Lesson: Doing Comparative Politics: Traditional Institutional and Political Systems Approaches
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Chapter: Doing Comparative Politics: Traditional Institutional and Political Systems Approaches

Introduction

As social beings we often tend to compare ourselves with others, are influenced by what others think and express about us, and learn from and judge on the basis of what others do or how they live. Relating to others in such ways, shapes a large part of who we are, involving processes of comparison and modification. A similar process of relating to others, takes place at a collective level too, and students and scholars of political science have engaged in the activity of comparing political set-ups, institutions and relations, to understand reasons behind their differences and to find out ideal ways of political organization of society. A study of political institutions and processes around the world, and their comparisons with each other, makes us see what kind of institutional set up works where and why. It also enables us to suggest changes based on some generalizations that could be made after examining a large number of cases. Such a logic rationalises our interest in the sub-field of Comparative Politics within the discipline of Political Science.

To study the political processes and institutions of various countries in a comparative manner, however, various methods could be employed. A method can be understood simply as a kind of 'technique' to do something. If our purpose is to find out how the different parts of government in a specific country work, we would employ certain strategies and techniques of inquiry. Not every researcher, however, employs the same techniques for this purpose. Based on their general understanding of politics (or theoretical backgrounds), different schools of comparative politics employ different techniques. From specific theoretical backgrounds emerge specific approaches to study comparative politics, together with varying methods. In this chapter we would study two such major approaches to the study of comparative politics, namely, traditional institutional approach and political systems approach.
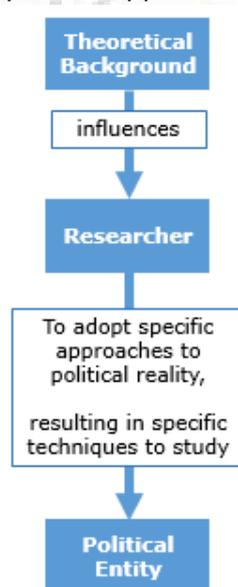

Diagram 1: Author: Explaining an approach

Value Addition: Did you know
Comparative Politics and other Sub-fields

Let us quickly see how comparative politics is related to some other sub-disciplines of political science.

Comparative Politics and Political Theory: Though we see these fields, in the earliest moments of their evolution, developed in the works of the same philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle, there is diversification of field between the two within present disciplinary classification. The specific role of political theory in the present appears to be predominantly normative, i.e., though it cannot do without some amount of descriptions of 'why's and 'how's of the political world, their major concern is to advance normative theories, or theories prescribing ideal ways, to organize social and political relations. Comparative politics on the other hand, is predominantly concerned with describing and finding explanations about how things happen and why they happen that way. With this task, comparative politics may act as a support system for political theory to develop normative theories.

Comparative Politics and International Relations: The subfield of international relations focus more on the relations between states, while increasingly acknowledging that inter-state relations are affected by what happens inside a country. The inter-state relations are studied on various aspects such as war, cooperation and trade. Comparative politics, on the other hand, though acknowledges the crucial impact of international affairs on domestic politics, limits its central focus to the politics in the domestic spheres of countries. They examine and try to understand the political patterns and institutions internal to a country.

While making these distinctions, however, we must also remember that the subjects of study of these sub-disciplines are integrally related to each other, and

The traditional institutional approach focused on studying the institutions of government and its formal-legal powers and functions, as this approach held that the politics of a country depends on the institutional structures and laws. As an approach in the field of comparative politics, it takes up the task of comparing constitutions, laws and institutional set-up of various countries, tries to understand the differences and similarities in their political processes, and attempts to find explanations for differences in political regimes. The traditional institutionalists believed that structures of governments and constitutions could be understood well, then on the basis of that it is possible to predict the actual performance of the governments.

Evolution of the traditional institutional approach

The first systematic thinking about political life was concerned with the question of the nature of governing institutions. Aristotle, for instance, considered monarchies, aristocracies and democracies as forms of governments and tried to figure out the best form. Hobbes, who experienced the English Civil War of 1688, argued for strong institutions to save people from a 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short' state of

nature. Montesquieu in the middle of the eighteenth century identified that power of various political structures need to be balanced, to prevent autocratic governments.

More than hundred years after Montesquieu wrote, political science first began to differentiate itself as an academic discipline, and the major questions that it raised were about institutions and their goals. So the things that were studied were formal aspects of government, its various organs, what rules they follow, etc. The first generation of constitutional lawyers in this period were concerned mostly with the theories or principles of institutions and not with how they are implemented in practice. Tocqueville for the first time emphasised upon both theory and practice as important, while contrasting American government with European governments.

Comparative politics as a separate sub-discipline focusing on the study of institutions was founded in the real sense through the works of **James Bryce** and **A.L. Lowell**, together with a crucial role played by works of **M. Ostrogorski**, in the late nineteenth century.

