



## A STUDY ON GENERAL APPROACHES AND METHODOLOGY IN POLITICAL SCIENCE

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### **Abstract:**

*At its most basic level, politics is the struggle of "who gets what, when, how." This struggle may be as modest as competing interest groups fighting over control of a small municipal budget or as overwhelming as a military stand-off between international superpowers. Political scientists study such struggles, both small and large, in an effort to develop general principles or theories about the way the world of politics works. Think about the title of your course or re-read the course description in your syllabus. You'll find that your course covers a particular sector of the large world of "politics" and brings with it a set of topics, issues, and approaches to information that may be helpful to consider as you begin a writing assignment. The diverse structure of political science reflects the diverse kinds of problems the discipline attempts to analyze and explain.*

### **Introduction**

#### **General Approaches in Political Science**

#### **History of Political Science**

Within the discipline of political science in the United States, traditionalism, behavioralism, and post behavioralism are three distinct political science research approaches. That is, each offers a perspective on how best to carry out investigation, analysis, and explanation relating to politics and political life. These three approaches represent different points of emphasis regarding the ways in which research about politics should proceed. For example, it will be seen that traditionalism—in comparison with behavioralism—tends to emphasize the usefulness of analyzing governmental institutions when studying political phenomena, whereas behavioralism tends to assert the importance of research into the intricacies of the behavior of individual political actors (e.g., citizens, lobbyists, candidates, elected officials). However, all three research perspectives share the belief that political science research should produce explanations that improve and deepen our understanding of complex political processes. See History of Political Science Research Paper.

#### **Postmodernism**

“Postmodernism,” writes criminologist John Crank (2003), “is a body of philosophy, methodology, and critical review of contemporary society that encompasses a variety of standpoints” (p. 153). Although we will revisit this simple description of postmodernism in some detail below, it is not uncommon that when first encountering this (or similar) encapsulations of postmodernism, many students of political theory are left scratching their heads. This is not necessarily the fault of the student. In fact, scholars, too, are left scratching their heads (sometimes angrily) over the dilemma of postmodernism and its “questionable” application to “real life.” Whether postmodernism and postmodern theories are applicable to real life is a debate, essentially, about the nature of reality and the value of some types of knowledge over others. This research paper intends to plunge the student directly into this debate. Drawing inspiration from famous postmodernist Jean- François Lyotard, this paper



intends to expose readers to knowledge that will both enhance their knowledge base and change the way they acquire and process knowledge in the future. See Postmodernism Research Paper.

### **Neoinstitutionalism**

Neoinstitutionalism, also known as the new institutionalism, has been one of the primary methodological approaches in political science in the United States since the late 1980s. This methodology is especially popular among scholars of U.S. politics, although it is growing in influence in the fields of comparative politics and international relations. The new institutionalism combines the interests of traditionalist scholars in studying formal institutional rules and structures with the focus of behaviorist scholars on examining the actions of individual political actors. The new institutionalism thus explores how institutional structures, rules, norms, and cultures constrain the choices and actions of individuals when they are part of a political institution. In other words, "The neo-institutionalist perspective combines the microlevel study of individual behavior with the macrolevel sensitivity to the institutional factors that help shape that behavior" (Miller, 1995, p. 6). The new institutionalism is a very influential postbehavioralist methodology today among political scientists in the United States and abroad.

### **Systemism**

Systemism has emerged as an important worldview and methodological approach in social science. This approach is generally against reductionism, and it sees everything either as a system or as part of a system. This view is different from individualism or holism. While individualism emphasizes individuals in society, holism focuses on structure. Systemism can be seen as an alternative way to make sense of a complex world. This research paper explores the historical and theoretical development of the systemism approach in social science by addressing its applications and policy implications. Systemism contributes to methodological issues such as systems analysis, modeling, case study, and survey research, and it may have significant policy implications in the fields of environmental politics, administrative decision making, and urban politics and development.

