

**Columbia University Department of Political Science**  
**Written Qualifying Examination in Political Theory**  
**January 2026**

**Instructions:**

All students should answer one question from Part I of this examination. For the minor, students should also answer one question from any other part of this examination (Part II, III, or IV). For the major, students should answer two additional questions, one each from any two additional parts of this examination (e.g. one question from Part II and one from Part IV). You should incorporate into your answers discussion of the theories and thinkers you deem most relevant to the question. Make sure, however, to answer the question directly as well as you are able; do not simply offer a literature review.

**PART I. CORE**

1. Compare and contrast the philosophy of history we find in three (3) of the following thinkers: Kant, Smith, Hegel, Marx. What can we learn from such accounts? Should we treat these 18<sup>th</sup> / 19<sup>th</sup> century philosophies of history as dated, or are they still instructive today?
2. “Sovereignty” only gets explicitly theorized in the early modern period with Bodin and Hobbes. Should we nonetheless think of the concept as a perennial one, such that even earlier political theories contain an implicit account of sovereignty? Discuss with reference to at least 1-2 other thinkers.
3. Which is the better response to social and political divisions, promoting commonality and unity or pluralizing and deepening diversity? Discuss with reference to one ancient and one modern author.

**PART II. JUSTICE, RIGHTS AND CONSTITUTIONALISM**

4. Explain the difference between an illegitimate political regime and an unjust one. Which is more important, legitimacy or justice?
5. Do the demands of global justice supersede those of justice at the level of the individual nation-state? Or are there distinctive rights and obligations within the nation-state that persist even when we accept the existence of some obligations at the global level?

6. Analyze and discuss the idea of the constitution as a pre-commitment with reference to at least three contemporary authors.

### **PART III. DEMOCRACY AND ITS ALTERNATIVES**

7. What is democracy best at: reaching good decisions, securing equality, dispersing power, or something else?
8. Critics of electoral democracy argue that elections violate the principle of equality because democracy means equalizing the chances of “ruling.” Scholars defending the democratic character of elections argue instead that democracy entails equalizing citizens’ effective opportunities to make critical political decisions as equals collectively. Discuss.
9. Should we consider modern states like the United States, even in their best versions, not as pure democracies but as "mixed regimes" combining monarchic, aristocratic, and democratic elements? Why or why not?

### **PART IV. POWER, IDEOLOGY AND IDENTITY**

10. Are political questions ultimately a matter of *knowledge*, that is, of knowing what the world is like and, on that basis, finding out the right solutions to objectively existing problems? Discuss.
11. According to Arendt, “Violence can destroy power; it is utterly incapable of creating it.” Compare and contrast Arendt’s distinctive conception of power with 2 other thinkers of your choice.
12. “Foucault's conception of power deprives the term of any analytical purchase: if power is everywhere, it is nowhere.” Critically assess (i.e. defend and/or critique) this statement.