

## Approaches to the study of Politics<sup>1</sup>

### Defining Approach:

**J.C. Johari:** “An approach ... may be defined as a way of looking at and then explaining a particular phenomenon.”  
(*Comparative Politics* – J.C. Johari)

**Vernon Von Dyke:** An approach “...consists of criteria of selection – criteria employed in selecting the problems or questions to consider and in selecting the data to bring to bear; it consists of standards governing the inclusion and exclusion of questions and data.”  
(*Political Science: A Philosophical Analysis* – Vernon Von Dyke)

**Gerry Stoker:** Approaches “... guide participants towards different ways of doing political science. They answer questions about the core subject matter to be addressed; the mode by which evidence should be obtained; the nature of the theoretical enterprise that should be undertaken; and offer diverse underlying assumptions about the nature and dynamics of politics.”  
(*Theory and Methods in Political Science* – Edited by Gerry Stoker and David Marsh)

### Methodology:

Methodology is a particular way of producing knowledge or a way of knowing the world. They apply different research techniques (i.e. – methods), in understanding and interpreting the world.

Methodological orientations are mainly concerned with *ontological* (i.e. – views about the nature of social existence and social beings) and *epistemological* (i.e. – views about how we know what we know and in particular what constitutes an adequate explanation of a political event or process) questions.

### Classification of Approaches:

Political Science is characterized by a diversity of approaches. Approaches are classified either in order of their chronological emergence; or on the basis of their methodological orientations.

Before 1900 the study of politics was largely dominated by philosophy, history and law. These approaches to politics are collectively labeled as **traditional**. Since the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century there has been an

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emphasis on applying methods and concepts in Political Science borrowed from physical sciences as well as other social sciences, like, economics, sociology and psychology. These are defined as **modern** approaches to the study of politics.

On the other hand approaches are classified as **normative** and **empirical** based on their inclinations towards value judgement and objectivity, i.e. their methodological orientations.

According to **J.C. Johari**, "...while normativism – the hallmark of traditional approaches – stands for a value-laden system, empiricism – the hallmark of modern approaches – does the same for a system loaded with facts."

### **Normative Approach:**

#### **Definition:**

In defining normative political theory **Isaiah Berlin** says that, it is concerned with "... the discovery and application of moral notions in the sphere of political relations and practice."

#### **Span:**

Normative approach has a long lineage – going back in the West at least to the Ancient Greece (600 BC) and in the East, among other sources, to the Confucian and Hindu philosophy (3000 BC). This approach is also called 'traditional' as it dominated the study of politics mostly before 1900. Although it no longer monopolises the avenues of approach to the study of politics, nonetheless it still remains a living and vital branch of political studies. It has benefited from a considerable revival of interest in value based research since the early 1970s thanks to the works and influence of the political thinkers like, John Rawls and Robert Nozick.

#### **Basic Features:**

1. Normative approach searches for universal values concerning political activities,
2. The theoretical components of normative approach are philosophical, legal, historical and institutional,
3. It emphasizes on 'what ought to be' rather than 'what is' in politics,
4. It searches for an ideal or perfect state based on assumptions on a wide variety of matters,
5. This approach uses *a priori* deductions as the methodology,
6. It is more descriptive than analytical in treating the subject matter,

7. Its method of analysis is based on ethical standards and moral values.

**Types:**

**Philosophical:**

It is a search for the essential purity of human nature and the ideal political set up. It seeks to apply moral and religious codes in politics. According to **S.L. Wasby**, "Probably the oldest approach to the study of politics is the philosophical." Methodologically it is deductive, speculative, utopian and based on *a priori* assumptions. This approach is criticized for being biased, unrealistic and for its over-simplified assumptions. Chief propagators of this approach have been Plato (*Republic*), Rousseau, Kant, Hegel, Bradley, Bosanquet etc.

**Historical:**

Historical approach examines past events through available evidences such as, memoirs and biographies of statesmen, journalistic accounts etc. and draw tentative conclusions regarding some aspects of contemporary politics. It examines the origin and development of political organizations and movements. It seeks to contextualize politics. Primarily it adopts descriptive methodology. But this approach is criticized for its biased, subjective and sometimes confusing outlook. Scarcity of reliable data is also a limitation. Chief propagators of historical approach include: Ivor Jennings (*British Cabinet System*), Robert Mackenzie (*British Political Parties*), J.P. Macintosh (*British Cabinet System*), Robert Palmer (*Age of Democratic Revolution*) and Barrington Moore (*Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*).

