

Approaches to the study of Political Science

Most authors do not make a distinction between the term approach and method to the study of political science as they are synonyms. However in view of Dr J C Johari, 'an approach is a way of looking at and then explaining a given phenomenon which includes everything related to the collection and selection of evidence necessary for investigation and analysis of hypotheses. Methods on the other hand is a way of organising a theory for application to data. According to Salvadori, method refers to the technical devices used for gathering data and the points of view of the specialists. According to Van Dyke, "approaches consist of criteria for selecting problems and relevant data whereas methods are procedures for getting and utilising data". Accordingly approaches to the study of political science may be classified under two categories: the traditional approach and the modern approach.

Traditional Approach

The traditional approach is value based and lays emphasis on the inclusion of values to the study of political phenomena. The adherents of this approach believe that the study of political science should not be based on facts alone since facts and values are closely related to each other. Since the days of Plato and Aristotle 'the great issues of politics' have revolved around normative orientations. Accordingly there are a large number of traditional approaches like legal approach, philosophical approach, historical approach, institutional approach etc.

Philosophical approach to the study of political science could be traced in the writings of ancient philosophers like Plato and Aristotle. Leo Strauss who was one of the ardent supporters of this approach believed that "the philosophy is the quest for wisdom and political philosophy is the attempt truly to know about the nature of political things and the right or good political order." This approach lays stress on ethical and normative study of politics and is idealistic in nature. It deals with the problems of nature and function of state, issues of citizenship, rights and duties etc.

Historical approach believes that political phenomena could be understood better with the help of historical factors like age, place, situations etc. Political thinkers like Machiavelli, Sabine and Dunning believe that politics and history are intricately related and the study of politics always should have a historical perspective. Sabine is of the view that Political Science should include all those subjects which have been discussed in the writings of different political thinkers from the time of Plato. Every past is linked with the present and thus the historical analysis provides a chronological order of every political phenomenon.

Institutional approach lays stress on the study of political institutions and structures like executive, legislature, judiciary, political parties, interests groups etc. Among the ancient thinkers Aristotle is an important contributor to this approach while the modern thinkers include James Bryce, Bentley, Walter Bagehot, Harold Laski, etc.

Legal approach regards state as the creator and enforcer of law and deals with legal institutions, and processes. Its advocates include Cicero, Jean Bodin, Thomas Hobbes, Jeremy Bentham, John Austin, Dicey and Sir Henry Maine.

Based on the definition of traditional approach to political issues, the following features of traditional approach could be deduced¹:

Accent on large questions: the issues of larger concern such as how the authority should be organised, what should be the criteria for citizenship, what should be the functions of state etc. are the subject matter of traditional approach and appear with greater degree of regularity.

Normative overtone: normative orientation or statement of preferences (value questions) occurs frequently in traditional thinking. The traditional thinkers as such do not make a distinction between political and ethical questions. Therefore thinkers like Plato have raised questions like what should be the size of state, what should be an ideal state etc.

¹ Ray Amal and Bhattacharya.....

Philosophical orientation: an important feature of traditional political thought has been its philosophical orientation. In the words of Wasby, “the philosophical approach takes in all aspects of man’s political activities and has as its goal a statement of underlying principles concerning those activities²”. Actual political activities have often been judged against ideals postulated as ‘state of nature’, natural law, ideal polity and so on. Plato’s Republic and Hobbes Leviathan will always be remembered as treatise which searched for deeper general principles underlying the actual political activities³.

Legal institutional bias: formal aspects of government such as constitution, the organs of government, the laws of election and so on have been the concern of traditional political thought. The institutional approach has legal orientation as emphasis is placed on laws, rules and regulations that determine the structure and processes of governmental institutions⁴.

Thus traditional approach with all its intrinsic feature has made tremendous contribution to the understanding of political problems. Even now political researchers adhere to traditional approach for understanding issues of government and politics which shows significance of traditional approach.

Modern Approach

The modern approach is fact based and lays emphasis on the factual study of political phenomenon to arrive at scientific and definite conclusions. The modern approaches include sociological approach, economic approach, psychological approach, quantitative approach, simulation approach, system approach, behavioural approach, Marxian approach etc.

² Wasby, L Stephen (1972), “Political Science- The Discipline and its Dimensions, an Introduction”, Scientific Book Agency, Calcutta.

³ Ray and Bhattacharya.....