### **Rationality and Rational Choice**

The rationality concept has figured prominently in some of the most fascinating, heartfelt, and at times acrimonious scholarly exchanges among political scientists. This research paper focuses on five important intellectual developments in the study of rationality from a political science perspective: (1) the 1960s as an important era in scholarly exploration of the relationship between public policy making, decision making, and rationality; (2) Herbert Simon's seminal and hugely influential theorizing on decision making and the limits of individual rationality; (3) the legacy of bounded rationality, particularly in Graham Allison's models of decision making; (4) the seminal work of a group of economists and political scientists during the 1950s and 1960s who figured prominently in the emergence of modern rational choice theory; and (5) the modern scholarly debate over rational choice. A central theme of this survey is the tension between economic and political definitions of rationality



and how these conceptions of rationality have shaped contemporary political science theory and research. See Rationality and Rational Choice Research Paper.

### **Principal-Agent Theory**

In political science, the principal–agent relationship is usually studied by rational choice scholars. The rational choice paradigm uses economic assumptions of human nature to study political outcomes. As such, rational choice scholars begin with assumptions of rationality as well as the maximization of (relatively) fixed goals. These are the strong assumptions of rational choice. For example, the assumption of wealth maximization often translates to power maximization or reelection for political leaders (Levi, 1997). It also includes several weaker assumptions, including no information costs; no transaction costs; no collective or organizational costs; no transportation costs; and no role for history, institutions, or culture. There are simplifying assumptions that are not true, per se, but they are held to be true for the parsimony of the model. However, some authors do not include all of the assumptions (or they lift or “assume away” one assumption or another) and examine the likely outcomes of no longer having all the simplifying assumptions in the model. However, different scholars have examined political interactions and have lifted one assumption or another. Olson (1965), for example, lifted the assumption of collective action costs to show how by reintroducing these costs, one could predict more realistic political outcomes than before.

### **Political Psychology**

The term political psychology refers to the study of the ways in which human psychology—our thought processes, personalities, beliefs, and so on—affects politics, and it can be thought of as the area where the academic disciplines of political science and psychology overlap or intersect. It can also be thought of as a kind of “bridge” between the two fields. Just as political economy studies the ways in which economic relationships affect political behavior (as well as the ways in which politics affects economics), political psychology looks at the ways in which our cognitions and emotions, as well as the social pressures surrounding us, can shape our behavior in the political realm. It would be odd indeed if the ways in which the human mind works, for instance, did not affect our voting choices in significant ways, the manner in which we campaign, the tendency of some individuals to engage in genocidal behavior, or the practice of terrorism (to note but a few of the ways in which human beings act politically). In fact, while many political scientists attempt to explain our behavior in other ways—most commonly, by modeling it according to the assumptions of classical economics—there is at least a grudging acceptance within the discipline today that any full account of the vast array of behaviors that human beings engage in when they act politically simply requires an understanding of political psychology.

### **Straussians**

Leo Strauss was one of the most prominent and controversial political theorists of the 20th century. He is perhaps most well-known for his view that classical political science, exemplified by Plato and Aristotle, is superior to modern political science in its various forms. Strauss cultivated in his students and admirers a certain disdain for contemporary



political science, which he believed was largely irrelevant or even dangerous to political life. He emphasized the need for political science to be prescriptive with respect to the ends as well as the means of political action. Strauss's followers are now commonly known as the Straussians, although some of them resist the label. While there are disagreements among them, they generally adhere to his rejection of mainstream political science, with its emphasis on method, math, and theory. They make up a relatively small but important group within academic political science, several holding posts in some of the most prestigious universities in the United States. While most of them hold formal positions in the field of political philosophy, their work extends to all the substantive fields of contemporary academic political science.

### **Political Science Methodology**

#### **Evolution of Science in Political Science**

The scientific study of politics bears a rather short history. It was not until the 1950s that political science reached its attic as a distinct academic discipline. The less-than-a-century time frame, however, has seen significant developments in terms of theoretical and methodological divides. From positivism and interpretivism before the 1980s to a synergy of both thereafter, each of these prominent paradigms not only advocates different approaches to political analysis but also shares varying assumptions about the science of social inquiry. This research paper offers a general overview of the evolution of science and scientific methods. The central questions addressed include the following: (a) What is science and how can the study of politics be scientific? and (b) How did the contemporary debates in the philosophy of (social) science shape the methodological development in political science?

