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Political Science & Int. Relations [PSIR] Notes

for

UPSC-CSE Mains & State PSCs

Paper 2 Section A Comp. Politics and IR



Part 1

Topics: 1,2,3,4,5,6

SAMPLE

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1] Introduction

Comparative politics is one of the core elements of political science. Comparative politics means comparing the political systems of different states. Comparative politics is as old as political theory. Aristotle is regarded as the father of comparative politics. He studied 158 constitutions and gave the classification of constitutions. Comparative politics can be divided into two phases. Up till 2nd WW, traditional comparative politics. After the 2nd WW, modern comparative politics.

A] Why is Comparative Politics important?

Comparison is at the heart of the analysis of any phenomenon. In comparison, meaning is searched. Whenever scientific and objectivity are required- comparison is a method. Natural sciences have the luxury of a laboratory, but in Political Science, a comparison is a substitute for laboratory conditions. Not only dis-similarities but similarities are also compared.

B] Advantages of comparative politics.

1. Gaining knowledge - By comparison at a micro-level, one learns about the politics of different countries. It helps in understanding our own country and politics in a better way.
2. Evaluating good practices and avoiding mistakes – Every system innovates/develops as a response to situations. There is no paradigm shift in Social Sciences after a few years like Natural Science. Thus we can benefit from research already done by someone else. For example, in modern context, democracy developed in western countries but was later imported to the 3rd world. The Indian institution of Lokpal is also inspired by practice in European countries.
3. Enhances Objectivity – to make studies are more objective. Earlier, whatever studies were made, it was criticized for being ethnocentric. It was criticized as cultural imperialism. Comparative politics helps avoid this criticism.
4. Comparative method to make an enterprise more scientific. It helps in better analysis and understanding.
5. It allows verification/rejection of behavioural trends and patterns of people under certain circumstances.
6. Different institutions functioning in different atmospheres can be understood by comparative politics.

C] Limitations of comparative politics.

1. **Range of variables** – There are multiple factors which affect politics, i.e. society, history, climate, geography, economy, resources etc. And not all factors can be quantified and observed. They also operate at various degrees in various states.
2. **Lack of sufficient information** – Public information often may not be complete and can be filtered by state agencies, e.g. China has strong control over what comes out. And some totalitarian countries may not release any information at all (N. Korea). The comparison then really becomes difficult. Further, even when data exists, its format, frequency, and quality may differ across countries, making valid comparisons harder.

3. **The problem of objectivity / Cultural bias** – Certain social practices may be too incomprehensible to a foreign mind. Objectivity then gets obscured. Scholars often interpret political systems through the lens of their own cultural background, leading to biased analysis. What appears rational or democratic in one context may be inappropriate or misunderstood in another
4. **Difficulty in Establishing Causality** – In comparative politics, isolating one variable as the cause of a political outcome is difficult due to the complex interaction of multiple factors. Correlation is easier to observe, but causation remains hard to prove.
5. **Conceptual Stretching** – When scholars try to apply the same concepts (e.g. democracy, state, legitimacy) across different political systems, these terms may lose clarity or meaning due to different historical and institutional contexts.
6. **Language and Translation Barriers** – Accessing primary data, laws, speeches, or cultural texts often requires language proficiency. Misinterpretation due to poor translation or lack of local insight can distort analysis. Additionally, the meaning of terms like “authoritarianism,” “development,” or “rights” evolve over time, which complicates historical comparisons and trend analysis.
7. **Selection Bias** – Researchers may choose countries or cases that fit their hypothesis, leading to non-representative findings. This affects the generalisability of conclusions.
8. **Dynamic nature of discipline** – Politics is shaped by multiple factors. It is never static. The comparison we may do today may not be relevant tomorrow. This also creates a problem.

While these limitations do not invalidate comparative politics but is also necessitates that comparisons be made carefully as well as contextually. This also goes to suggest that comparison may not give a complete answer to the problems at hand.