⁴ Ibid

Modern Approaches

Normative methods generally refer to the traditional methods of inquiry to the phenomena of politics and are not merely concerned with 'what is' but 'what ought to be' issues in politics. Its focus is on the analysis of institution as the basic unit of study. However with the advent of industrialisation and behavioural revolution in the field of political science, emphasis shifted from the study 'what ought to' to 'what is'. Today political scientists are more interested in analysing how people behave in matters related to the state and government.

A new movement was ushered in by a group of political scientists in America who were not satisfied with the traditional approach to the analysis of government and state as they felt that tremendous exploration had occurred in other social sciences like sociology, psychology anthropology etc. which when applied to the political issues could render new insights. They now collect data relating to actual political happenings. Statistical information coupled with the actual behaviours of men, individually and collectively, may help the political scientists in arriving at definite conclusions and predicting things correctly in political matters⁵. The quantitative or statistical method, the systems approach or simulation approach in political science base their inquiry on scientific data and as such are known as modern or empirical method.

Behavioural Approach

Until the middle of the 20th century, political science was primarily concerned with qualitative questions which had a philosophical, legalistic and descriptive orientation. The discipline was in fact transformed by the behavioural revolution in the 1950's which laid stress on scientific and empirical approach to the understanding of political phenomena. The revolution got an impetus with the establishment of the journal *Experimental Study of Politics* in 1970's. The central focus of behavioralism

⁵ book

is its emphasis on the study of political behaviour which refers to acts, attitudes, preferences and expectations of man in political context⁶. In the words of Barrow, “behaviouralism’s main methodological claim was that uniformities in political behaviour could be discovered and expressed as generalizations but such generalizations must be testable by reference to observable political behaviours such as voting, public opinion or decision making⁷”.

The main characteristics of behavioural revolution has been summed up as⁸ and

- It rejects political institutions as the basic unit for research and identifies the behaviour of individuals in political situations as the basic unit of analysis
- Identifies social sciences as behavioural sciences and emphasises the unity of political science with the other social sciences
- Advocates the utilization and development of more precise techniques of observing, classifying and measuring data and urges the use of statistical or quantitative formulation wherever possible
- Defines the construction of systematic, empirical theory as the goal of political sciences.

The intellectual foundations of behavioralism have been summed up by David Easton as regularities, verification, technique, quantification, values, systematisation, pure science and integration. Behaviouralism has been criticised on a number of grounds some which may be summed up as⁹

⁶ Ealau, Heinz (1964), “The Behavioural Persuasion in Politics”, Random House, New Delhi.

⁷ Barrow, Clyde W (2008), “Political Science” in the International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences, William A Darity Jr. (ed). pp 313.

⁸ Kirkpatric, M Evron (1962), “The Impact of the Behavioural Approach on Traditonal Political science” in Austin Ranney (ed.) Essay on the Behavioural Study of Politics, University of Ellinois Press, Urbana.

⁹ Introduction to approaches to the study of Political Science, URL:
http://www.kkhsou.in/main/polscience/approaches_polscience.html

- The movement has been criticized for its dependence on techniques and methods ignoring the subject matter.
- The advocates of this approach were wrong when they said that human beings behave in similar ways in similar circumstances.
- Besides, it is a difficult task to study human behaviour and to get a definite result.
- Most of the political phenomena are unquantifiable. Therefore it is always difficult to use scientific method in the study of Political Science.
- Moreover, the researcher being a human being is not always value neutral as believed by the behaviouralists.

Behaviouralism is not to be looked as a complete dissociation with the traditional thinking. In fact it is a protest against and an extension and enrichment of the traditionalist stance in political science¹⁰. The goals of behavioural research have been set as understanding, describing, analysing and if possible predicting political phenomena.

Post- Behavioural

David Easton coined the term Post-Behaviouralism in his Presidential Address at the 65th Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association in 1969. In fact Easton was one of the key figures of behavioural revolution. Post-behavioralism claimed that despite the fact that behaviouralism claimed to be value free there was tendency in it towards social preservation and status-quo rather than social change. Therefore the new movement led stress on action and relevance. Three key tenets of the post behavioural movement were:

- It challenged the view of behaviouralists that research has to be value neutral and stressed that values should not be totally neglected. Unlike natural sciences generalizations can't be made in the field of social sciences because study of men in the social context was a complicated affair.

¹⁰ Ray and Bhattacharya.....