**Legal:**

Legal approach is concerned with the study of constitutional law and legal institutions. It seeks to explain political life through legal perceptions and in the contexts of legal frameworks and institutions like the state. The method is largely descriptive and institutional and is guided by logic and reason rather than facts and events. But it is accused of reducing all aspects of political life and system into a judicial entity overlooking the underlying socio-economic and cultural aspects. It is also said that a legal truth can be politically untrue. Cicero, Jean Bodin, Austin, Grotius, Bentham, A.V. Dicey (*Law of the Constitution*) etc. are the chief propagators of this approach.

**Institutional:**

Institutional approach concentrates chiefly on examining the major political institutions of the state, i.e. – the executive, the legislature, the civil service, the judiciary, and the local governments. Through this it seeks to draw valuable insights into their organization, discuss proposals for their reforms and offer general conclusions about their performance. Its methodology is descriptive and institutional. According to the critics no wide-reaching theory can be constructed from this approach and it can not be applied to the situations in the developing countries. The major thinkers who adopted this approach include: Polybius, Finer, James Brice, H.J. Laski, Maurice Duverger, G.A. Almond, J.C. Coleman, Bernard Crick (*Reforms of Parliament*), Bailey and Samuel (*Congress at Work*).

### **Critical Appreciation:**

The normative approach to politics has been subjected to severe criticism by the empiricists, logical positivists and the behaviouralists since the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century till 1960s. It has been accused of being too much descriptive, institutional, biased, unrealistic and conservative in outlook. But since 1970 normative theories developed in a variety of directions through the works of John Rawls, Robert Nozick, Ronald Dworkin (Deontological Liberalism), Amartya Sen, B. Williams, Raymond Plant (Modern Utilitarianism), Michael Oakeshott, Hannah Arendt, Michael Sande (Communitarianism).

Normative theories are theories about what the world ought to be. Here the theorist posits a desired set of conditions and argues why it should be preferred. It is concerned with “...the bearing or promoting norms, in the sense of values” (**Goodwin**). **Daryl Glasser** says: “Engagement with normative theory proceeds from the hope that moral actors who debate their options in an open and self-conscious way will, on the whole, do fewer of the things most of us would consider bad than those who proceed unreflectively or suppress moral debate.”

## **Empiricism:**

### **Definition:**

**A.G. Johnson**, in his *Blackwell Dictionary of Sociology* says: “Empiricism is a philosophical approach based on the idea that the only valid form of knowledge is that which is gathered through the use of the senses. According to this perspective, if something cannot be observed, then it is of no use in trying to explain natural or other phenomena.”

According to **David Sanders**, “An empirical theory is a set of interconnected abstract statements, consisting of assumptions, definitions and empirically-testable hypotheses, which purports to describe and explain the occurrence of a given phenomenon or set of phenomena.”

### **Evolution:**

Empiricism has its roots in the writings of Auguste Comte in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and in the deliberations of the logical positivists of the ‘Vienna Circle’ in the 1920s. It has been popularized in Britain by Alfred Ayer and in Germany by Carl Hempel.

The application of empirical approach to the study of politics has been formally initiated by the publication of two books in 1908: *Human nature in Politics* by Graham Wallas and *The Process of Government* by Arthur Bentley. This was followed by a series of publications, researches and deliberations by leading scholars in the USA and West Europe.

### **Exponents:**

The leading exponents of the empirical as well as behavioural approach include: Charles Merriam of the Chicago University (*New Aspects of Politics*, 1925), J.E. Catlin of the Cornell University (*The Science and Method in Politics*, 1927), Stuart Rice (*Political Behavior: the Heretofore Unwritten Law*, 1928), Harold D. Lasswell (*Psychopathology and Politics*, 1930 and *Politics: Who Gets, What, When How?* 1936), scholars of the ‘Chicago School’ led by Merriam: Gabriel Almond, David Truman, V.O. Key, Herbert Simon, scholars from other American Universities: Robert A. Dahl, David Easton, D.E. Apter, S. Verba, Karl Deutsch, European scholars migrated to the USA: Franz Neumann, Paul Lazarasfeld, Hans Speier, Hans Gerth and others.

## **Behaviouralism:**

Behaviouralism is a branch of the empirical approach to the study of politics initiated by the American scholars in the 1920s and developed to its best after the World War II. Scholars belonging to the 'Chicago School of Thought' and other American universities and institutes like the University of Michigan, the Princeton University, the University of Yale and the Palo Alto institute were the chief propagators of this approach. Apart from the US government, the Ford Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, the Carnegie Foundation and the like played very significant role in the development of this approach by sponsoring research works in these institutions. By 1950, in the accounts of **E.M. Kirkpatrick**, behaviouralism had emerged as "...a new approach, and a challenge, a new orientation and a reform movement."

