

Nature, Scope & Approach of Political Science

Nature, Scope & Methodology of a discipline are interlinked terms. Out of these, the most important is the scope, which means the issues that have to be studied. Scope will determine the choice of method / approach & approach will determine the nature of the subject.

There has been debate among scholars over the nature scope & the subject of the discipline.

Debate is not simply on the nature & scope but even with the title or nomenclature of the subject. In some universities, it is categorised as politics, in some universities as study of govt & in some universities as political philosophy or political science. In Europe, subject is considered nearer to philosophy as well as nearer to law. US universities follow the tradition of Political Science. According to Mattland, the title political Science for the discipline may misguide us. That is why he writes that it is more fearful to look at the title rather than at the questions in the question paper.

Political Science is one of the oldest disciplines with ever increasing frontiers. We trace the origin of discipline to ancient Greece. Plato is considered as the 'Father of Political Philosophy' & Aristotle as the 'Father of Political Science'.

Nature & Scope of the discipline during Ancient Greece

Subject was the part of ethics. Greek scholars never separated the question of politics from ethics. During Greek time, subject dealt with all activities associated with the city state. Subject was described as "Master Science" by Aristotle. It means Political Science is science of Masters.

Master Science also means other disciplines are subordinate to the discipline of political science. According to Edmund Burke, Political Science is a discipline from where all other disciplines take their direction or guidance.

Greek thinkers emphasised on the philosophical & normative nature of the discipline.

During medieval times, the subject was overshadowed by religion. Subject gained its autonomous character in the hands of Machiavelli. Machiavelli made a separation between Politics & Ethics and Politics & Religion and established an autonomous sphere of the discipline. Machiavelli looked politics as craft rather than philosophy. He shifted the focus of the subject on successful management of power. Since then the study of power (political power) has been the central concern of the subject.

Even in contemporary times, scholars like Robert Dahl, Lasswell consider Political Science as the study of shaping & sharing of power.

Traditionally subject has been revolving around study of state, govt and the operation of power.

There has been an attempt by American Political scientists to develop the methodologies which are scientific for analysis of political phenomenon.

There has been the development of scientific theories and ^{scientific} researches in the subject.

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Methods / Approaches available for study of Pol. Sci.

Traditional

Modern/
Behaviourism

Post-Modernist

Normative Empirical legal constitutional Historical Institutional

Normative Approach / Philosophical Approach

Origin of Philosophical approach can be traced to the works of Plato. Plato known as 'father of Political Philosophy'. Plato made no distinction between ethics and politics. For Plato, the objective of Political enquiry is to understand what ought to be there and not just what is. It is not enough to study the existing practices in governance. It is more important to understand the idea of governance. Plato laid the foundation of Theory of Ideas, gave primacy to ideas over material facts.

Thus, in Plato, purpose of political enquiry is to understand the essence of governance and to apply the understanding for betterment of real world of politics. Plato proposed dialectical method of Socrates to be applied for understanding the ideas.

Thus Normative theories deal with what ought to be rather than simply what is. For these scholars, the most imp. concern of political works is to deal with normative issues like rights, liberties, equality or justice.

Normative theories are forward looking. They are prescriptive in nature. They provide suggestions to resolve the problems of our times. Normative Theory is also known as Philosophical approach. Philosophy is understanding the essence or idea.

Normative approach has dominated the discipline since the time of Plato till present. It is considered to be more suitable w.r.t. the nature of the discipline and purpose of the discipline.

Key exponents of Philosophical approach

- Plato
- Hegel
- Leo Strauss
- Isaiah Berlin

support Normative Approach.

Drawback is it may neglect what is for the sake of what ought to be. There can be a complete disconnect between the idea & the real world. We can be misguided if we overlook the empirical facts. Normative issues are abstract in nature & may be difficult to comprehend. Approach used in combination with other approaches like empirical, legal institutional may be desirable.

Historical Approach

Machiavelli can be considered as one of the earliest exponent of historical approach.

For Machiavelli, history is the best guide to understand politics and at times neglect of history may prove detrimental also.

