

Discipline Core –3: Understanding Political Theory

What is Politics: Theorizing the –Political

SEM-II

ARINDAM DEBNATH.

Concept of Political Theory:

Political theory is a set of specified relationships encompassing political matters that focus and organize inquiry to describe, explain, and predict political events and behaviours. Political theory is considered as the basis and branch of political science which attempts to arrive at generalizations, inferences, or conclusions to be drawn from the data gathered by other specialists, not only in political science, but throughout the whole range of human knowledge and experience. From ancient Greece to the present, the history of political theory has dealt with fundamental and perennial ideas of Political Science. Political theory reflects upon political phenomenon, processes and institutions and on actual political behaviour by subjecting it to philosophical or ethical criterion. The most dominant political theories realise all three goals such as describe, explain, and predict. The theories are the results of thoughts and research of many scholars and exponents of political science. Thinkers on the subject formulate definitions of various political concepts and establish theories.

Germino described that 'Political theory is the most appropriate term to employ in designating that intellectual tradition which affirms the possibility of transcending the sphere of immediate practical concerns and viewing man's societal existence from a critical perspective.' According to Sabine, 'Political theory is, quite simply, man's attempts to consciously understand and solve the problems of his group life and organization. It is the disciplined investigation of political problems not only to show what a political practice is, but also to show what it means. In showing what a practice means, or what it ought to mean, political theory can alter what it is.'

Numerous eminent theorists explained the nature of political theory.

David Held described that "Political theory is a network of concepts and generalizations about political life involving ideas, assumptions and statements about the nature, purpose and key features of government, state and society, and about the political capabilities of human beings." WC Coker explained political theory as "When political government and its forms and activities are studied not simply as facts to be described and compared and judged in reference to their immediate and temporary effects, but as facts to be understood and appraised in relation to the constant needs, desires and opinions of men, then we have political theory." According to Andrew Hacker, "Political Theory is a combination of a disinterested search for the principles of good state and good society on the one hand, and a disinterested search for knowledge of political and social reality on the other." George Catlin stated that "Political theory includes political science and political philosophy. While science refers to the phenomenon of control in many forms over all the processes of whole social field. It is concerned with the end or final value, when man asks, what the national good is" or "What is good society." John Plamentaz

delineates political theory in functional terms and said that "The function of political theory has come to be restricted to the analysis and clarification of the vocabulary of politics and the critical examination, verification and justification of the concepts employed in political argument." Another theorist, Norman Barry defined that "Political theory is an eclectic subject which draws upon a variety of disciplines. There is no body of knowledge or method of analysis which can be classified as belonging exclusively to political theory."

Approaches of political theory:

The study of political science and in the process of search for political truth certain procedure must be followed. These procedures are defined as approaches, methods, techniques and strategies. Approaches to study political science are grouped as traditional and modern approaches

Traditional approaches:

Traditional approaches are value based. These approaches put emphasis on values more than facts. Advocates of this approach believe that the study of political science cannot and should not be purely scientific. They stated that in social science such as facts values are closely related with each other. In politics, emphasis should not be on the facts but on the moral quality of political event. There are huge number of traditional approaches such as philosophical, institutional, legal, and historical approaches..

Characteristics of Traditional approaches:

1. Traditional approaches are largely normative and stresses on the values of politics.
2. Emphasis is on the study of different political structures.
3. Traditional approaches made very little attempt to relate theory and research.
4. These approaches believe that since facts and values are closely interlinked, studies in Political Science can never be scientific.

Different types of traditional approaches:

1. Philosophical Approach: This approach is considered as the oldest approach in the arena of Political Science. The development of this approach can be traced back to the times of the Greek philosophers like Plato and Aristotle. Leo Strauss was one of the main supporter of the philosophical approach. He considered 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." Vernon Van Dyke observed that a philosophical analysis is an effort to clarify thought about the nature of the subject and about ends and means in studying it. The aim of this approach is to evolve the standard of right and wrong, for the purpose of critical evaluation of existing institutions, laws and policies (Gaub, 2009).

