



Political Theory & Approaches

Meaning

According to **Ernest Barker**, **Political Theory** is "*architectonic in character*" — meaning it is like the **master builder**, connecting and organising different aspects of political life into a coherent structure.

Even **Aristotle** moved politics from abstract **philosophy** to **theory**, calling it the **master science**, because politics shapes all other activities of society.

Phases of Development

1. **Ancient phase** → Political Theory was a **branch of philosophy**. Think of Plato and Aristotle — they studied the **ideal state** and justice.
2. **Medieval period** → the **age of religion**. Think of **St Augustine** and **St Thomas Aquinas** — politics was tied to **divine authority** and the Church.
3. **Modern phase** → A separation occurred: politics moved away from **religion and ethics**. Now it focused on **state and constitution**. This gave rise to **comparative politics**.

Behavioural Approach

Later, in the 20th century, came the **Behavioural Approach**, led by **APSA (American Political Science Association)**.

- It promoted the **scientific method**, data, surveys, and empirical research instead of just abstract ideals.

Post-modern Thinking & Revival

But soon, thinkers realised politics isn't just numbers. With **post-modern thinking**, there was a **revival of philosophical approach** — values,

ethics, and power relationships were back in discussion.

Present Day

Today, **Political Theory** is a **vibrant discipline**. It doesn't just talk about the **state** but also about the **family, environment, gender, culture**, and global issues. It has widened to cover every sphere where **power, justice, and authority** are at play.

So, in short:

- **Ancient** → Philosophy
- **Medieval** → Religion
- **Modern** → State & Constitution
- **Behavioural** → Scientific method
- **Post-modern** → Revival of philosophy
- **Present** → Expanded, vibrant discipline

Nature of Political Science as Science

Political Science as Normative

Traditionally, **Political Science** has been a **normative discipline**, rooted in **philosophy**.

It doesn't just measure facts — it asks *big moral questions*:

- What is **justice**?
- What are **rights**?
- How do we achieve **equality**?

This is why thinkers like Plato or Aristotle did not just describe politics, they prescribed what ought to be.

Behaviouralist Attempt

Then came the **behaviouralist school** in the 20th century, which tried to turn Political Science into a **pure science**.

- They wanted objectivity, data, and measurable outcomes.



- But here lies the problem: in **natural science**, language is **symbolic** (like formulas, equations).
- In **political science**, language is **normative** — we talk about *freedom, justice, rights* — values you cannot measure with a lab test.

So the dream of making politics exactly like physics? Not possible.

Thomas Kuhn – Paradigm Shifts

Here, **Thomas Kuhn's idea of paradigm** helps us.

- He showed that every **theory has phases**.
- Science itself evolves — it is not one fixed truth.
- Similarly, Political Science moves from **normative** → **behavioural** → **post-behavioural** → **post-modern**.

So, politics is also scientific in its own way — but it's a science of changing paradigms, not fixed formulas.

Post Modernism

Then enters **post-modernism**.

It says: "*Wait! All theories are not absolute truths — they are discourses, interpretations.*"

So, Political Science is less about one universal truth and more about **multiple perspectives**: liberal, socialist, feminist, post-colonial, ecological, etc.

Conclusion – Dynamic Discipline

So where do we stand today?

Political Science is the **most dynamic discipline** — always **accommodating different schools of thought**.

- Normative roots give it **moral depth**.
- Behavioural approach gave it **scientific rigor**.

- Post-modernism gave it **pluralism and humility**.

That is what makes Political Science so rich — it's not rigid like physics, but flexible, reflective, and deeply connected with human life.

Approaches

Meaning of Approach

When we say **approach**, we're simply asking: "*How is theory produced?*"

- Some approaches rely on **history** → tracing ideas through time.
- Others rely on **empirical methods** → facts, data, observation.
- Some create **philosophical theories** → about values like justice, rights, equality.
- Others build **scientific theories** → trying to explain behaviour with evidence and general laws.