Political scholars have established interdependence between the two disciplines. It is often

said that history is past politics and politics is present history. It is also said that history

is a root and politics is a shoot. In contemporary

times, Sabine, Dunning are the greatest exponents of historical approach. According

to Sabine, historical approach appeals to common sense. It is easier to understand political idea

if idea is placed in the context of history.

Ex: Why Hobbes supports absolute authority

of the state? can be easily understood from

the fact that he belonged to the anarchical

phase of British history. Laski also suggests

that every thinker is the child of his times.

and no idea is ever intelligible, save in the

context of time. According to Sabine,

historical method fulfils the requirement of

good method. It has 3 components

- Factual

- Explanatory

- Prescriptive

Historical approach has been dominating approach

in International Affairs & traditionally International

Prisoner of history can't make history.

Politics has been studied as diplomatic history.

Limitations of Historical Approach

- Possibility of misuse of history.

Scholars like Machiavelli, Hegel & Marx have used history to support their politics.

They have gone for ideological use of history.

Historicism

Ideological use of history by Marx & Hegel is termed as 'Historicism' by Karl Popper.

Edward Said also talks about Orientalism.

He talks about the biased understanding of history by colonial masters and thus making politics out of history.

- History writings have also been political
- and controversial. History is very vast & it maybe challenging for a political scholar to comprehend history with neutral perspective.
- All that is there in history may not be relevant.
- There are certain political ideas like that of a Philosopher King or Communism. They are not historical facts but still very significant to be analysed by political scholars.
- History maybe a guide to present politics, but we should not become prisoners of history.

Some scholars suggest that there is no need to make study of politics too much dependent on history. Politics should be studied independently of history, Political ideas to be accepted/rejected on the basis of logic rather than history.

Empirical Approach / Observation method

Empirical approach is supported by Aristotle, Utilitarians, Hobbes, Locke, etc. Locke is a major exponent of empirical approach. According to him, mind is *tabula rasa*. Experience or observation is a source of knowledge. Scholars of empirical approach support empirical observation. They study observable facts. For empirical approach, the major concern is what is rather than what ought to be. Some of the features of empirical approach can be understood by comparing empirical approach with normative approach.

- Scope of study

- Normative approach deals with normative issues or ideas, whereas empirical approach deals with observable facts.
- Normative approach adopts methodology of logical reasoning whereas empirical approach depends on observation.
- The concern of Normative approach is right and wrong. The concern of empirical approach is true or false.
- Normative theories are prescriptive, whereas empirical theories are descriptive.
- Normative approach is future oriented, whereas empirical approach is status quoist, explaining things as they are rather than what it should be.

Actually both empirical & normative are used by traditional scholars. They are also interdependent.

Ex: Plato's concern for Ideal State emerge out of his observation of Athens of his times. However Plato is Normative philosopher because his main concern became the construction of an Ideal State.

Empirical approach vs Scientific Approach

- Empirical approach is a broader term. It is not necessary that every empirical ^{work} approach will also be scientific. All scientific theories are empirical but all empirical theories are not scientific. In order to be known as scientific theory a theory has to have some features like verification, measurement, systematisation & value neutrality.

However empirical approach later on contributed to the development of scientific approach.

Legal Constitutional

Legal Constitutional approach has also dominated the study & political research. Even in contemporary times constitutions, forms of govt remain the core area in political research. In many universities, subject is taught as study of govt.

However we can differentiate between law and politics. Law is text and politics is context.

It is not sufficient to understand constitution.

It is more important to understand the context in which that constitution operates. Ex: Parliamentary system in India is modelled on the British system.

However working of the system differs in a significant way in the two countries.

Institutional Approach

Institutional approach is closely linked to legal constitutional. However the focus is on political institutions. Scholars trace the origin & evolution, growth & development of political institutions like Legislature, Executive & Judiciary. Institutional approach revolves around govt. institutions. This approach has led to the evolution of modern approach known as structural functional approach.

Modern Approaches

Scientific approaches:

Scientific approach or modern approach is a product of behavioural revolution in political science. That is why they are also known as Behavioural & Post-Behavioural approaches.

History of Behavioural movement.

Behavioural approaches started in interwar period but primarily developed after World War II. American Political Science Association (APSA) & the scholars associated to it like David Easton have contributed for behavioural revolution.

