

Topic __Major approaches to the study of comparative politics

1Institutional approach

2,System approach

3,Structural and functional approach

4Semester (hons)

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Major approaches to the study of comparative politics : __

Political investigators use different approaches tools to arrive at greater political understanding. Approaches support in defining the kinds of facts which are relevant. The diversity of approaches are used by political scientists to attack the complexity of political systems and behaviour.

Conventionally, the study of comparative politics is termed as 'comparative government'. It includes the study of political institutions existing in various states .The features, advantages, demerits, similarities and dissimilarities of political institutions were compared. It was an attempt to ascertain the best of political institutions. The focus (Traditional view), continued to remain popular up to the end of the 19th century. In the 20th century, the study of political government underwent revolutionary changes. The traditional focus of the study of politics got substituted by new scope, methodology, concepts, techniques which was known as contemporary view of the study of politics. Political researchers made great attempts to develop a new science of 'comparative politics'. They espoused comprehensiveness, realism, precision and use of scientific methods as the new goals for the study of comparative politics. This new endeavour is nowadays promoted as 'modern' comparative politics. In the modern assessment, the scope of comparative politics is much wider. It includes the analysis and comparison of the actual behaviour of political structures, formal as well as informal. Researchers believe that these political structures, governmental or non- governmental, directly or indirectly affect the process of politics in all political systems.

Both traditional and modern comparative politics adopt different approaches to its study. Traditional scientists follow narrow and normative approach. It involves descriptive studies with a legal institutional framework and normative prescriptive focus. Whereas modern political scientists follow empirical, analytical studies with a process orientated or behavioural focus and they adopt scientific methodology. It seeks to analyse and compare empirically the actual behaviour of political structure .

Adoption of 'Political Systems

With above features, Comparative politics is emerged as a new science of politics. It has prohibited the non-comprehensive scope, formal character, legal and institutionalised framework, normative approach and parochial nature of the traditional comparative government studies.

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1. Institutional approach:

There is a strong belief that philosophy, history and law have bestowed to the study of politics and it is in the field of institutional approaches. Institutional approaches are ancient and important approach to the study of Political Science. These approaches mainly deals with the formal aspects of government and politics. Institutional approach is concerned with the study of the formal political structures like legislature, executive, and judiciary. It focused on the rules of the political system, the powers of the various institutions, the legislative bodies, and how the constitution worked. Main drawback of this approach was its narrow focus on formal structures and arrangements. In far-reaching terms, an institution can be described as 'any persistent system of activities in any pattern of group behaviour. More concretely, an institution has been regarded as 'offices and agencies arranged in a hierarchy, each agency having certain functions and powers.

The study of institutions has been dominant not only to the arena of comparative politics, but to the political science field as a whole. Many writers have argued that institutions have shaped political behaviour and social change. These authors have taken an "institutionalist" approach which treat institutions as independent variables. In the last twenty-five years, the field of comparative politics has experienced the advent of the "new institutionalism," which developed in reaction to the behavioural perspectives that exercise a significant influence on the field during the 1960s and 1970s.

The new institutionalism body can be divided into three analytical approaches:

Historical institutionalism

Rational choice institutionalism

Sociological institutionalism

These three theoretical approaches developed autonomously from each other.

The institutional approach to political analysis emphasises on the formal structures and agencies of government. It originally concentrated on the development and operation of legislatures, executives and judiciaries. As the approach developed however, the list is extended to include political parties, constitutions, bureaucracies, interest groups and other institutions which are more or less enduringly engaged in politics.

In the descriptive-institutional approach, the stress is on facts rather than values. In other words, the approach provide factual and historical answers to such questions as;

- What are the historical sources of parliamentary supremacy over the kingdom?
- What are the procedures followed when a bill becomes law?
- By what electoral arrangement are values or representatives chosen?
- What are the relative merits and demerits of rigid and flexible constitutions?

