.

1. Scholars often talk about American ‘exceptionalism’ -- the idea that American politics and government is very different from other industrialized democracies. Is America really that different from other wealthy democracies? If so, how is America different and why do think we are different? Given the nature of these differences, is the American political system a useful model for other states to follow in terms of creating a stable democracy and effective public policy?

2. The Bush Administration was slammed in the media for not responding quickly and effectively to Hurricane Katrina. Would the government have been better able to respond to problems like this if we had a parliamentary system rather than a presidential system with separation of powers? What are the advantages and disadvantages of each? Do you think that the policies enacted by the Bush Administration (not only in regards to Katrina, but overall) would have been very much different if he were the head of the majority in the House of Representatives rather than a separately elected President? Given this, which system do you think works better and why?

3. Party discipline in the British House of Commons is very high while party discipline in the US House of Representatives is fairly low. This means that the government of the day is almost assured of getting its legislation passed. What is ‘party discipline’ and why is it so much higher in the UK than in the US? More importantly, what difference does this make in terms of public policy outputs? Which do you think is the better system and why?

4. France, Germany, and Japan have all had failed democratic experiments and authoritarian political systems. This suggests either flawed institutions or political cultures not conducive to democracy in those regimes. Yet all of these countries are stable, prosperous, successful democracies today. Pick either France, Germany, or Japan. What aspects of their respective political systems allow democracy to work in the present when it has failed in the past?

5. Managing collective identities is a crucial issue for any political system. Select any two of the countries we have studied so far. What are the most significant identity-based demands of (e.g., ethnic/racial, religious, regional, class) being placed on the government of those countries? What are the causes and goals of these demands? Which government do you think has done a job of managing this issue? Why?

6. In the decades after World War II, Japan’s economy was a spectacular success, allowing it to become the world’s second largest economy and a leading exporter. Since the early 1990s, however, Japan’s economy has been slumping. Explain the role played by the Japanese state in postwar economic development (the so-called “developmental state”). Why has this system done so badly over the last decade? What has changed? What sorts of policies might help Japan to improve its economic performance?

7. One of the overriding realities of 21st century politics is the pervasive influence of globalization. Economies are increasingly intertwined, cultures intermixed, and political systems influenced by each other. Given that all of the countries we have studied in the first half of the course are wealthy democracies, which country or countries do you think is best suited to adapting to an increasingly globalized world and why? Which system(s) seem to be having the most difficult time adapting? Why?