This approach is based on the theoretical principle that the values cannot be separated from the study of politics. Therefore, its main concern is to judge what is good or bad in any political society. It is mainly an ethical and normative study of politics and, thus, idealistic. It addresses

the problems of the nature and functions of the state, citizenship, rights and duties etc. The supporters of this approach consider that political philosophy is strongly associated with the political beliefs. Therefore, they are of the opinion that a political scientist must have the knowledge of good life and good society. Political philosophy supports in establishing a good political order.

Historical Approach: Theorists who developed this political approach focused on the historical factors like the age, place and the situation in which it is evolved are taken into consideration. This approach is related to history and it emphasizes on the study of history of every political reality to analyse any situation. Political thinkers such as Machiavelli, Sabine and Dunning considered that politics and history are closely related and the study of politics always should have a historical standpoint. Sabine stated that Political Science should include all those subjects which have been discussed in the writings of different political thinkers from the time of Plato. This approach strongly maintains the belief that the thinking or the dogma of every political thinker is formed by the surrounding environment. Furthermore, history provide details of the past as well as it also links it with the present events. History gives the chronological order of every political event and thereby helps in future estimation of events also. Therefore, without studying the past political events, institutions and political environment it would be erroneous to analyse the present political events. But critics of historical approach designated that it is not

Institutional approach: this is traditional and significant approach in studying political science. This approach primarily deals with the formal features of government and politics accentuates the study of the political institutions and structures. Therefore, the institutional approach is concerned with the study of the formal structures like legislature, executive, judiciary, political parties, and interest groups. The supporters of this approach includes both ancient and modern political philosophers. Among the ancient thinkers, aristotle had significant role in shaping this approach while the modern thinkers include james bryce, bentley, walter bagehot, harold laski contributed to develop this approach.

The various traditional approaches to the study of political science have been disapproved for being normative. These approaches were principled also as their concern went beyond how and why political events happen to what ought to happen. In the later period, the modern approaches have made an attempt to make the study of political science more scientific and, therefore, emphasize pragmatism.

Modern approaches:

After studying politics with the help of traditional approaches, the political thinkers of the later stage felt the necessity to study politics from a new perspective. Thus, to minimize the deficiencies of the traditional approaches, various new approaches have been advocated by the new political thinkers. These new approaches are regarded as the “modern approaches” to the study of political science. Modern approaches are fact based approaches. They lay emphasis on factual study of political events and try to arrive at scientific and definite conclusion. The aim of modern approaches is to replace normativism with empiricism. Therefore modern approaches are marked by empirical investigation of relevant data.

Characteristics of modern approaches:

1. These approaches try to draw conclusion from empirical data.
2. These approaches go beyond the study of political structures and its historical analysis.
3. Modern approaches believe in inter-disciplinary study.
4. They emphasize scientific methods of study and attempt to draw scientific conclusions in political science.

Modern approaches include sociological approach, psychological approach, economic approach, quantitative approach, simulation approach, system approach, behavioural approach and marxian approach (d. K. Sarmah, 2007).

Behavioural approach:

Among the modern empirical approach, the behavioural approach, to study political science grabbed notable place. Most eminent exponents of this approach are david etson, robert, a. Dahl, e. M. Kirkpatrick, and heinz eulau. Behavioural approach is political theory which is the result of increasing attention given to behaviour of ordinary man. Theorist, kirkpatrick stated that traditional approaches accepted institution as the basic unit of research but behavioural approach consider the behaviour of individual in political situation as the basis (k. Sarmah, 2007).

Salient features of behaviourism:

David easton has pointed out certain salient features of behaviouralism which are regarded as its intellectual foundations. These are:

Regularities: this approach believes that there are certain uniformities in political behaviour which can be expressed in generalizations or theories in order to explain and predict political phenomena. In a particular situation the political behaviour of individuals may be more or less similar. Such regularities of behaviour may help the researcher to analyse a political situation as well as to predict the future political phenomena. Study of such regularities makes political science more scientific with some predictive value.

