

# UNDERSTANDING POLITICS: A SYNOPSIS OF APPROACHES

BY

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## ABSTRACT

*The study of political science has undergone several changes over the years. In a conscious bid to be reliable producers of knowledge, scholars have adopted various methods and approaches to the study of the discipline. These approaches include the most simplistic historical approach to more complex and systematic behavioural and post-behavioural approaches. This paper takes a critical look at the various approaches in political science over the years. It argues that they all have their advantages and disadvantages. It then concludes that the various evolutionary stages in the approaches reflect the dynamism of the field of political science on one hand and on another, it shows the concern of scholars for more realistic methods for acquiring knowledge.*

## INTRODUCTION

The term “approach” is common to nearly all fields of study. If we move from the liberal arts to the social sciences and then to the natural sciences, one finds that the term is commonly used. The historian concerns himself with ways of knowing important events that took place in the past. In this light, the historian may utilize a variety of approaches ranging from simple transfer of information from elders to more rigorous method of perusing through and analyzing information and materials left in various tourist centres. The sociologist also is interested in discovering the regularities in social behaviour via different approaches. He may also use a variety of approaches ranging from simple observation of human behaviour to a more rigorous method of empirical research. The natural scientist is also

engaged in various methods of empirical research with a view to discovering scientific laws.

By the same token, the political scientist is also interested in discovering regularities about man and his political behaviour. Though there is a large measure of agreements among political scientists about this object of analysis, disagreements however dominate the quest for meaningful ways of achieving this goal.

A look at the trend in approaches would reveal two things about approaches in political science. This is that approaches reflect the dominant thinking in political science in a particular epoch. Furthermore, the approaches reveal the systematic developmental processes that have taken place in political science as a field of study. It is in this light that this paper takes a critical look at the three giant approaches or orientations that have dominated the field of politics over the years viz: the traditional, behavioural and post-behavioural approaches.

### **THE TRADITIONAL APPROACH**

According to Isaak (1985:34), the so-called traditional approach includes several methods of analyzing politics which became popular among many American political scientists in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries and which continue to be widely followed. The three major approaches that are lumped together to constitute the traditional approach are the historical, legal and institutional approaches. They have some common characteristics. A major characteristic of these approaches is that they are principally non-comparative. Hence, it has sometimes been argued that the traditional approach cannot be utilized for a critical study in the area of comparative government and politics (Maridis, 1982:3).

Another important characteristic of the traditional approach to political science is that it is essentially parochial. The traditional approaches concentrated on the examination of political structures of the Western European countries without any systematic attempt to include in its analysis other systems of the world. The influx of new countries into world politics especially with the independence of many states in Africa was not adequately taken care of by this approach.

Traditional approaches in the examination of political systems also demonstrated that they were more interested in stability rather than growth and change. In general, the traditional approach ignored the dynamic factors that account for growth and change. It has concentrated on what scholars have called political anatomy. Finally, the traditional approach is essentially descriptive. It catalogues and describes political events of the past without a detailed analysis. Today, even a non-political scientist would agree that the concern of the political scientist is much more than merely describing political events.

Having given the general characteristics of traditional approaches, we shall now examine the sub-approaches. Political science and history are two fields of study that have been closely related and studied over the years. In its early beginning, political science was looked upon as a historical discipline. This kind of thinking brought Richard Jensen to the conclusion that history is past politics and politics is present history (Jensen, 169:1-28). The historical method to political science is best presented by George H. Sabine (Sabine, 1937). In his view, a political theory is always advanced in reference to a pretty specific situation and therefore, reconstruction of the time, place and circumstances in which it was produced is essential to understand it. However, even though it is the outcome of a peculiar set of historical circumstances, it has a significance for all times to come. It is exactly this universal character of political theory which makes it respectable (quoted in Verma, (1975:7).