- Post behaviouralism claimed that behaviouralists stress on observable and measurable phenomena meant that too much emphasis was being placed on easily studied trivial issues at the expense of more important topics. Easton himself declared that he felt dissatisfied with the research made under the impact of behaviouralist movement as it looked more of Mathematics than Political Science which had lost touch with the reality and the contemporary world.

- Post behaviouralism stressed that research should have relevance to the society and that intellectuals have a positive role to play. The new movement believed that the use of scientific tools in political science could be beneficial only when it is able to solve the various problems confronting society. It criticised behaviouralism for ignoring the realities of society while laying too much emphasis on techniques.

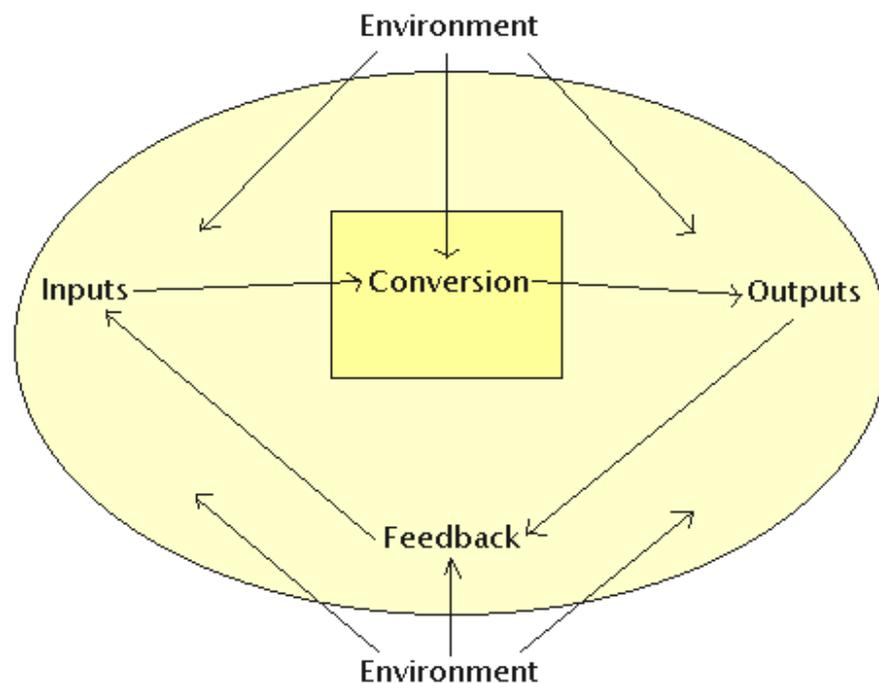
However it needs to be stressed that post-behaviouralism was a continuation of the behavioural movement as it recognised the contributions of behaviouralism in the realm of political science. By making use of different techniques and methods post-behaviouralism try to overcome the drawbacks of behaviouralism and make the study of political science more relevant to the society.

Structural-Functional Approach

The structural-functional theory postulates that political systems are comprised of various structures that are relatively uniform in the sense that they are found in most political systems throughout the world. The theory asserts that each of these structures has a particular function that supports the establishment of an orderly, stable system of governance within which individuals and other societal structures fulfil roles of their own. Typical political structures include: legislative bodies, courts, bureaucratic organizations, executive bodies, and political parties. (Powell, Dalton, Strom, pg 35).

Structural functionalism became popular around 1960 when it became clear that ways of studying U.S. and European politics were not useful in studying newly independent countries, and that a new approach was needed. Structural functionalists try to do find out the function a given structure (guerrilla movement, political party,

election, etc.) does within a political system (of country x)? Almond claimed that certain political functions existed in all political systems. On the input side he listed these functions as: political socialization, political interest articulation, political interest aggregation, and political communication. The output functions included rule-making, rule implementation, and rule adjudication. Other basic functions of all political systems included the conversion process, basic pattern maintenance, and various capabilities (distributive, symbolic, etc.)¹¹. Structural functionalists argued that all political systems, including Third World systems, could most fruitfully be studied and compared on the basis of how differing structures performed these functions in the various political systems. The structural functional approach could be better summed up through the given diagram:



Source: <http://udel.edu/~jdeiner/strufunc.html>

Political system in the diagram refers to nation states while environment refers to the interactions between the social, economic and political variables including internal as well external.

¹¹ Politics of Developing Nations (1999), URL: <http://udel.edu/~jdeiner/strufunc.html>

Structural-functionalism has a bias towards status-quo as it is more interested in the maintenance of equilibrium than in change. It favours evolutionary change in place of a revolutionary one.