D] Methods of Comparative Politics

Even today, there is no unanimity among scholars in regard to the method to be used in comparative politics. Various methods can be used depending on the purpose of comparison.

Prior to 1914, 2 forms of comparison existed

Until mid-18th century, the approach was **normative and philosophical**. It studied the existing situation and proposed a blueprint for the future, e.g. what type of future can be built.

With the expansion of democracies in the west, from middle of the 18th century, the **legalistic-constitutional approach emerged**. It included a study of the constitution and laws of states. It dominated till the 1st World War.

After 2nd World War, we see the emergence of modern comparative methods. Along with comparing constitutions, these approaches also focus on the study of society, politics, culture etc.

How to compare? One can comparing similar as well as different things. This is also a matter of debate. Both have their purpose and rationale.

Why should the comparison be of similar situations? Like sciences, it is keeping experimental conditions the same. It helps in identifying factors which make a difference. Factors responsible for that phenomenon. **Why compare of dis-similar situation?** It strengthens the hypothesis of theory,

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i.e. the assumption is true only in given circumstances and changing certain factors changes the outcome.

E] Traditional Comparative Politics

Traditional comparative politics was very narrow in its scope. It included just the study of the constitutions of the western world. Since the rest of the countries were colonies and had no independent political systems.

Because all western countries have been at a similar level of development, their societies, culture, and way of life do not differ from each other. Hence there were few bases for comparisons. The maximum comparison could be made only that of the constitutions or the forms of governments. Hence traditional comparative politics was the study of government. It is better to call it 'comparative government' rather than comparative politics.

Since constitutions or the forms of governments were the focus of the study, **the method that was used was legal and institutional**, i.e. study of laws and institutions.

The approach did not observe the norms like value neutrality, quantification etc. And since it focused on the study of institutions, it was largely static and suffered from a number of limitations.

Limitations of traditional comparative politics.

1. Narrow in scope – excluded political systems of non-western countries.
2. Static – focused on the study of constitutions rather than politics.
3. Essentially non-comparative – The only point of comparison was constitutions.

Hence the traditional approach is criticized as ethnocentric (just focused on the west), parochial, and limited.

Comparative Government vs Comparative Politics

Government represent the set of institutions. Comparative government Focuses on the study of constitutions and statutes.

Politics denote processes. When we study social, economic, cultural and psychological, formal and informal practices beyond constitutions, we understand politics.

Thus, along with constitution and laws, comparative politics includes the study of civil society, cultural factors, and domestic as well as international politics

F] Modern Comparative Politics

1] Reason for Emergence

After the 2nd World War, the world witnessed decolonization and the emergence of 'third world' countries. Third-world countries are too diverse, and there is a difference in theory and practice, text and context. Hence it was realized that it is not sufficient if we just go for the study of constitutions and statutes (laws). We will have to understand the socio-cultural factors in these societies.

The need for the study of developing areas coincided with behavioural movement. Behavioural techniques made the study of modern comparative politics possible, and the need to study new areas itself motivated scholars to make new innovations in approaches. Many new methods to study comparative politics were developed in the following period.

Modern methods in comparative politics can be listed as follows.

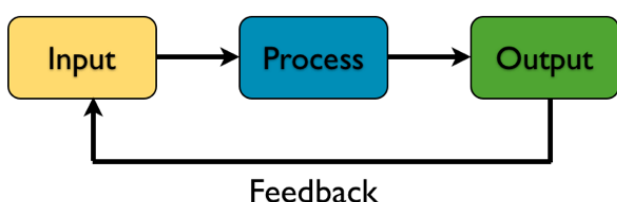
1. Systems approach
2. Structural, functional approach.
3. Political Development
4. Political Modernization
5. Political Culture
6. Political Sociology
7. Political Economy

1] Systems Approach

A] Introduction

David Easton gave the model of Systems Approach in comparative politics. The purpose of the system approach was to develop a scientific model. To develop a grand theory/model which can be utilized to study the political systems of different countries. To create a model which is value-free. Talcott Parsons was a source of influence for David Easton. Parsons has developed social system analysis in sociology.