James Bryce (1838-1922)

A.L. Lowell (1856-1943)

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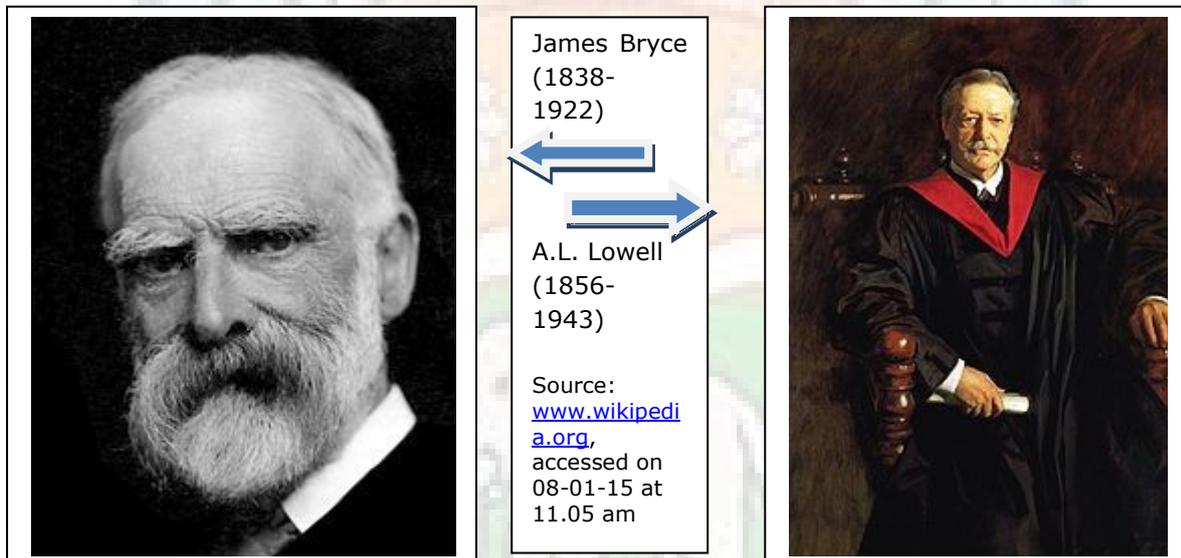
Bryce and Lowell focused on both the study of constitutions, i.e. theory of governments, and actual practices of governments. While the first part required study of documents and norms, the second part required discovery and collection of facts or data. They put so much emphasis on facts, to the extent of saying that when facts are supplied anyone can reason out of them, that the place of data or facts appeared to be paramount in their approach. Rebutting a critique coming from political systems theorist David Easton about hyper-factualism of the Institutional approach, Bryce stated that any statement or argument without the backing of facts is mere speculation. Refuting the charge of hyper-factualism, the institutionalists held that contrary to a belief in overload of facts, the real problem facing the discipline of comparative politics is the paucity of facts about many countries in the world, such as the third world and the then communist countries.

This search for data or facts led Bryce and Lowell to adopt quantitative methods, while balancing it with use of qualitative method. They argued that any conclusion has to be supported by both qualitative assessment and quantitative data.

Value Addition : Good to Know
Quantitative Method: A quantitative method is a method of systematic empirical investigation of observable phenomena. It may involve use of statistical, mathematical or numerical data, and computer based techniques. This method is used generally in natural sciences, and some social science disciplines such as political science, sociology, economics, psychology, etc. **Qualitative Method:** Qualitative method is about gathering in-depth understanding of human behaviour and the reasons that govern such behaviour. It is often also known as the case study method, as it focuses deeply in specific cases rather than attempting to providing overall generalized information. Ethnography is a prominent technique of this method. It is mostly used in social science disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, history and political science.

Further, responding to a charge of legalism due to the emphasis that the institutional approach places on study of laws and constitutions, it was asserted that laws too are facts, which are necessary to develop any theory. Further, laws and constitutions should be crucial aspects of study, institutionalists asserted, because the behaviour of political actors are often shaped by laws and institutions.
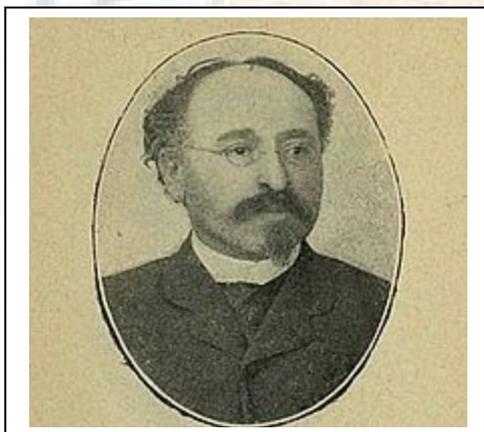
M. Ostrogorski

(1854-1921)

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While Bryce and Lowell set the founding stones of comparative politics, a crucial dimension to it was given by Ostrogorski's comparative study of specific institutions. In 1902, Ostrogorski published a comparative study of political parties in Britain and America. (Blondel 1981)

Value Addition : Know it more
Some Major works in the Traditional Institutional approach
James Bryce: *The American Commonwealth* (1888), *Modern Democracies* (1921) **A.L. Lowell:** *Governments and Parties in Continental Europe* (1896), *The Government of England* (1908) **Herman Finer:** *The Theory and Practice of Modern Government* (1932) **Karl J. Friedrich:** *Constitutional Government and Democracy* (1937)