Verification: the behaviouralists do not want to accept everything as granted. Therefore, they emphasize testing and verifying everything. According to them, what cannot be verified is not scientific.

Techniques: the behaviouralists put emphasis on the use of those research tools and methods which generate valid, reliable and comparative data. A researcher must make use of sophisticated tools like sample surveys, mathematical models, simulation etc.

Quantification: after collecting data, the researcher should measure and quantify those data.

Values: the behaviouralists have put heavy emphasis on separation of facts from values. They believe that to do objective research one has to be value free. It means that the researcher should not have any pre-conceived notion or a biased view.

Systematization: according to the behaviouralists, research in political science must be systematic. Theory and research should go together.

Pure science: another characteristic of behaviouralism has been its aim to make political science a “pure science”. It believes that the study of political science should be verified by evidence.

Integration: according to the behaviouralists, political science should not be separated from various other social sciences like history, sociology and economics etc. This approach believes that political events are shaped by various other factors in the society and therefore, it would be wrong to separate political science from other disciplines.

It is recognized by theorists that with the development of behaviouralism, a new thinking and new technique of study were evolved in the field of political science.

Benefits of behavioural approach are as follows:

1. This approach makes political science more scientific and brings it closer to the day to day life of the individuals.
2. Behaviouralism has first explained human behaviour into the field of political science and thus makes the study more relevant to the society.
3. This approach helps in predicting future political events.
4. The behavioural approach has been supported by different political thinkers as it is scientific approach and predictable nature of political events.

Despite of merits, the behavioural approach has been criticised for its fascination for scienticism also. The main criticisms levelled against this approach are mentioned below:

1. This has been disparaged for its dependence on practices and methods ignoring the subject matter.
2. The supporters of this approach were wrong when they said that human beings behave in similar ways in similar circumstances.
3. This approach focus on human behaviour but it is a difficult task to study human behaviour and to get a definite result.
4. Most of the political phenomena are indeterminate. Therefore it is always difficult to use scientific methods in the study of political science.
5. Furthermore, the scholar being a human being is not always value neutral as believed by the behaviouralists.

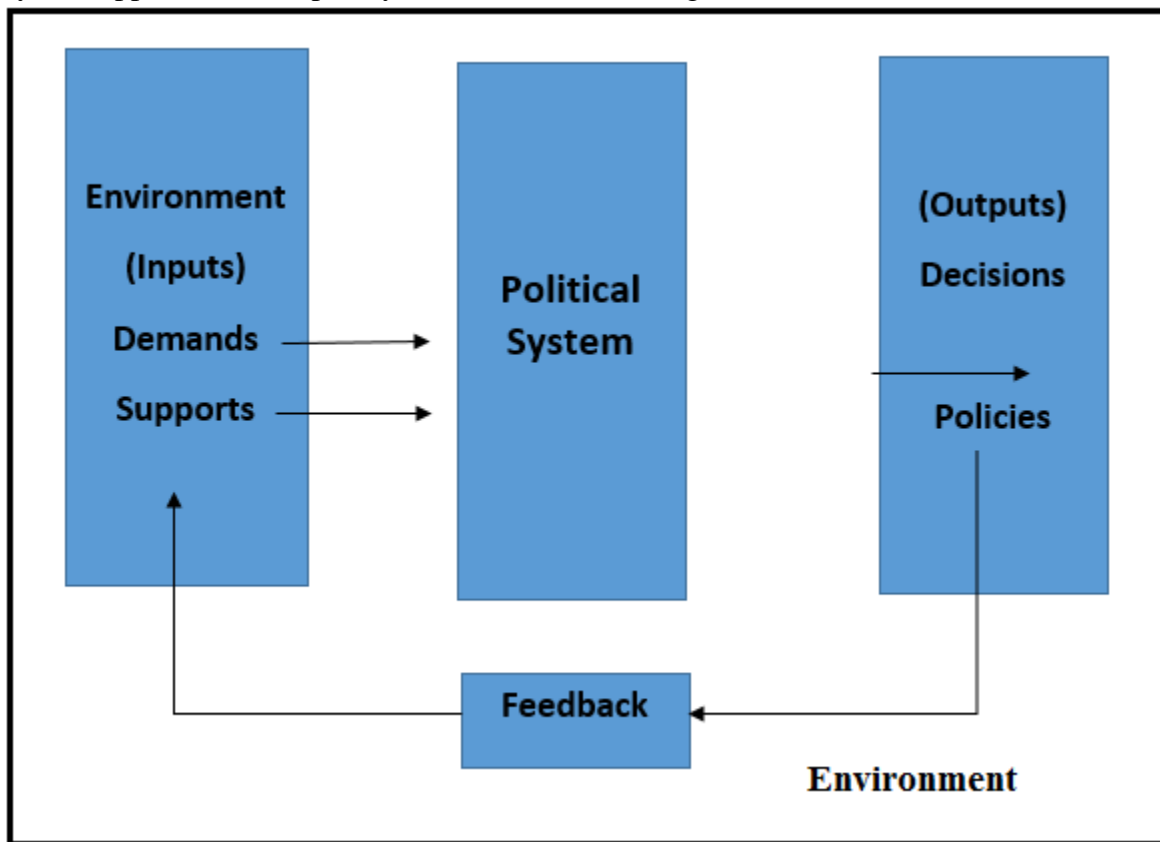
Post behaviour approach:

In the mid of 1960s, behaviourism gained a dominant position in the methodology of political science. Relevance and action were the main slogans of post behaviourism. In modern social science, behaviourism approach has shown increasing concern with problem solving of the prevailing problems of society. In this way, it is largely absorbed the post behavioural orientation within its scope (gauba, 2009).

Distinction between behavioural and post behavioural approaches

The issue	Behavioural approach	Post-behavioural approach
Nature of inquiry	Search for pure knowledge and theory	Search for applied knowledge and practice
Purpose of inquiry	Knowledge for knowledge sake; not interested in action	Relevance of knowledge to satisfy social needs and action for problem solving
Focus of study	- micro level analysis, focus on small units - process of decision making	Macro level analysis; focus on role of big units Content of the decision
Attitude towards values	Value neutral	Interested in the choice of values
Attitude towards social change	Interested in status quo, not interested in social change	Interested in social change for solving social problems

System approach developed by david easton (source: gauba, 2009)



The political system operates within an environment. The environment creates demands from different parts of the society such as demand for reservation in the matter of employment for certain groups, demand for better working conditions or minimum wages, demand for better transportation facilities, demand for better health facilities. Different demands have different

levels of support. Easton stated that 'demands' and 'supports' establish 'inputs.' the political system receives these inputs from the environment. After taking various factors into consideration, the government decides to take action on some of these demands while others are not acted upon. Through the conversion process, the inputs are converted into 'outputs' by the decision makers in the form of policies, decisions, rules, regulations and laws. The 'outputs' flow back into the environment through a 'feedback' mechanism, giving rise to fresh 'demands.' consequently, it is a cyclical process.

Structural functional approach: according to this approach, society is considered as a single inter related system where each part of the system has a certain and dissimilar role. The structural-functional approach may be considered as an outgrowth of the system analysis. These approaches accentuate the structures and functions. Gabriel Almond is a follower of this approach. He explained political systems as a special system of interaction that exists in all societies performing certain functions. His theory revealed that the main characteristics of a political system are comprehensiveness, inter-dependence and existence of boundaries. Like Easton, Almond also considered that all political systems perform input and output functions. The input functions of political systems are political socialization and recruitment, interest-articulation, interest-aggregation and political communication. Almond made three-fold classifications of governmental output functions relating to policy making and implementation. These output functions are rule making, rule application and rule adjudication. Thus, Almond affirmed that a stable and efficient political system converts inputs into outputs.