The systems approach is a way of understanding politics by thinking of it like a **machine**. Just like a machine has input, processing, output and feedback.

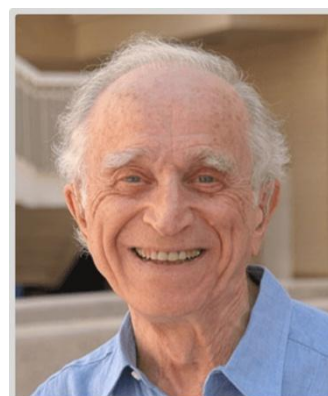


Easton tries to treat political system in a similar fashion. People give **inputs** to the political system—like demands, support, or complaints. The government then processes these and gives **outputs**—like laws, policies, or decisions. After

that, people react to those outputs, and that reaction becomes **feedback**, which helps the system adjust. So, it's like a loop:

people (input) → government (processing) → policies (output) → people's reaction (feedback / input) → back to government (processing) → policies (output) →

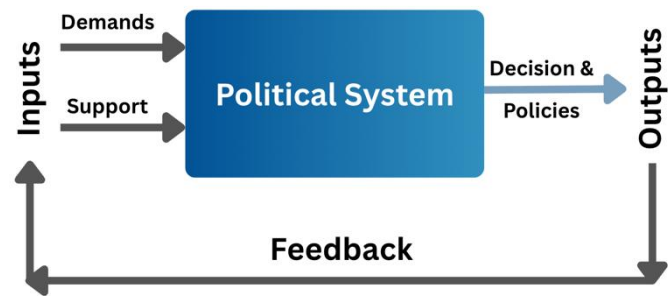
This method helps us see how a political system works and changes over time by connecting it to what's happening in society.



David Easton

B] Basic Concepts in Systems Approach

1] The concept of a system: A system is a set of elements in the state of interaction. Interaction is patterned and not haphazard. Behavioralists aimed to make political science 'science'. Hence they imported the concepts of natural sciences like systems from biology.



2] Concept of a political system: Just like there are different systems in a body, there are different systems in a society. The important criteria for differentiating different systems is on the basis of function they perform.

According to David Easton, the function of the political system is an 'authoritative' allocation of values. Allocation of values denotes deciding the distribution of goods, resources, honours, titles or deciding who will get what. Authoritative denotes the power to make binding decisions. Means punishment in case people do not follow the rules or laws.

Traditionalists use the term state. The term state denotes 'institutions'. Thus the state is a term used in the institutionalist approach, whereas the term 'political system' is a behaviouralist approach. The system not only denotes the structures it also denotes processes or functions. A system denotes a set of elements/environment in which a particular institution is based. (Refer to diagram.) All such things or subsystems which impact the main system is called as 'an environment of that system'.

3] Concept of Boundary: Every system has its boundary. Boundary denotes the limit of the environment. Systems kept out of boundary do not impact the main system.

4] Operation of Political system: According to David Easton, we can conceive a political system as a machine. Every machine functions on the principle of input and output. A conversion machine which converts input into output. The political system gets input from the environment.

5] Inputs are of two types:

i) Demands- Demands are what people want from the system. There are four types of demands: 1. Demand for regulation, 2. Demand for participation, 3. Demand for distribution, 4. Demand for communication.

ii) Support - Support shows people's support for the system, which is necessary for the functioning of the system. Support is also of four types. 1. Material support (e.g. tax) 2. Obedience to law 3. Participation in government programs 4. Paying attention to government communication.

6] Output functions: If a single decision comes, it will be treated as a decision. If multiple decisions come, it reflects policy.

7] Concept of Feedback: Feedback plays a very important role in the maintenance of the system. Outputs interact with the environment; they re-enter the system through the feedback loop. If a feedback loop does not exist, the system will collapse.