## **Definition:**

According to **Robert A. Dahl**, "Behavioural approach is an attempt to improve understanding of politics by seeking to explain the empirical aspects of political life by means of methods, theories and criteria of proof that are acceptable according to the canons, conventions and assumptions of modern empirical science."

**J.C. Charlesworth** said: "Unlike the great traditional theories of pan-political thought new theory tends to be analytical, not substantive, general rather than particular, and explanatory rather than ethical. The portion of political research which share these commitments to both the new theory and technical means of analysis and verification thereby links Political Science to broader behaviour tendencies in social sciences, and hence, its description as political behaviour. This is the full meaning and significance of behavioural approach in Political Science today."

## **Basic Features:**

**David Easton** identified the following aspects as the basic assumptions of behaviouralism:

1. **Regularity:** Political Scientists should focus on the regularities of political behaviour of men (through thorough observations) and be ready for rigorous analytical treatment of data.
2. **Verifications:** Valid knowledge should be empirically observable and verifiable.
3. **Techniques:** Political Scientists should use sophisticated techniques borrowed from other social and natural sciences for managing data.

4. **Quantification:** Data for research should be quantified so that the conclusions of the researcher may be verified on the basis of quantified evidence.
5. **Values:** Values and facts should be separated to avoid ethical or moral biasness. Research should reflect objective and verifiable truth.
6. **Systematisation:** Research should be theory oriented – the hypotheses to be testifiable and the goal should be “overarching generalisation”.
7. **Pure science:** Even if the findings may not be applicable to a specific social problem, the research should be of pure type, i.e. – perfectly verifiable by evidences.
8. **Integration:** The approach should be inter-disciplinary – Political Science should be integrated with other social sciences, such as, Economics, Psychology and Sociology etc.

**E.M. Kirkpatrick** described the characteristics of the ‘behavioural movement’ as:

- a. a rejection of political institutions as the basic conceptual unit and a substitution of the individual and group behaviour,
- b. an emphasis on the unity of the social sciences, hence an increased willingness to cross-disciplinary lines,
- c. a greater attention to precision, measurement and quantitative techniques, and
- d. the development of systematic empirical theory.

### **Critical Appreciation:**

According to **Leo Strauss**, “It is impossible to study social phenomena... without making value-judgement.” **Andresky** said: “By diverting the eyes from the explosive issues of the day the methodological purism acts in the fact as a prop of the status-quo whatever it may be.”

Apart from this behaviouralism has been criticized for diminishing the autonomy of Political Science, making unrealistic efforts for applying methods of natural sciences in Political Science and turning the study of politics as ineffective by avoiding any discussion on the state or other political institutions. Moreover many critics are not prepared to acknowledge it as an ‘intellectual movement’. In fact realizing the weaknesses of this approach the behaviouralists themselves made an effort to reform this, by invoking the so called *Post-behaviouralism*.

In spite of all these criticisms the impact of behaviouralism to the studies of Political Science has been enormous. It has enriched the study of politics by making it more scientific, systematic, sophisticated, inter-disciplinary and theory oriented.

### **Post-behaviouralism:**

During the late 1950s and early 1960s a spate of political incidents and movements rocked the US politics, such as, the assassination of President Kennedy, the protests against the Vietnam War, rising discontents with unemployment and racial discrimination in public policies, the emergence of radical feminism and so on. The behaviouralists could neither predict about this turmoil nor offer any useful solutions to these burning issues. There was a growing discontent with behaviouralism as an approach to political analysis.

In this scenario **David Easton** in his presidential address to the American Political Science Association in 1969 clearly stated the limitations of behaviouralism and offered seven fundamental theoretical elements of a new method of political analysis that he called as '*Post-behaviouralism*'.

### **Basic Features:**

1. Behaviouralism had failed to help the basic understanding of political life, so Post-behaviouralism should focus on the substance rather than the techniques.
2. Behaviouralism had conceived of the ideology of an 'empirical conservatism' tempered by modest implementational changes – that should be rejected.
3. Behaviouralism was bound to loose touch with the political reality for its superficial methodology, so Post-behaviouralism should try reach out to the needs of the mankind at a time of crisis.
4. Values are indispensable parts of the study of politics. So Political Science can never be evaluatingly neutral. In Post-behaviouralism facts and values should be fused together.
5. The historical role of the intellectuals must be to protect the human values of the civilization.
6. To know is to bear responsibility for acting and to act is to engage in reshaping the society.
7. Intellectuals and their organizations should be involved in active politics; they can not stand apart from the struggle of the day. So, the thrust was given on relevance and action.

### **Critical Appreciation:**

The critics said that the post-behaviouralism was less a separate kind of approach than that of behaviouralism, rather it was a mere effort for the revival of the later. However the emphasis on the values and concern for the real political issues made it more relevant and effective.