#### **Positivism and Its Critique**

Beyond the fact that there are several different traditions and streams of positivist thought, it is also unclear whether (or in what form) positivism continues to exist. For some, it is still the case that the appellation of the term positivist is, as James Johnson (2006) said, a “badge of honor, worn . . . to identify those whose research is seen—if not actually, then at least potentially—as embodying the virtues of rigor, clarity, and solidity” (p. 225). For others, the label is one to be avoided. For example, according to Anthony Giddens (1977), positivism “has today become more a term of abuse than a technical term of philosophy” (p. 29). Undoubtedly, at least in recent years, the term has been deployed as “a sufficient reason to dismiss entire brands of research and those who conduct them as abstract, sterile, and politically dogmatic in disciplinary and extradisciplinary terms” (Johnson, 2006, p. 225). Nonetheless, the concept seems to retain a central, if somewhat ambiguous, role within the social sciences generally and political science more particularly. It is perpetually disavowed yet often unconsciously embraced as a default orientation to ground scientific research in the social sciences. Positivism has been declared an anachronism at various points throughout the 20th century, only to reemerge with an uncanny persistence

#### **Constructivism**

The last decades of the 20th century were marked by significant transformations on a global scale. The arrival of new forces created by discoveries in the realms of technology,



transportation, and communications changed the patterns of social life and structures of international relations. The end of the cold war and ideological confrontation, decline in state sovereignty, and spread of globalization enlivened scholarly thinking about international relations and fostered academic debates about the nature of global politics and ways in which one can know and study it. The arrival of constructivism in the late 1980s was precipitated by these earthshaking changes in international relations and lively discussions within the discipline. This novel heterodox approach imbibed the criticisms of the mainstream perspectives on international relations, particularly the theories of neorealism. The latter was faulted for its inability to account for changes in the global realm because of its neglect of the transformational power of knowledge and ideas. Instead of prioritizing the role of material factors in international relations, the constructivist perspective emphasized ideational forces. Instead of accepting relations and structures in global politics as the natural or given order of things, it maintained that a reality of international relations was contingent and dependent on people's thinking about it.

### **Content Analysis**

Content analysis is, as its name suggests, the analysis of the content of communications. Researchers use content analysis to make statements about the meaning, impact, or producers of those communications. Depending on the purpose of the specific research project, analysts may focus on the literal content or seek to extract deeper (or latent) meanings. This multiplicity of purposes has led content analysts to use a variety of strategies for analyzing text systematically. Some of these strategies, such as word counts, are easy to replicate, whereas other forms are far more interpretive and dependent on the judgment of the individual who codes the text. Most forms of content analysis yield quantitative indicators. Indeed, some would define quantification as an essential aspect of content analysis. Others view it as preferable but not essential. Content analysis is not new. According to Krippendorff (1980), empirical studies of communications can be dated back to the 1600s. More immediate ancestors to modern content analysis, however, are studies that sought to evaluate the content of mass media in the early 20th century and Nazi propaganda during World War II. As a method for studying communications, content analysis has been an especially popular methodology in the field of (mass) communication.

### **Qualitative vs. Quantitative Research**

For decades, there has been a raging debate among scholars regarding the differences between and advantages of qualitative and quantitative methods. In fact, this has probably been one of the largest and longest methodological debates in all of social science research. Perhaps it can be briefly summarized by the following two famous and opposing quotations: Donald Campbell says, "All research ultimately has a qualitative grounding"; and Fred Kerlinger says, "There's no such thing as qualitative data. Everything is either 1 or 0" (in Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 40). Although it is not necessarily critical to determine which—if either—of these approaches can be described as the better one, it is imperative to have a thorough understanding of these methods in order to be able to conduct sound political science research. After all, for a study to be of value to scholars and other individuals interested in the topic, it is necessary for one to choose the correct research approach, ask suitable questions, use appropriate research methods and statistical analyses, correctly deduce or induce inferences, and have suitable general goals driving the research.



## Survey Research

Survey research is a major tool for bringing facts—data—to bear on political science theories. The way in which survey researchers do so, by collecting data from the few to generalize to the many, is once again undergoing a period of profound change. In the last significant period of change, survey research shifted from a reliance on face-to-face interviewing in respondent homes during the 1960s to the cheaper and faster world of telephone surveying in the 1970s and 1980s. Today, as the 21st century reaches its second decade, this transition toward a technology-mediated experience of the survey interview continues. The revolution in digital communications technology has brought about even bigger changes, from the steady replacement of landlines with cellular phones to the expansion and habitual reliance of an ever-larger number of Americans on the Internet. And although survey researchers have dealt with public skepticism of polling and a refusal to participate before, today it is higher than ever. Nevertheless, survey research has always been an investigative tool shifting with the prevailing social trends. As the study of survey research has become a scientific discipline of its own, survey research in political science is well prepared to meet these challenges and will adapt to do so.