C] Critical evaluation

1] Traditionalists

It brings unnecessary complications and jargons. It does not have much analytical importance. It is just a very preliminary conceptual framework. It can be utilized only at the initial level of research. Its only importance can be a conceptual framework for the collection of data.

2] Marxist

Marxists are critical of behaviouralists. Behaviouralism emerged at the time of cold-war. It was the initiative of American political scientists. Most of the behavioural research was directed towards understanding and explaining the social realities in 'socialist' countries. e.g. Elitist theory of democracy is an example of behavioural–empirical research. Elitist theory of democracy has shown that 'oligarchy' is the iron law. It means whether a country is socialist or liberal, power will always be in the hands of elites. The situation is better in western countries because the elite structure is fractured. Thus Marxists looked at behaviouralism as a conspiracy against socialist countries.

According to the Marxists, the Systems approach is status-quoist. The systems approach is not universalist. The systems approach is modelled on the political systems of western countries.

Systems approach gives too much focus on system maintenance. They do not explain the crisis in the system. They have not pointed toward the protests, revolutions, or disruptions. They project as if the system is capable of absorbing all types of challenges.

The scientific model has to be universalist and unbiased, but this model is not universalist. It takes the western model as an ideal. Hence political systems which are not based on the western model will appear defective or problematic.

Marxists suggest that the system is not even a correct explanation for even western countries. It shows as if there are no problems in the western countries. The political system operates smoothly; there are no disruptions or protests. It projects the American system as the ideal type. It means they show as if there is no system which can be considered better than this system. For Marxists, even western countries should move toward the communist model.

3] Feminist

Feminists argue that systems approach ignores gendered power relations and the role of patriarchy in shaping political systems. It only focuses on formal institutions and assuming neutral functionality. The systems approach overlooks how these very structures often exclude or disadvantage women. It also does not account for care work, informal power structures, or gendered access to resources and representation. Feminists view the approach as blind to the lived realities experienced by women.

2] Structural-Functional Approach

Scholars: Almond and Powell

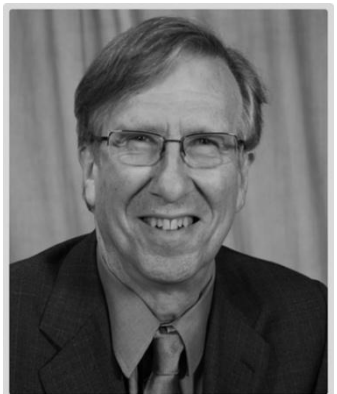
A] Need for Structural Functional Approach

Structural functional approach was developed to address some of the deficiencies in the Systems approach. The Systems approach was too general. It does not tell in detail about the structures and processes within the political system. And systems approach was criticized for being too static. It was modelled on western countries and hence was not found to be very relevant for the study of 'developing societies'. Thus limited importance in comparative politics.

Structural-functional approach is also based on Easton's model. Therefore Systems approach remains the basic conceptual framework even in this approach. However, Almond and Powell take a 'micro-view' rather than the macro-view. It is aimed at formulating a more 'universalist' model so that it is useful for developing countries.



Gabriel Almond



G B Powell

B] Methodology

Almond and Powell looked into the developments in other disciplines. They found the approach of anthropologists like Malinowski and Brown useful. Anthropologists, have shown that all societies perform some essential functions which are necessary. However, societies may vary with respect to the structures performing such functions.

On similar lines Almond and Powell suggest that every political system may have to perform the function of security, but the structure of the institutions performing these functions may vary.

The structural-functional approach takes the dynamic view of the political system i.e. according to them, different political systems are at different stages of development.

C] Structural Functional Approach

Political System, according to the Structural-Functional approach, consists of four Inputs functions and three output functions. Each function is performed by different structures in society /system.

4 Inputs functions

Input Functions	Associated Structures
1. Political socialization and recruitment	Family, School, Peer group, Society
2. Political communication	Mass media
3. Interest articulation	Interest groups, Pressure groups
4. Interest Aggregation	Political Parties