Cause of rise of behaviourism.

- There were intellectual as well as historical factors behind the rise of behaviourism. Chicago school of Political Science played significant role in highlighting the limitations of traditional approaches. Traditional research was focussing on studying of constitutions, institutions & century old ideas. The discipline had become static. It lacked any practical relevance in dealing with contemporary problems. Hence Chicago school theorists suggested that the focus of politics should be on the dynamic part, should be on the study of power, the operation of power, rather than studying of constitutions.

- American political scientists recognised that discipline has lost its respectability. Disciplines like sociology, economics, psychology have gone much ahead in improving their methodologies and improving their utility for mankind. David Easton proclaimed death of political theory. Robert Dahl talked about decline of political theory. They blamed scholars like Sabine & Dunning responsible for the state of discipline. They have made political enquiry limited to century old ideas. They were not dealing with contemporary problems & developments. Hence they called for the necessity of modernisation in the discipline.

Behaviouralism started as methodological revolution, but later on it touched almost all spheres & changed nature & scope of the discipline also.

• What are the features of Behavioural Approach?

• David Easton has given 8 intellectual foundation stones of behaviouralism

1 - Study of behaviour rather than ideas

Objective was to make Political Science scientific. Just as theories exist in Physics, we should also have theories in Politics.

Theories can be built if we observe regularity in a phenomenon. Regularities can also be observed in Political sphere. Political sphere scholars should study political behaviour to understand regularities & make laws.

Oligarchy is the Iron law of politics.

Michels' Iron law of politics Oligarchy is an example of behavioural approach.

- Verification

Just like scientific theories have to be based on verification, similarly political theories have to be verified by the collection of empirical data.

- Measurement

Political scientists should also use quantitative techniques, statistical methods so that results are precise & can be verified.

- Systematisation

Just like scientific works are systematic, similarly political research has to be systematic. There has to be proper linkage between the hypothesis, data collected, methodology used & generalisation arrived.

- Interdisciplinary approach

Political Science needs to go for interdisciplinary approach. The study should not be compartmentalised.

Developments in methodology of other subjects have to be imported in Political Science. Political Science has to be taken away from Philosophy, History & Law & to be brought nearer to Sociology and Psychology.

- Value neutrality

Value neutrality implies that scholars should not be guided by their values, conclusions

should not be biased, they should focus on accuracy of results & should not be prescriptive.

Technological Sophistication of techniques

• Adoption of quantitative techniques

Pure Science

• Attempt should be made to make Political Science as pure science which is possible when above principles are incorporated.

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Essence of Behaviourism

In Academic sense, aim was to bring scientific methodology & to create scientific theories, so that discipline gains respectability. Marxists have criticised Behaviourism having a political agenda of criticising Socialism & subtle defence of Western way of life & these theories were packaged in such a manner that despite being biased should look neutral.

Arguments of Marxists is that behavioural theories were directed against socialist political systems & socialist ideals.

Ex. Elitist theory of democracy, Iron Law of Oligarchy was attack on Socialism.

Traditionalists continued to criticise Behaviourists, called Behaviourism as a mad craze for Science. Behaviourism gave primacy to techniques over content. There are very limited areas in the political sphere where quantitative analysis is possible. At the most can be applied in studies of electoral behaviour, public opinion etc., thus compromising with subject matter & purpose. They continue to emphasise the philosophical nature of the subject.

o Grounds on which traditionalists criticise Behaviourists.

- Regularity Issue

Behaviourist Argument: It is possible to make scientific theories because we can observe the

regularities in political sphere.

For traditionalists, we can't generalise human behaviour. Same person may behave differently in different situations or similar situations.

Wrt. techniques

- Traditionalists believe that there are many limited areas where quantitative techniques can be employed. We should not sacrifice the subject matter for the sake of techniques.

Interdisciplinary nature

- Behaviourists emphasise closeness to scientific discipline like Sociology, Psychology, Biology but traditionalist view that history, philosophy as well as law is more relevant for political analysis.

On value neutrality

- Value neutrality is neither possible nor desirable.

According to Leo Strauss, value neutrality implies failure to make differentiation between clean water & dirty water.