So, an **approach** is like a *lens* you choose to study politics. Change the lens, and the whole picture looks different.

Structure of an Approach

Every approach you study in Political Science usually follows a common **structure**:

- **Meaning** – what the approach is trying to do.
- **Exponents** – who are the thinkers associated with it (Plato, Hobbes, Marx, Dahl, etc.).
- **Features** – what makes this approach unique (e.g., normative, behavioural, institutional).
- **Merits and Demerits** – strengths and weaknesses.
- **Current Relevance** – why it still matters in today's political debates.

Think of it this way:

Approach is like **choosing your travel route**. You



want to reach the same destination — understanding politics — but you can take a **historical road**, a **philosophical road**, or an **empirical road**. Each has its own scenery, shortcuts, and traffic jams (merits & demerits).

The Essence:

- **Approach = method + type of theory** (historical/empirical, philosophical/scientific).
- **Structure = meaning + exponents + features + merits & demerits + relevance.**

Philosophical / Normative Approach

Meaning

This is the **oldest approach** in Political Science. It focuses not on mere facts, but on the **idea or essence** behind politics.

Instead of asking “*what is happening?*”, it asks “*what ought to happen?*”

That’s why it is called **normative** — it deals with *norms, values, ideals*.

Exponents

- **Socrates** – gave us the *Theory of Knowledge*, stressing the difference between opinion and true knowledge.
- **Plato** – used **dialectics**, where reasoning transforms opinion into knowledge. His *Republic* is a classic normative work.
- **John Rawls** – in modern times, introduced **reflective equilibrium**, justifying moral principles by balancing intuition and reasoning.

Features

Merits:

- Helps us compare **ideal vs reality** (e.g., Plato’s *Republic* vs Aristotle’s *Politics*).

- **Prescriptive & futuristic** – it doesn’t just describe, it tells us how society *should* be.
- Inspires reform: e.g., Rawls’s **Difference Principle** suggests redistribution to ensure fairness.
- Fits Political Science naturally since the discipline is full of **normative concepts** like justice, rights, and equality.

Demerits:

- Often called **armchair theories**, detached from ground reality. (*Philosopher King* is inspiring, but impractical).
- **Speculative** – heavily shaped by personal biases. Example: Plato’s theory of three souls (rational, spirited, appetitive).
- Lacks empirical testing, so sometimes difficult to apply in practice.

Current Relevance

Even though **behaviouralism** once challenged it (with its obsession for facts and data), the **post-behavioural movement** brought values back into Political Science.

Today, **normative theories** are very much alive:

- The **critical school** challenges domination.
- **Feminism** raises questions of justice and equality.
- **Communitarianism** stresses values of community and solidarity.

All of these reaffirm that politics is not only about *what is*, but also about *what ought to be*.

The Essence

If Political Science ignored the normative approach, it would become like engineering without ethics — technical, but soulless. Normative approach ensures politics stays tied to



justice, morality, and human dignity.

Historical Approach

Meaning

The **historical approach** explains political ideas by tracing their **origin and evolution**.

The logic is simple: to understand an idea, you must understand the **time in which it was born**. Politics doesn't exist in a vacuum — it grows out of historical circumstances.

Exponents

- **Laski** – insisted that *“every thinker is a child of his time.”* In other words, thinkers reflect the problems, hopes, and crises of their age.
- **Sabine** – called history the *easiest way* of understanding political theory. For him, theory always emerges in **crisis** and must meet three requirements:
 - **Factual** – rooted in real events.
 - **Explanatory** – helps us interpret those events.
 - **Evaluative** – guides us in judging them.
- **Machiavelli** – famously declared that the **law of politics must be discovered in history**, not in abstract moral sermons. For him, politics was about how people actually behaved, not how they *ought* to behave.