Features and Limitations of the Traditional Institutional Approach

From various works written from an institutional approach, we can figure out some central concerns and patterns of this approach. These are:

1) **Concerned with laws and constitutions:** The traditional Institutional Approach believes in the central role of law in governing. According to this way of studying politics, specific kinds of laws or constitutions lead to specific outcomes. For example, it is widely believed that having a constitution with rights and liberties of people will lead to a democratic governing.
2) **Emphasizes government structures as explanatory:** The traditional institutional approach hold the structures, such as parliamentary of presidential form, or federal or unitary form, determine political behaviour of actors, and thus it left no room for explanations coming from influence of personality or society on the working of the state.
3) **Holistic character of comparisons:** The traditional institutionalists mostly embarked on comparing whole systems rather than to examine individual institutions of governments, such as legislature or political parties. Countries were, in most studies, described one after another, rather than comparing them with each other, as they had to be dealt with in totality, and comparable elements were not found in every aspect. A strand led by Ostrogorski in the direction of comparing particular institutions was never a major trend in traditional institutional studies.
4) **Historical analysis of institutions:** The traditional institutional approach studied institutions in the context of their historical development, as they held that how politics is practices can be understood by understanding the institutions through their historical development. Thus, for example, while the British parliament is studied, it would be studied through a detailed discussion of its historical evolution, and would not be limited to its present form and functions. (Sahu 2010)

Roy C. Macridis (1955), in an attempt to analyse the gradual dissatisfaction of political scientists with the traditional institutional approach, discussed some of its central characteristics, which may also be counted as its **shortcomings**. He held that comparative politics done in the traditional institutional way was comparative only in

name, and was more aptly a study of foreign governments focusing on the governmental structures and formal organizations of state institutions. Suggesting a 'reorientation' of the traditional institutional approach, Macridis described it in the following terms.

Essentially Non-comparative: Most of the works involved just parallel descriptions of the institutions of several countries, and no comparisons beyond identification of differences between types, eg. parliamentary or presidential systems, were done. Further, the approach primarily studied the Western countries, and mainly the representative democracies, considering non-democratic systems as aberrations. The limited reach of the traditional institutional works merely upto the representational democracies of the Western world, prevented the students of comparative politics in this school from studying many political systems, such as non-democracies in the Western world, colonial states and other culturally distinct societies.

Essentially Descriptive: While formal political institutions of various countries are described in a stated attempt to understand their political processes which allegedly enabled comparison, it was never clarified what prompted the choice of particular countries for comparison and not others. Further, while similarities and dissimilarities were highlighted, what factors possibly accounted for such similarities and differences were never examined.

Such descriptive studies were done mainly through two typical approaches: historical and legalistic. The **historical approach** traces the historical origin and growth of institutions, and assumes that parallel historical accounts of institutions in different countries would indicate similarities and differences. The **legalistic approach** assumes that studying the formal-legal or constitutional powers of various branches of governments and their relationship with each other in the context of various countries in sufficient to call it a comparative study. Such studies do not attempt to examine the forces that influence and shape laws.

Due to such preoccupation with formal-legal aspects of government structures, however, the approach loses a sophisticated awareness of the informal arrangements of society, which influence political behaviour and processes of decision-making to a great extent.

Essentially Parochial: Most of the works in the traditional institutional approach are limited to study of Western European countries and institutions, such as France, Great Britain, Switzerland and Germany. This was understandably prompted by geographical accessibility, linguistic familiarity and cultural affinities. While doing this, however, countries were simply described, and no attempt was taken to analytically define the categories that constitute an 'area' of study. While talking of some common traits, such as 'liberal-democratic', or 'advanced' economic systems, the works did not attempt to explain what is the link between economic systems and political processes, or what is meant by the term 'advanced'.

Essentially Static: The traditional approach, Macridis claimed, had ignored dynamic factors which explain growth and change in a political system. Even when growth of new political institutions were studied, they were studied in terms of their, what Macridis calls 'political anatomy', i.e. in terms of their legal status and configurations, and no consideration was given to the changes that they caused to the organization of political power.

Essentially Monographic: Most of the important works in this approach concentrated on the study of political institutions of one country as a whole, or specific institutions of one country, without referring to any possibility of applicability of the study in other contexts. (Macridis 1955)

Macridis's major suggestion for improvement was that the focus of comparative politics should shift from description of political reality to explanation of political reality, accompanied by an inclusion of comparisons with Third World developing countries.

Historical events added to the dissatisfaction with the traditional institutional approach too. This approach assumed that there is a constitutional formula, which, if followed, would lead to stable, effective and democratic governments. But the effectiveness of constitutions and institutions in ensuring stable democracies was disproved by what happened in Germany. In Germany, the ideal constitution of 1933 itself opened the roads for Hitler's totalitarian regime. (Sahu 2010)

Starting from the 1930s to 1960s, the traditional institutional approach faced critique from various circles. While the need to expand the discipline to encourage studies of non-Western systems was seen as crucial, the influence of the behavioural revolution in the social sciences also pushed the scholars of comparative politics to develop a scientific method showing regular and predictable patterns of behaviour.