- For traditionalists the responsibility of social scientists is more than natural scientist. They have to provide direction to the society.

- For traditionalists, the conclusions arrived at by behaviourists hardly differ from those which are arrived at by logical reasoning. Hence scientific methods are not as necessary

as believed to be by behaviourists. Behaviourists have brought unnecessary complications in the subject by introducing scientific terminologies & methods.

• Was Behaviourism a Revolution?

Behaviourism is regarded by many scholars as a revolution. Revolution means comprehensive change and a distinct break from the past. Following arguments are given to treat Behaviourism as revolution.

- It changed the focus of political enquiry from study of normative ideas to the study of political behaviour.
- It brought change in the methodology. Rather than philosophical approach, it emphasised on scientific techniques.
- It changed the goal of the discipline. Rather than suggesting what is desirable or not, behaviourists restricted themselves to what is the fact.
- Behaviourist methods resulted into changing the nature, scope, methodology as well as basic assumptions about politics.

• For above reasons it is called as Revolution.

Though Marxists continue to blame that behaviourism was never value neutral & part of ideological project of Cold War.

Some scholars do not regard it as a revolution as we can see its linkages with empirical approach.

Post - Behaviouralism

60's

Why Post-behaviourism?

Political Theory has faced crisis twice

First crisis: It was due to traditionalists

& primarily historians. Under their influence,

Political Science focussed on century old ideas,

didn't have anything to offer w.r.t. the

problems faced by the societies after World War II.

Second Crisis: Behaviourists emerged to rescue

Political Theory from the state of decline by

introducing scientific methodology & shifting

focus on the present. However they gave

primacy to methods over the subject matter.

they promoted only that research where

quantitative techniques could be used. I

In 1960's USA again faced challenges in the

form of Civil Right movements, feminist

movements & political theories & scholars

had nothing to offer to solve these problems.

Once again discipline lost relevance & there

was a call for the revival of the discipline.

This resulted into post-behaviourism.

Features of Post-Behaviourism

- David Easton, who gave the intellectual

foundation stones of behaviourism also

proposed post-behaviourism in his lecture

titled 'Credo of Relevance'. In this lecture

he proposed Creative Theory.

What is Creative Theory?

The 2 parameters are

- action
- relevance

Any theory has to be action oriented

& thus relevant in tackling social problems.

According to him, technique is important but the purpose for which that technique is to be used is more important.

It is wrong to consider that Political Science has no relevance. Rather Political Science, with the approach of Creative Theory has significance.

Universities, Research organisations should actively promote the discipline.

He held that there is no need to avoid values

However values can be admitted in political theory / research. There is no dycotomy between facts & values.

Rawls' Theory of Justice marks the beginning of Post-Behaviouralism & revival of the Political Theory.

Other imp. works of Post-behaviourism approach are

- Macpherson's democracy
- Nozick's entitlement theory
- Amartya Sen's idea of equality

1. Nature of Post-Behaviourism

Is it near to traditional approach?

Is It is wrong to consider that Post behaviourism is near to traditionalism & makes a break from the behavioural approach.

Post behaviourism is not a break with behaviourism but it carries behaviourism forward. It continues to believe in basic assumptions of behaviourists w.r.t. the subject, the necessity to provide scientific theories, the necessity to deal with contemporary concerns, rather than just studying old ideas. However it has accommodated the values. For Post Behaviourists, subject matter is more imp. than technique, but it is not that scientific technique is not important. To the extent possible, scientific techniques should be adopted. It is said that traditionalism is thesis, behaviourism is antithesis & Post-Behaviourism is synthesis.

Development of Political methodology in Europe

In Europe, 2 approaches have become more significant

- Critical Theory
- Post-Modernism

Critical Theory is promoted by Marxist scholars.

They emphasise on normative issues like freedom, ~~works~~ like ED ~~man~~ are the outcomes of Critical Theory. Critical Theory is critical of science. According to them science has resulted into the neglect of values from human life.

Post-modernism is against grand theories.

They do not believe that it is possible

to discover the ultimate reality. They suggest regimes of truth. We accept the dominating version of truth out of many competing regimes of truth. They support discourse & reconstruction as a method to study politics.