Model of structural functional analysis (source: Gauba, 2009)

		Environment				Environment	
		Function	Structure			Function	Structure
INPUTS	Political Socialization and recruitment	Interest	Articulation	POLITICAL SYSTEM	Rule-Making	Rule-Application	Rule-Adjudication
	Interest Aggregation	Political Communication	Family, Peer Group, School, Church, etc.		Legislature	Executive	Judiciary
		Environment				Environment	
						OUTPUTS	

Communication theory approach: This approach explores the process by which one segment of a system affects another by sending messages or information. Robert Weiner had evolved this approach. Afterwards Karl Deutsch developed it and applied it in Political Science. Deutsch

stated that the political system is a network of communication channels and it is self-regulative. Additionally, he emphasized that the government is responsible for administering different communication channels. This approach treats the government as the decision making system. Deutsch described that there are four factors of analysis in communication theory which include lead, lag, gain and load.

Decision making approach:

This political approach discover the features of decision makers as well as the type of influence the individuals have on the decision makers. Numerous scholars such as Richard Synder and Charles Lindblom have developed this approach. A political decision which is taken by a few actors influences a larger society and such a decision is generally shaped by a specific situation. Therefore, it takes into account psychological and social aspects of decision makers also.

Broadly speaking, several approaches to political science have been advocated from time to time, and these are broadly divided into two categories that include the empirical-analytical or the scientific-behavioural approach and the legal-historical or the normative-philosophical approach.

Empirical theory:

In simple form, empirical political theory explains 'what is' through observation. In this approach, scholars seek to generate a hypothesis, which is a proposed explanation for some phenomena that can be tested empirically. After formulating a hypothesis, a study will be designed to test the hypothesis.

Normative theory:

Normative political theory is related to concepts such as justice, equality, and rights. Historical political theory involves political philosophers from the past (e.g. Thucyides and plato) to the present (e.g. Wendy brown and seyla benahabib), and may focus on how particular philosophers engaged political problems that continue to be relevant today. While the focus has traditionally been on western traditions, that is beginning to change in this field.

Broadly speaking, empirical approach seeks to discover and describe facts whereas normative approach seeks to determine and prescribe value (gauba, 2009).

Difference between empirical and normative approaches of political theory (SOURCE: GAUBA, 2009):

The issue	Empirical approach	Normative approach
Chief concern	Facts (It is so)	Values (It ought to be so)
Nature	Scientific and descriptive	Critical and prescriptive
Based on criterion of validity	Sense- experience and logic True or false	Speculation and logic Right or wrong

It is demonstrated in theoretical literature that the traditional empirical approach to political science is what makes it a "positive" science. The study of what is, as opposed to what ought to be, lends a certain respectability to political science that is not attached to opinion-writing or political theorists. While plato and aristotle sought to recognise the characteristics of a good polity, most modern political scientists seek to identify the characteristics of polities, their causes and effects, leaving aside moral judgments about their goodness or badness.

To summarize, political theory is a separate area within the discipline of political science. Political theory is an outline of what the political order is about. It is symbolic representation about the word 'political'. It is a formal, logical and systematic analysis of the processes and consequences of political activity. It is analytical, expository and descriptive. It seeks to give order, coherence, and meaning to what is described as 'political'. Political theorists concentrate more on theoretical claims instead of empirical claims about the nature of the politics. There are different approaches which explains the political system which includes modern and traditional approaches. In behaviour approach, scientific method is emphasized because behaviours of several actors in political situation is capable of scientific study. Normative approach is linked to philosophical method because norms and values can be determined philosophically. Another classification of political approach is empirical analysis of political events.

NEXT TOPIC WIL BE DISCUSSED ON TOMMOROW. (Traditions of Political Theory: Liberal, Marxist, Anarchist and Conservative)