Out of such dissatisfaction with the traditional institutional approach, and the newly felt need to develop a scientific method, emerged the political systems approach in the field of comparative politics.

Insert Interactive Question 1

The Political Systems Approach

In the post Second World War period, the scholars of comparative politics became aware of the limitations of the formal-legal traditional-institutional approach and highlighted the need to study non-Western politics of Latin America, Asia and Africa. The need to study the newer phenomena of 'modernization', 'liberation', 'political development' was identified and need to develop alternative frameworks to study those was highlighted.

This was the time of behavioural revolution in the social sciences. The behavioural approach claimed that social and political phenomena can be studied in an objective, quantitative manner, to predict behaviour. The attempt was to model the social sciences after the natural sciences. The sub-discipline of comparative politics was influenced by this too, and it, along with the increasing dissatisfaction with the traditional approach, led the scholars of comparative politics to look for a new framework of analysis. This resulted in the systems approach in comparative politics.

The aim of the systems approach in comparative politics was to study dynamic and ongoing processes, and thereby to study the impact of policy decisions on such processes. The focus of study shifted from an emphasis on state to an emphasis on society. The sub-field of comparative politics, in the process, drew much closer to other sub-disciplines, like sociology and social psychology.

Value Addition : Did you know
Basic Terms in the Systems Approach
Society: the most inclusive entity within which all systems may be identified **Systems:** In real society, interactions, practices and institutions are interrelated. A system is an abstraction from that real society, by separating through an analytical boundary some elements that seem to cohere more closely than others. The entities that form a system are interconnected by behaviour and history.

The Behavioural Revolution is an intellectual movement that was initiated in the University of Chicago during the interwar years. The 'Chicago school', as it is known, emphasised on study of dynamic processes and the play of power, and advocated seamless use of methods and concepts from other social sciences. The founders of the Chicago school of thought were Charles Merriam, Harold Gosnell, Quincy Wright, and Harold Lasswell. Some important students of this department who later spread the behavioural revolution through their teaching in departments across the United States are Gabriel Almond, David Truman, Alexander George etc.

Some distinctive features of the behavioural revolution are as follows: 1) emphasis on quantitative and statistical methods, 2) an equally strong emphasis on political psychology and political culture, 3) recognition that political acts do not merely follow laws and constitutions but involve exercise of choice on the part of actors or decision makers, and 4) the concepts and findings of other social sciences were freely used.

The behavioural revolution brought in a clear departure in the field of comparative politics, from the earlier study of constitutional and institutional structures. (Pye 2008)

The political systems approach drew attention to the need of studying the political system as a whole – in its processes, its policies, and its environment – rather than focusing merely on formal structures of government. Thus, we can say that it intended to study both structures and their functioning. The approach is based on the application of the systems theory to political reality. Systems theory in general is based on the analogy of social phenomena and biological assumptions, which assumes that, the components of social and political systems work in coordination with each other, just like the heart, the lungs and blood function in the body in coordination with each other. When one component changes or comes under stress, the other components adjust accordingly to compensate. They also assumed that, like in the animate environment, in the realm of the social or political too, there are many systems, each of which is made up of smaller systems and is in turn part of a larger one. (Kamrava 1996)

Insert Interactive Question 2

Mexican political sociologist Pablo Gonzalez Casanova (1973) identified two types of works within the systems approach. The first one is **functionalism**, a major theoretician in this school being Talcott Parsons. The second one is generally known as **systems analysis**. This school, Gonzalez Casanova pointed out, focused on problems of decision making, and was influenced by disciplines of operations research and mathematics in the post Second World War period. What we understand as the political systems approach in

comparative politics in the present day has been influenced by both these tendencies in systems analysis.

The political systems approach in contemporary comparative politics is identified with two patterns: the first one known as **systems theory** is marked by the seminal contributions of **David Easton** and his followers such as Karl Deutch, Morton Kaplan, and Herbert Spiro. The second one is known as **structural-functionalism**, marked by works of anthropologists Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown, sociologist Parsons, poitical scientists Arthur Bentley and David Truman. **Gabriel Almond** brought together the divergent flows within the structural-functional theories, and significantly contributed to the discipline of comparative politics.

Insert Interactive Question 3

David Easton and the General Systems Theory

The major questions of interest for the systems theory have been like how scare resources are allocated through politics, how political stability could be maintained, etc. David Easton is the major proponent of this theory. He presented his work in this regard through three crucial publications, namely *The Political System* (1953), *A Framework for Political Analysis* (1965) and *A Systems Analysis of Political Life* (1965).
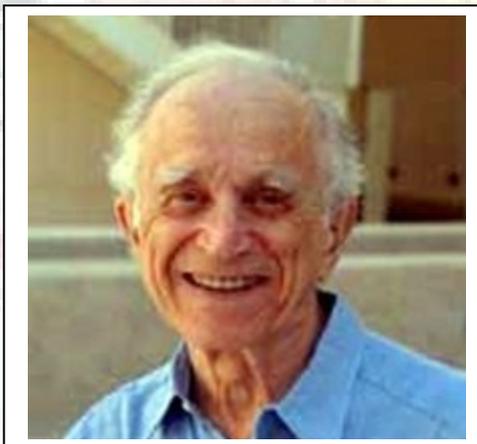
David Easton
(1917-2014)