## Experiments in Political Science

Experimental research experienced a resurgence in the 21st century. This resurgence was led by a group of scholars at Yale University who persuasively argued that randomized intervention into real-world settings should “occupy a central place in political science” (Green & Gerber, 2002, p. 808). Committed to the belief that the value of survey research had been overstated and the value of field experiments was underappreciated, they set out to explore and promote the “untapped potential of field experiments” (p. 808). Working through Yale’s Institution for Social and Policy Studies, Green and Gerber set up a summer workshop on field experiments, inviting social scientists across the nation (and world) to join them in this shared endeavor. Meanwhile, they trained their graduate students to conduct field experiments, inspiring a series of doctoral dissertations and academic articles using field experimentation. This research paper discusses the experimental method, compares the experimental method to survey-based research, and stresses the importance of random assignment of experimental treatments. The paper also explains the difference between laboratory experiments and field experiments, highlights the wide range of applications for experimental studies, and briefly discusses the policy implications and future directions of experimental research in political science.

## Formal Theory and Spatial Modeling

In Greek mythology, Hercules is tasked with 12 impossible labors to regain honor and thus ascend to Mount Olympus as a god. The job of explaining formal theory and spatial theory in a brief, nontechnical essay is a labor of sufficient difficulty to make the search for the Golden Fleece pale in comparison. Given that this author has no transcendental gifts (though Hippolyta’s belt may be around here somewhere), aspirations, or pretensions, this research paper eschews the impossible task of summarizing and explaining the entirety of formal and spatial theory. Instead, this research paper settles for the daunting yet mortal goal of a thorough yet concise introduction to some of the classical and contemporary works of the formal and spatial theories on politics and the concepts, definitions, and models on which



those works rest. Although Duncan Black (1958) may have understated the mathematical underpinnings of spatial theory as “simple arithmetic,” it is as true today as it was then that the fundamental assumptions, intuitions, and predictions of formal and spatial theory can be grasped with a relatively basic foundation in mathematics such as algebra and geometry. Formal theorists employ a range of advanced mathematical concepts (i.e., integral calculus, matrix algebra, etc.) in their models. However, one does not need these to understand what formal theory is, what the foundational principles of formal theory are, and the gamut of its predictions and conclusions regarding political institutions and behavior. To the extent possible without compromising the material, this research paper keeps the discussion broad and descriptive and thus accessible to the undergraduate reader.

### **Game Theory**

Game theory is a branch of applied mathematics that is used to model multiactor interdependent decision making. Game theory is widely used in many social science disciplines, including political science, economics, sociology, and anthropology, where researchers are interested in outcomes when at least two actors interact with certain purposes. Game theory is a method of modeling. A usual game theoretic model specifies some essential aspects of a situation of interest and tries to make logical inferences about ensuing outcomes given the initial setup. There can be a simple election model, for instance, where there are two candidates who want to win the election and  $n$  voters who want to elect the candidate who is going to make policies that are beneficial for the voters. Two candidates announce their respective policy platforms, and voters vote. Whoever gets the majority of votes wins and makes policies. Given the initial setting, the solution to the game provides logically deduced inferences about outcomes of interest, such as who can win under which conditions and which policies should follow

### **Conclusion**

Methodology of Political Sciences studies a set of specified methodological concepts, choice and application of general and social sciences' methods and the construction of new or innovated method which creates a specific method of political sciences. It is simultaneously a part – branch of methodology of sciences and a discipline within political science. Basic tasks of the methodology of political sciences are to discover, develop and enable: 1) use of methods for obtaining scientific knowledge about political processes and methods of practicing that knowledge in politics; 2) methods of training for use of scientific knowledge and method of obtaining scientific knowledge; 3) methods of scientific knowledge and politics as a subject matter of science and methods of building and checking the theory of politics as a subject matter of political science; 4) check and verify research methods and develop a theory thereupon.

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