

Columbia University Department of Political Science
Written Qualifying Examination in Political Theory
August 2025

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 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. The mixed constitution is a concept invented and developed by ancient philosophers. Analyze it and compare it with the modern doctrine of separation of powers.
2. Compare and contrast the function and meaning of deliberation in the work of 3 of the following political theorists: Rousseau, Mill, Arendt, and Habermas.
3. Kant's moral and political philosophy draws subtly and not-so-subtly on Rousseau's. What are some important ways in which Kant uses, misuses, and editorializes Rousseau's ideas?

PART II. JUSTICE, RIGHTS AND CONSTITUTIONALISM

4. A renewed commitment to the national community is the best hope for social justice and democratic politics in conditions of global capitalism. Discuss.
5. Are rights and universalism intertwined? Explain and discuss the arguments for and against a universalistic conception of rights.
6. How should we understand the "rule of law," and is it an unambiguously good thing?

PART III. DEMOCRACY AND ITS ALTERNATIVES

7. Is an illiberal democracy a coherent idea? Can there be a modern democracy without liberal rights and freedoms? Discuss.
8. Representation has been said to have many functions, including to 'mirror', to 'embody', or to 'authorize'. Analyze the meaning(s) of representation in light of the interpretations of democracy in contemporary political theory.
9. Some thinkers consider direct democracy and representative democracy to be distinct regime types—for instance, Madison calls the former “democratic” and the latter “republican” government. Is this right, or is there a core aspect of democracy that is constant across variants?

PART IV. POWER, IDEOLOGY AND IDENTITY

10. What, if anything, is distinctive about the “republican” conception of liberty? Assess this conception (i.e. discuss its strengths and weaknesses) in comparison with a “liberal” conception of liberty.
11. According to Giovanni Sartori, ideology is an “instrument of mass manipulation.” Is this a fair and/or comprehensive characterization of the role of ideology in politics?
12. How would you define and distinguish between political, economic, social domination?