Source: www.wikipedia.org, accessed on 08-01-15 at 11.30 am

Easton argued that knowledge, to be scientific, has to be theoretical – which will be backed by empirical data – but that data or facts cannot alone explain events. In his quest for theory, he attempted to formulate a general framework of analysis by engaging with the whole system and its environment rather than merely looking at parts. He wanted to replace the concept of state as he thought it was confusing, with the concept of system. In his framework, the concepts of power, decision making, authority, and policy are essential. Power in his schema related to shaping and carrying out of authoritative policies in a society, by influencing and controlling actions and decisions of other actors. A policy on the other hand is understood as a web of decisions and actions which allocates values. The political life in totality is about authoritative allocation of values in society. (Chilcote 1994)

Easton organizes his theory in the following steps (Easton 1965):

1) A political system is distinguishable from the environment in which it exists and open to influences from it. The boundary of a political system is defined by all

those actions more or less directly related to the making of binding decisions for a society;

2) The political system's internal structures and processes are determined by the nature of its interaction with its surrounding environment. There is at least some minimum division of labour amongst the members of the system, which provides a structure for action.

3) What keeps the system going are 'inputs' of various kinds. These inputs are converted by the processes of the system into authoritative decisions, called 'outputs' by Easton. The 'outputs' have consequences for both the political system and the environment in which the political system exists. For the persistence of the political system, the flow from and to the environment through the political system is crucial. Without 'inputs' the system cannot work, and without 'outputs' it is impossible to identify the work done by the system.

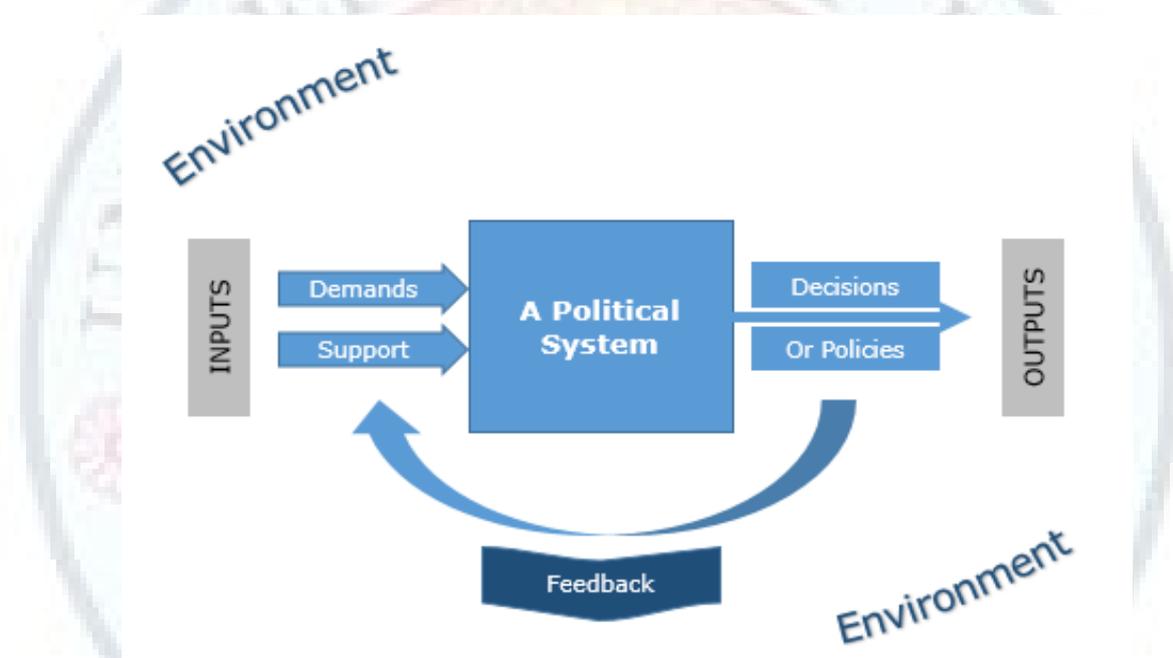Easton diagrammatically expressed his theory in the following way:

Diagram 2, Easton's Systems theory Source: Easton 1965, p.3

Thus, for Easton, the question of what specific types of institutions a political system has is only of secondary importance. The issue that is primarily important is the degree and nature of interactions between the people and the decision-makers and other political actors.

Within the systems theory, it is important to study the political system, because it is assumed that it has important consequences for the society in the form of binding decisions. These consequences are what are known as 'outputs'. The 'inputs' to the political system, on the other hand, can be broadly defined as, any event external to the political system, which alters, modifies, or affects the system in any way.

Easton focuses on **two major types of inputs**:

a) **Demands:** Demands are made by various groups or person in society. But the resources or capacity to satisfy those demands are limited in society. So the

political system is entrusted with the authority to allocate values, and demands are made upon the political system for this purpose.