A number of reasons are responsible for the application of the historical approach to the study of political science. However, the major motivating factor has been the role history has to play in providing political scientists with relevant information that can aid their analysis of political events (Sait, 1938:529). Despite this important contribution however, the historical approach has a number of limitations. First, the historical approach is not a reliable producer of knowledge. A mere catalogue of events of the past cannot assist the political scientist in discovering regularities across the political system. Secondly, the historical method is not crafted to suit comparative studies. It does not assist us in discovering commonalities or diversities across nations and systems (Isaac, 1985:35). Finally, a preoccupation with historical approach usually prevents initial concern for

current political behaviour. Certainly, a political scientist is much more interested in current political behaviour.

The legalistic approach arose partly as a result of intellectual dissatisfaction with the historical approach. For scholars of the legalistic approach, the most distinguishing feature of politics is the study of laws and constitutions. This contention that tends to help in the demarcation of politics from other fields of study has been commended by many scholars (Isaak, 1985:36).

A number of observations can be made when we discuss the legalistic approach. First and foremost, the legalistic approach represents an improvement on the historical approach. This is because it helps to distinguish politics from history. Secondly, the legalistic approach tended to highlight a major aspect of political science which is the study of laws and constitutions. However, political science is certainly much more than the mere study of law and constitutions. It is also the study of institutions and processes. To the extent that the legalistic approach does not capture all that is political, it can be criticized as parochial. Furthermore, the legalistic approach does not attempt to discover consistencies and regularities in political behaviour. The legalistic approach does not probe beyond the study of laws and constitutions. Thus it can be said to be essentially descriptive and static. It ignores the dynamic factors in society that account for growth and change.

Political scientists dissatisfied with the historical and legal approaches offered a third approach popularly called the institutional approach. There is no doubt that the institutional approach made significant contribution to the development of political science as a field of study. Its attempt to study political institutions directed political science to a major area in the study of politics. However, it is in this light that the approach has been subjected to severe criticisms. It is often argued that the study of political institutions does not constitute the real stuff of politics. Political scientists must study the behaviour and activities that happen within these institutions. Institutions do not make meaning to a political scientist unless these activities and actions are studied. The need to correct this led to another giant approach which is popularly known as the behavioural approach.

## **THE BEHAVIOURAL APPROACH**

The behavioural approach has been defined variously by different scholars. According to Dahl (quoted in Verma, (1975:79) behaviouralism can be regarded as a protest movement in political science associated with a number of political scientists mainly Americans who shared

- (a) a strong sense of dissatisfaction with the achievements of conventional political science and
- (b) a belief that additional methods and approaches either existed or could be developed that would help to provide political science with empirical propositions and theories of a systematic sort, tested by closer, more direct and more rigorously controlled observation of political events.

In the opinion of Truman (1951:37-39), behavioural political science emphasizes two important things. They are, first and foremost, a research that must be systematic and secondly emphasis must be placed on empirical methods. According to Easton (1967:16), behavioural political science is characterized by a number of assumptions which include regularities, verification, techniques, qualification, values, systematization, pure science and integration. The behaviouralist does not share the view of scholars that are against a scientific study of politics that acclaims that human behaviour is scattered to forestall the ability to decipher uniformities and orderliness. On the contrary, they contend that human behaviour is explainable and predictable.

Furthermore, the behaviouralist contend that for knowledge to be valid, it must consist of agreements and relationships that are observable and can also be subjected to empirical test. Verification is essentially a process of determining the correctness or falsehood of statements about relationships between variables. Also, the measurement and quantification of any political phenomena is a central aspect of the behavioural approach. Measurement is central to the goal of establishing scientific laws and generalization. Unless an analyst is able to precisely measure a particular variable, the analyst may not be able to determine its relationship with other variables in a particular situation.

It is also contended that a science of politics is generally argued to be possible if political scientists can effectively minimize, if not eradicate, the influence of values. According to Verma, ethical evaluation, in the opinion of the behaviouralist is different from empirical explanation. Values and facts are two separate things and should be kept analytically distinct. They may be studied separately or even in combination, but the one should not be mixed with the other. Values might be brought in for scientific analysis in as much as they determine political behaviour as in the case of voting, but in such a case too, the researcher must keep his own values rigidly aloof from his studies.