Think of it this way:

- If the **Normative Approach** asks *“what should justice look like?”*
- The **Historical Approach** asks *“how did the idea of justice itself emerge and change over centuries?”*

For example, the concept of **rights**:

- In medieval times, it was tied to divine authority.
- In modern times, Locke tied it to natural

law.

- In contemporary times, rights have expanded to include human rights and group rights.

Without **history**, we would miss this journey of ideas.

The **historical approach** reminds us that political theory is not static. It is a **living tradition**, constantly evolving with time, crises, and human struggles.

Historical Approach – Features

Merits

- **Impossible to understand ideas without historical context** – No idea exists in isolation. For example, **Hobbes justified the absolute state** in the backdrop of civil war in England. Without knowing that context, his theory of sovereignty looks unnecessarily harsh. With context, it makes perfect sense.
- **Highlights close relationship between politics and history** – The two are inseparable. As the famous line goes:
 - *History is past politics*
 - *Politics is present history*
 This means ideas of today are born from struggles of yesterday.

Limitations

- **Demands vast data collection** – To use this approach effectively, one needs huge amounts of historical evidence, which can overwhelm or distract from the main political argument.
- **Writing becomes politicised** – History is never neutral. It carries biases, sometimes hidden. For example, **orientalism** presented Eastern societies as backward to justify colonialism.



- **Selective or ideological use** – Thinkers often “cherry-pick” history:
 - **Machiavelli** used Roman history selectively to prove his political realism.
 - **Marx and Hegel** read history through an **ideological lens** (dialectics, class struggle), shaping it to fit their grand narrative.
- **Not all concepts are strictly historical facts** – Many big ideas like **Philosopher King** or **Communism** are not drawn directly from historical evidence but from imagination, ideals, or speculation.

The **historical approach** is like looking at political ideas through a *time machine*. It gives depth and context, but the danger is — once you step into history, it's very easy to **get lost in biases** or **force history to say what you want it to say**.

That's why we must use this approach **critically** — embracing its depth, but guarding against its distortions.

Current Relevance of the Historical Approach

Now, students, here's the twist in the story. The **historical approach**, which once dominated, **lost its earlier significance** because of harsh criticism from the **Behaviouralist school**. Thinkers like **David Easton** accused scholars such as **Dunning and Sabine** of reducing political science into nothing more than a *history of political thought*, instead of making it a scientific discipline.

So yes, behaviouralist critics were right in saying: “You can't simply narrate history and call it theory.”

But — does that mean the **historical approach** is **dead**? Absolutely not!

Why It Still Matters

- **Comprehensive understanding** – If you want

to truly grasp any political theory, you cannot rely only on statistics or models. You must understand the *historical context* in which it was born. For example, Locke's idea of the **state as trust** makes sense only if you see the 17th-century struggle against absolute monarchy.

- **Revival through contextual approach** – Today, scholars recognise that *ignoring history is dangerous*. That's why we see a revival in the **contextual approach**:
 - **Derrida** with his methods of *reconstruction and deconstruction* reminds us that texts carry hidden meanings shaped by history.
 - **Quentin Skinner** and **Peacock** insist on studying the **linguistic context prevailing at that time** — what words meant *then*, not what they mean *now*.

This makes our interpretation more accurate, less anachronistic.

So, while the **behaviouralists** tried to bury the historical approach, reality brought it back. Why? Because politics without history is like a tree without roots.

The lesson for us is simple: **no single approach is enough**. Behaviouralism gives us data, philosophy gives us ideals, but **history gives us depth**. Together, they provide the *full picture*.

Empirical Approach

Meaning

Students, the word *empirical* simply means **derived from observation or data**. You *see*, you *record*, you *describe*. But notice carefully — this is **different from the scientific approach**. Why? Because the **scientific approach demands rigorous verification, controlled experiments, and systemic models**, whereas the empirical is



far more modest. It says: *"Let's first look at reality as it is."*

Exponents

- **Aristotle** — often called the father of political science — applied it when he collected and studied **158 constitutions**. He was not philosophising in the clouds; he was *observing institutions in practice*.
- **Locke** — gave a twist in psychology by describing the human mind as a **tabula rasa** (blank slate). Knowledge, according to him, comes only from **experience and observation**, not from innate ideas.