Demands on a political system could be, however, of two types: demands that arise from the environment outside of the political system and demands that arise from within the political system. Easton calls the first one **external inputs** and the second one internal inputs or '**withinputs**'. While talking of external inputs, Easton clarifies that he does not mean the environment as an 'undifferentiated mass of events', but as composed of systems which are distinguishable from each other as well as the political system. The cultures within each of these systems, further, influence what demands are put up in front of the political system. Internal inputs or 'withinputs' on the other hand, emerge from situations within the political system itself: for example, a demand from within the system to change the processes of recruitment of formal political leaders or the demand for modification in the constitutional amendment procedures. Easton, however, does not think of 'withinputs' as inputs in the real sense, though he thinks it important to identify them to avoid confusion.

Further, Easton makes another classification of inputs in the form of demands: material and political. Thus a demand could be an expression of opinion or call for a decision. We can use a couple of concrete examples for the purposes of understanding. Thus, a material demand could be that a dam is constructed. A political demand could be that a specific law be scrapped.

Such demands upon the political systems may be made in various forms such as through individual requests, letters, by lobbying, by demonstrating or picketing.

b) **Supports:** Easton talked about supports as inputs to the political system too, and believed that without supports, demands cannot be satisfied. Supportive behaviour may be externally observable acts such as voting for a specific political candidate, or a state of mind or orientation, such as attachment to democracy or feeling of patriotism. Such supports again could be divided into material and political supports. A material support could perhaps be understood through the example of paying of taxes to carry out the work of construction of roads. An example of a political support could be agreement with a governmental decision, or defence of a decision by the highest court of law.

Suppports are expressed through various means such as voting, by taking part in political life, by taking part in wars, by paying taxes, by writing letters, by publishing public documents etc.

Apart from readily identifiable acts of support, the voicing of a demand to the political system also shows support for the system in some way, as it shows a belief on part of people, that putting their demands to the political system would lead to desired outputs.

These inputs are crucial for the political system, Easton argues, as without inputs, both in the form of demands and supports, the political system can do no work. A healthy flow of inputs are crucially linked to a satisfactory output.

'**Outputs**', as defined by Easton, are the decisions and actions of the authorities. Easton argues that apart from influencing events in the broader society in which the political system operates, they also help in shaping of each succeeding round

of inputs to the system. The 'outputs' are, again, in the form of material and political outputs. For example, a government's *decision* to construct a railway line would be a political output, and the actual construction of the railway line would be a material output.

Further, Easton argues that, much of what happens within a political system, i.e. whatever changes that take place with regard to the structures and institutions, happens as a result of the attempts of the members of the political system to cope with the changing environment and changing inputs to the system. The institutions and structures in turn affect the output of the political system to some extent. The major part of the output is, however, influenced by the shifts in the external environment. (Easton 1965, Fisher 2011)

4) Within a political system, its members engage in at least some minimal **division of labour that provides a structure** within which action takes place. Such division of labour or structural differentiation is supplemented by mechanisms of integration whereby members are induced to cooperate to work towards common goals, in order to make authoritative decisions.

5) Easton identifies a '**feedback loop**' operating between the political system and its environment. According to him, information about the consequences of each round of outputs and the changing conditions that impact members, is essential. Such information enables authorities to measure support for its previous actions. This also helps them take those further actions which are necessary to keep at least a minimum level of support for the system intact. Thus the feedback loop is basically required to maintain stability in the system.

Critique of the Systems Analysis

The Systems Analysis is criticized mainly on the following grounds:

1) **Methodological weakness:** Some critics say that the assumption of this theory that "reality 'really' consists of systems" is problematic and misleading, while some others suggest that the systems analysis is incapable of grasping the reality of existence of individuals and isolated events not falling into a systemic relationship.

2) **Not suitable for empirical research:** Another criticism of the approach is that, due to the difficulty in identifying boundaries and variables in the system, it is a challenging task to formulate operational definitions and perform empirical research. Further, other critics pointed out, that it is impossible to understand political phenomena merely by looking at the present interactions between the system and its environment, and by totally ignoring the past. Only a study of the evolution of a system and its historical strengths and weaknesses can tell us whether an event in the present is a crisis or regular situation.

Structural- Functionalism

Structural-functionalism as a theory also presupposed a 'systems' view of the political world. Influenced by Easton's first work on the systems theory in 1956, Gabriel Almond applied it to study national political systems. Later he developed it into a new formulation, with political system as the base and bringing in other concepts related to structure and function. The most comprehensive formulations of the structural-functional approach in comparative politics are seen in the works of Gabriel Almond, G.B. Powell and James C. Coleman. On a first look, the structural-functional approach looks very similar to systems analysis: both focus on analysing inputs and outputs, both talk about maintaining an equilibrium, and both talk about the crucial role of feedback. There, however, is a small but crucial difference between these two variants of political systems approach.

While the systems analysis focuses on the degree and nature of interactions between the environment and the political system to explain working of a political system, the structural-functional theory places emphasis on the specific nature of the structures and institutions and their functions, in explaining political reality.