Another major feature of the behavioural approach is systematization. According to David Easton, research ought to be systematic; this is to say theory and research are to be seen as closely intertwined points of a coherent and orderly body of knowledge. Research untutored by theory may prove trivial and theory not supported by data may equally prove futile (Easton, 1967:16).

Furthermore, behaviouralist by and large insists in what they call the “pure science” approach. They agree that theoretical understanding may lead to an application of this knowledge of problems of life. Both the theory and its application are part of the scientific enterprise. Thus, the behaviouralist attach great importance to pure research.

Finally, the behaviouralist approach is in support of integrating different sub-disciplines in the social sciences with a view to understanding political science better. According to David Easton, because the social science deals with the whole human situation, political research can ignore the findings of other disciplines only at the peril of weakening the validity and undermining the generality of its own result (Easton, 1967:17). Recognition of this interrelationship will help to bring political science back to its states of earlier centuries and return it to the main fold of the social sciences.

Despite these attractive assumptions of behaviouralism, it also has its limitation. A major limitation of the behavioural approach is the lack of a single explanation to the term behaviouralism. While some attempts to look at behaviour from the perspective of the individual, others look at it from the perspective of the group. Another major criticism stems from the call for the unity of the social sciences by the behaviouralist. This trend, it has been argued has the possibility of eradicating the distinctiveness of political science as a field of study. According to Bernard Crick, this lack of disciplinary patriotism is an indication of the dangers of behaviouralism (Crick, 1962:18). Most serious is a lost appreciation among political scientists for what is truly political. Finally, it can be said that efforts on the part of the behavioural political scientists to build up conceptual framework clearly fall short of the level of theory. By their nature, they focus more on individual and group behaviour and less on institution.

Nevertheless, the behavioural approach has contributed a great deal to the development of political science as a field of study. It has made the study of political science much more rigorous, systematic and scientific. It thus guides the explanation and prediction of events in political science. According to Mulford Sibley, fundamentally, it appears that the behaviouralist, once he has settled on his problem and decides what is relevant and important to:

- (a) explain the conduct of men in politics under specific assumptions and within controlled situations and
- (b) predict how men will probably behave in like circumstance, the first achievements we may designate scientific explanation and the second we may ascribe prediction.

## **POST-BEHAVIOURALISM**

Despite its popularity and attraction, the behavioural approach in political science did not only make disciples for itself, but also created vehement oppositions in some areas. While it was generally accepted that the behavioural revolution attempted to draw political science into the realm of a more rigorous scientific study, some scholars stopped to question the basis and relevance of this drift (Graham and Carey, 1972). To this group of scholars, the attempt to make political science more scientific led to a reduction of its relevance in society. This argument formed the basis of the post-behavioural revolution in political science. To the post-behaviouralist therefore, in emphasizing the need to be empirical, to base all statements on observation and in most cases quantification, the behavioural political scientist has too often focused his attention on trivial questions. The most important topics such as the causes of war, have received scant attention, while the more easily studied ones (such as voting behaviour) are over-analyzed (Isaak, 1985:44).

By and large, the post-behavioural revolution did not completely reject the behaviouralist arguments as did the traditionalist. However, they sought to push political science further and towards a new horizon. The major aim of the post-behavioural revolution is to make political science more relevant to societal development rather than being covered up in the guise of becoming more scientific. The drift towards the relevance of political science as a policy science has been welcomed by many prominent political scientists. In fact, Lerner and Lasswell have suggested that the political scientist should concentrate on questions of policy which are the most important devices made either in organized or in private life (Lerner and Lasswell, 1975)



## **CONCLUSION**

From the discussions above, it can be safely contended that the study of political science has gone through several changes over the years. From a narrow concern with historical document, the field has been revolutionized to a broader concern with human behaviour and a scientific study. Combining the need for a scientific study as argued by the behaviouralist, the post-behaviouralist has pushed the boundaries of politics further by pointing out its relevance in policy making. The changes in approaches to the study of political science reflects partly the dynamism of politics as a field of study. Furthermore, it demonstrates the continued search by scholars for a viable way of studying political science. Finally, it points to the possibility of studying political science from various approaches.

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