Though, descriptive-institutional approach is slightly old, political experts still concentrate chiefly on scrutinising the major political institutions of the state such as the executive, legislature, the civil service, the judiciary and local government, and from these examinations, valuable insights as to their organisation can be drawn, proposals for reform conversed and general conclusions obtainable. The approach has been critiqued for the disregard of the informed aspects of politics, norms, beliefs, values, attitudes, personality and the processes. Institutional approach is also criticized for being too narrow. It ignores the role of individuals who constitute and operate the formal as well as informal structures and substructures of a political system. Another problem is that the meaning and the range of an institutional system vary with the view of the scholars. Researchers of this approach ignored the international politics (J. C. Johari, 1982)

2. System approach:

This approach falls in the category of modern approach. The notion of Systems Theory was emerged from ancient time, dates back to 1920s. Ludwig Von Bertalanfy is considered as the earliest advocate of the general systems theory. He utilized this theory for the study of Biology. It is only after the Second World War, the social scientists claimed for the amalgamation of sciences for which they took the help of the systems theory. However, when the general systems theory in its abstract form traced back to natural sciences like Biology, in its operational form, they are found in Anthropology. Then it was embraced in Sociology and Psychology. In the decade of sixties, the systems theory became an important tool to evaluate and investigate key factors in Political Science. Among political scientists, David Easton has been the first to apply this theory to political analysis.

This approach describes the relationship of political life with other aspects of social life. The idea of a system was initially borrowed from biology by Talcott Parsons who first promoted the concept of social system. Later on David Easton further developed the concept of a political system. This approach signified that a political system operates within the social environment. Consequently, it is not possible to analyse political events in isolation from other aspects of the society. To put in other way, influences from the society, be it economic, religious or otherwise, do shape the political process.

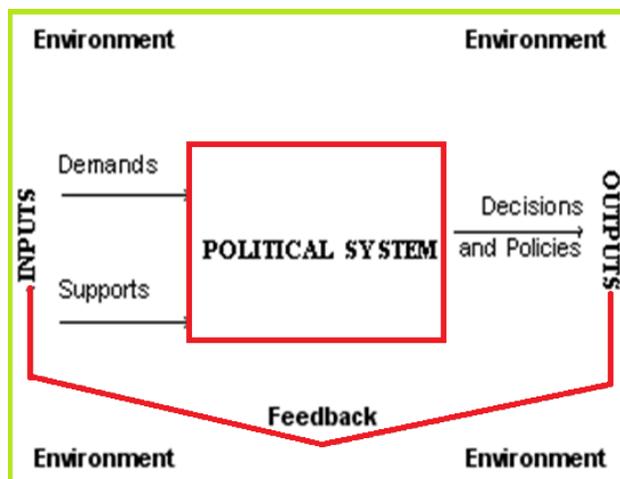


Figure: System approach

System approach

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

facilities, demand for better health facilities. Different demands have different levels of support. Easton said that both 'demands' and 'supports' establish 'inputs.' The political system receives these inputs from the environment. After considering various factors, 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.' Accordingly, it is a recurring process.

Presently, the term 'political system' has been chosen to the term state or government because it includes both formal and informal political institutions and processes that continue to exist in a society. Systems approach to political institutions by the behavioural school has evolved new concepts. David Easton, G. A. Almond and Morton A. Kaplan are credited for applying this approach in Political Science. According to this theory, political behaviour is conceived as a system and the political system is well-defined as "Authoritative allocation of values with threat or actual use of deprivations to make them binding on all". It is the system of interactions to be found in independent societies which performs the functions of integration and adaptation both internally and externally by means of employment of legitimate physical compulsion. A political system has three important characteristics, specifically, comprehensiveness, interdependence and existence of boundaries. However, the features of a political system are openness, adaptiveness, comprehensiveness, self-regulating, ongoing. It is composed of a number of structures which have specific functions. These functions are pigeonholed as input and output functions. A political system performs these in order to maintain itself.

3 Structural functional approach:

According to this approach, the society is a single inter-related system where each part of the system has a definite and distinct role to play. The structural-functional approach may be considered as an offshoot of the system analysis. These approaches accentuate the structures and functions. Gabriel Almond was an advocate of this approach. He described political systems as a special system of interaction that exists in all societies performing certain functions. According to him, the main attributes of a political system are comprehensiveness, inter-dependence and existence of boundaries. Like Easton, Almond also believes 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 makes three-fold classifications of governmental output functions relating to policy making and implementation. These output functions are rule making, rule application and rule adjudication. Therefore, Almond believes that a stable and efficient political system converts inputs into outputs.