Structural-functionalists argued that political systems operate in both a domestic and an international 'environment'. From this environment it receives 'inputs' both in the form of demands and supports, which it converts and returns back in the form of 'outputs'. The inputs and outputs are transactions between the system and its environment.

Almond in the first phase of his work, rather than focusing on concepts of institution or organization, emphasised on role and structure. Role signified the interacting units of the system, whereas structure represented the patterns in which interaction took place. Almond also introduced the concept of political culture, which later came to be identified as a separate approach to study comparative politics.

Gabriel Almond (1911-2002)

Source: www.lifeinlegacy.com , accessed on 07-01-2015 at 9.30 pm

In what Chilcote (1994) terms the second phase of structural-functional writing by Almond, he engaged in elaboration of a set of structures and functions. In a book co-edited with Coleman, Almond (Almond in Almond & Coleman 1960) wrote an introductory chapter, where he advocated the concept of political system to replace those of state and legal institutions. He simultaneously also suggested that the concept of function should substitute the concepts of power, role should substitute office, and structure should substitute institution.

Comparative Model of Almond

Employing the concepts mentioned above, Almond (Almond in Almond & Coleman 1960) advanced the thesis that all political systems – whether advanced or backward – have some universal characteristics, on the basis of which comparison of these systems are possible. These characteristics are:

1) All political systems have political structures. Comparison between political systems can be done keeping in mind the degree or form of structural specialization.
2) The same functions are performed in all political systems, though different kinds of structures may perform them and perform in different manners.
3) All political systems are multi-functional, no matter how specialized they are, or regardless of whether they are modern or primitive. Political systems can be compared by looking at specificity of functions of structures.
4) All political structures are 'mixed' in the cultural sense. There are no completely modern or completely primitive societies based on their respective degrees of rationality and traditionality. All political systems are, rather, a 'mix' of both. Comparison can be made on the basis of dominance of one aspect over another.

Thus, structural-functionalists ask, in each political system, what structures are performing what functions. In this way they want to explain the discrepancies between the developed and the developing countries. They pointed to the comparative lack of structural differentiation and the paucity of functional complexity, on the part of some states vis-à-vis others.

In his formulation Almond incorporated the Eastonian input-output-feedback framework too. But he developed his own functional categories of inputs and outputs, as he thought that the Eastonian formulation had limitations. For him, 'input functions' are the mechanisms through which the system interacts with its environment, and the means through which the demands and supports are accessed to the political system. Almond (1960) talked of four 'input functions', namely:

i)   Political socialization and recruitment
ii)   Interest articulation
iii)   Interest aggregation and
iv)   Political communication

The first input is about participation of people in a political culture. The second is about expressing interests and demanding action. Third input refers to the functions of political parties, which aggregate interests and demands. Political communication is required to ensure all the other three. It links inputs to outputs, as it provides the function of feedback loop in Almond's schema. All these input functions are seen as essential for a political system to run smoothly and deliver outputs.

Likewise Almond talked of three output functions:

i)   Rule making
ii)   Rule application and
iii)   Rule adjudication

These outputs are government functions which can be likened to the traditional description of powers of three institutions of government, namely legislature, executive and judiciary.

Adopting this scheme of input functions and output functions, the structural functionalists explain the stability or instability of a system. If a political system is 'developed', i.e. if it is characterized by sufficient degrees of structural specialization and an ability to foster and expand political participation, then it can survive. Other the system crumbles and falls. In the 1960s, Almond and Coleman were the first scholars to compare the political systems of 'developing' areas systematically according to a common set of categories.

Criticisms of the Political Systems Approach

Most of the criticisms of the structural-functional approach are common with the general criticisms of systems theory. Thus, unlike in the section dealing with systems theory of Easton where we discussed its specific criticisms, in the following we shall deal with the criticisms of the political systems approach in general.

1) **Strong conservative political bias:** This criticism is interesting, because at the time when Easton proposed his approach, it was seen by many as having a liberal bent. But critics point that his approach was overly concerned with equilibrium, and avoided situations of stress, contradiction and conflict that generally characterize the 'normal' conditions of the modern state. Like Easton's theory, structural-functionalism too is accused of having a conservative bias, as it merely describes what exists and what enables to maintain the existing rather than saying what ought to be. This is seen as a status-quo-ist position. Almond and Powell, however, had a response to this criticism in their work published in 1966, where they argued that political systems are not necessarily stable, but are interdependent. What it means is that, what happens in one part of the political system affects what happens to the whole. Thus their theory seems to be at least explanatory, if not normative. It does not merely talk about maintaining stability, but attempts to explain all kinds of political situations.

2) **Conceptual confusion:** Both the theories within the political systems approach are criticised for use of confusing jargons and their tendency to present rather simple phenomena in complicated way. Such a way of presenting their theories, it is alleged, hinders understanding. Many scholars also doubted this use of jargons as an attempt to sell 'old story in new terminology'.