Features

- It is **mainly descriptive**: it tells us *what is*, not necessarily *what ought to be*.
- It is **status quoist**: since it avoids normative judgment, it often ends up accepting reality as it exists, without offering deeper transformation.

Current Relevance

Now, this is where things get interesting. The **empirical approach laid the foundation for modern behaviouralism**. Behaviouralists, in the 20th century, said: *"Let us build political science as a data-driven discipline."* This was nothing but the **empirical spirit in a modern, systematic form**.

So, the **empirical approach influenced behaviouralism**, making it a **modern extension** of the age-old tendency to observe and describe political reality.

Think of the **empirical approach as the first step of knowledge**. Before you create ideals (philosophical) or trace roots (historical) or build models (scientific), you must **observe what exists**. That is what Aristotle and Locke taught us.

In simple words: **Empirical approach is the eye; philosophy is the mind; science is the method.**

Legal–Institutional Approach

Meaning

Students, this is one of the **oldest and most classical approaches** in Political Science. It says: *"To understand politics, study the **constitutions** and the **institutions**."*

In other words, **politics begins at the legal and institutional level** — parliaments, executives, courts, and the written constitution.

Exponents

The great legal minds shaped this approach:

- **A.V. Dicey** — famous for **Rule of Law**.
- **K.C. Wheare** — known for **federalism and constitutional studies**.
- **C.F. Strong** — focused on **comparative constitutionalism**.

These scholars treated **institutions as the foundation of political life**.

Features

- It studies **constitutions and institutions as the basis of politics**.
- It is **legalistic, static, and formal** — more about *rules* than *processes*.

Limitations

Here's where we need to be critical:

- It is often **static**, ignoring the **dynamic process** of politics.
- It has **limited relevance in developing countries**, because there is usually a wide **gap between the constitution and political reality**.
 - **Fred Riggs** explained this gap as



formalism in a **prismatic society** (where written rules exist, but practice is different).

- It neglects **economic, social, and cultural factors** that deeply influence politics.

Merits

Yet, don't dismiss it too quickly.

- Despite its limits, the **legal-institutional approach provides a good starting point** for political analysis.
- Constitutions are still the **basic framework** — even if reality diverges, you must know the rules before you see the exceptions.

Current Relevance

This approach did not vanish; it **evolved**.

- It eventually led to the **rise of comparative politics** in the 20th century.
- Out of it emerged the **structural-functional approach**, which tried to move beyond static institutions and study *how they function in society*.

Think of it this way: The **legal-institutional approach** is like studying the **blueprint of a house**. You get to see the design, the rooms, the framework. But does that tell you how people actually *live* in the house? Not always. For that, you need **comparative politics and functionalism**.

So, while this approach is **formal and static**, it remains an **essential first step** in political inquiry.

PYQ

1. Difference between normative and empirical theories of politics. 2012, 10
2. Examine the significance of the behavioural revolution in politics. 2011, 30
3. Comment on: Political Theory is, quite simply, mans attempt to consciously understand and solve the problems of his group life and organization. It is the disciplined investigation of political problems. Not only to show what a political practice is, but also to show what it means. In showing what a practice means, or what it ought to mean, political theory can alter what it is (Sabine)
4. Examine the arguments in the Normative vs. Empirical debate in the study of political theory. 2002, 60
5. Comment on: Relevance of contextualist approach to the study of political theory. 2001, 20
6. Elucidate the meanings inherent in the term 'political' with appropriate illustrations. 2024, 20
7. Comment on: Normative approach in Political Science. 2023, 10
8. Discuss the significance of a normative approach to political theory. 2020, 15