3) **Ethnocentrism:** Though the political systems approach claims to bring in the non-Western world into comparisons, their concern with a structurally differentiated and secular political system, where regular interactions between the political system and its environment take place, and where there is a regular flow of input and output, make it far more readily applicable to the democratic systems of the West than to authoritarian and dictatorial ones.
   Cases where political inputs are non-existent, as in most non-democracies, were often left out from the discussions, or otherwise, their political characteristics were reinterpreted to fit the analysis.

4) **Realization of importance of institutions:** The final set-back to the political systems approach came from a realization that no political analysis which overlooks its central concern, the 'state', is adequate. Systems approach, while focused a lot on

the inputs, outputs or feedbacks, totally ignored the thing on which all these operated, i.e. the state.

Conclusion

With the realization that study of institutions form a crucial part of any study about political organization of society, by the 1970s and 1980s, scholars of comparative politics started taking a second look at the state and its significance as a focus of study. This intellectual development led to the resurgence and growth the institutional approach in a new form, known as the new institutional approach.

The contributions of old institutional and the political systems approach to the study of comparative politics, however, are undeniable. While the old institutional approach holds the base of the new institutional approach, the political systems approach which developed and flourished at the time of many crucial international events, such as the World Wars, decolonization and the Cold War, drew the attention of students of comparative politics to some very important dimensions that the discipline needs to engage with.

Summary

At various points of time in the evolution of the sub-discipline of comparative politics, various approaches to compare political systems and processes of countries around the world are thought to be apt. Comparative politics as field emerged in the studies of Traditional Institutional nature, in the later parts of nineteenth century and the early part of the twentieth century. Some prominent scholars who adopted this approach are James Bryce, A.L. Lowell, and M. Ostrogorski. Starting from the interwar period and mainly in the post Second World War period, this old institutional approach to comparative politics was found to be inadequate to explain political realities of various political systems, including the non-Western and developing ones. This, along with a new enthusiasm to model social sciences in the pattern of natural sciences, commonly known as the Behavioural Revolution in the social sciences, encouraged political scientists to abandon this traditional institutional approach in favour of the Political Systems approach, which attempted to build general theories to explain political phenomena. The major proponents of this approach were David Easton and Gabriel Almond. This approach too, however, faced a decline starting from the 1970s and 1980s, with the increasing realization that the neglect of the state in Political Systems theory is a limitation, and that any meaningful study of politics cannot ignore the state.

Glossary

Abstraction: the process of formulating general concepts by withdrawing specificities of different cases and by focussing on common properties.

Division of labour: It refers to specialization of cooperating individuals in pursuit of a common outcome.

Empirical Research: It is a way of acquiring knowledge through direct or indirect observation and/ or experience.

Ethnocentrism: Ethnocentrism is a tendency to believe that one's own social, cultural or ethnic group is centrally important, and all other cultures or societies are judged in relation to it.

Jargon: Characteristic language or word of a specific group, which are difficult for others to understand

Status-quo: It is a Latin word, which means existing situation or state of affairs

Third World: The terminology was originally used during the Cold War to refer to those countries which did not ally either with the American bloc or the USSR bloc. In present contexts, the term often refers to developing postcolonial countries of Asia, Africa, Latin America and Oceania.

Exercises

1. **Write an essay answering each of the following two questions:**

   a) **What is the central focus of the Traditional Institutional Approach to comparative politics? Critically evaluate some features of this approach.**

   b) **Discuss the Political Systems Approach with reference to the major works of David Easton and Gabriel Almond.**

2. **Write brief answers to the following questions:**
   a) **What do you understand by an 'approach' to study comparative politics? Elaborate with examples.**
   b) **Discuss how the field of comparative politics is different from other fields in the discipline of Political Science, such as Political Theory and International Relations.**
   c) **Do you think the Traditional Institutional Approach is a valuable contribution to the field of comparative politics? Give reasons for your answer.**
   d) **What are the major factors that encouraged the development of the Political Systems approach?**
   e) **What is the phenomenon of 'Behavioural Revolution' in the social sciences?**

    f) Discuss some of the major terminologies of the political systems approach, taking into account theorizations by both Easton and Almond.

    g) What are 'inputs' and 'outputs' in the Political Systems approach, and how are they related to the stability and functioning of a political system.

    h) Discuss some limitations of the systems theory advanced by David Easton.

    i) Why do you think the Political Systems Approach has been rejected as an effective method to study politics comparatively, beginning from the 1970s and 1980s?

3. Choose the most suitable option:

    a) A system is:

      i) an isolated phenomenon

      ii) an mechanical tool

      iii) a set of elements which cohere closely and are abstracted from real society through an analytical boundary

      iv) the whole society within which various elements interact and shape political outcomes

    b) A 'demand' is:

      i) an input

      ii) a feedback

      iii) an output

      iv) support

    c) Which one is incorrect?

      i) Supportive behaviour may or may not be externally observable

      ii) 'withinputs' are not really inputs

      iii) Political Systems approach is guilty of ethnocentrism

      iv) Rule making is an 'input function'

Answer Keys to the objective type questions

3 (a): ii

3 (b): iii

3 (c): i

3 (d): iv

References and Further Readings

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