

Approaches to the Study of Political Science

After reading this chapter, you will be conversant with:

- Meaning
- Traditional Approaches and Their Limitations
- Contemporary Approaches and Their Limitations

A detailed study of a subject requires certain approaches. Each subject will follow certain methods to study it. The knowledge or wisdom applied for studying a subject is termed as an 'approach'. The term 'approach' or 'method' is variably used in the subject of political science. They are, sometimes, used interchangeably. Method is a common term, which signifies a particular approach of doing something. In a methodical study, a method may be defined as the process of inquiry by means of which consistent knowledge could be achieved and a consistent conclusion can possibly be drawn. Conversely, approach is an extensive term, which comprehends not only method but also the focus of study so as to understand a specified phenomenon. According to Vernon Van Dyke, 'An approach consists of criteria of selection—criteria employed in selecting the problems or questions to consider and in selecting the data to bring to bear; it consists of standards governing the inclusion and exclusion of questions and data.' He further comments on the distinction between approach and method as, 'In brief, approaches consist of criteria for selecting problems and relevant data, whereas methods are procedures for getting and utilizing data.' A great deal of early writings on politics were normative in character as it supported what should or ought to be the ideal polity. The ancient Greek thinkers like Plato and Aristotle followed this approach and meticulously provided elaborate indications of 'what the good society' ought to be.

TRADITIONAL APPROACHES

The study of politics comprises an extensive tradition. A number of approaches are adopted for this reason to study politics. Generally, the approaches that continued till the end of World War II are described as traditional approaches. These approaches valued only the fundamental aspects of the theory. As Alan Ball in his book *Modern Politics and Government* rightly says, 'the use of the label "traditional" is neither a criticism nor a refutation of the obvious fact that they still play an important role in modern political studies'. Based on the methods applied in studying a subject, the approaches are classified into traditional and modern or contemporary. The traditional approach is based on values and normative methods. Many subjects and concepts that developed are based on the traditional approaches. The traditional approach is further classified into the following five approaches:

- i. Historical approach
- ii. Comparative approach
- iii. Institutional approach
- iv. Philosophical approach
- v. Legal approach

Historical Approach

This approach assumes that a political system arises out of socio-economic crisis. Machiavelli, Montesquieu, Seeley and others stressed upon the historical approach as a method and a proper study of the political phenomena. The reason for this is all the political institutions, their origin and growth and their present status may be well understood in the framework of their past history. The relevance of this method is, it not only explains about the past but also supplies required principles for interpreting the future. An English theorist, Michael Oakeshott, is of the view that, 'genuine historical study is an indispensable part of political education'. The historical approach also enables us to understand about certain valuable generalizations with authentic evidence. Based on the gathered information of history, we may analyse the validity of excogitated thoughts. This information of history warns us against repeating the blunders of the past and correcting them for the betterment of our future life. Professor E. M. Sait puts this as, 'History, in this way, becomes like a great teacher of wisdom. It enlarges mental horizon, improves the perspective and builds up an attitude towards events that may be termed as sense of history'. Similarly, Professor Alfred Zimmern says, 'It is a contact with the art which equips men and communities for the tasks of the present; and more bewildering the present, the greater the accumulation of material goods and material cares, the greater the need for inspiration and refreshment from the past'. Professor Laski also says, 'The study of politics must make an effort to codify the results of experience in the history of states'. Thus, the historical approach makes use of the knowledge of history

and applies it to understand the political life. History signifies an ever-changing process, affecting the entire social life. Sabine points that, 'each political theory is advanced in response to some specific situation. It is necessary to recapitulate the circumstances under which a particular theory was produced, for understanding its relevance to the present situation'. This approach facilitates to make out meaningful patterns of political life. It is chronological and descriptive and tries to find relation of political life with the changing social situations. Aristotle, in the ancient Greek period, Machiavelli, Austin Montesquieu and others in the middle-period adopted this approach in their study.

Limitations of Historical Approach

Historical approach has some limitations and inadequacies. Lord Bryce has warned us against the tendency of making superficial resemblances. He says:

Historical parallels may be interesting and sometimes illuminating, but they may be misleading also. The elements of subjectivity in seeking historical facts and then using them for the purpose of a political study may stand in the way of an objective assessment. Thus, the historical investigator may be influenced, consciously or unconsciously, by his religious beliefs, his political partisanship, his racial prejudices, or his philosophical doctrines.

Sidgwick also says, 'I do not think that the historical method is the one to be primarily used in attempting to find reasoned solutions of the problems of practical politics'.

Barker is of the view that 'the state is concerned less with historic processes than with the fundamental realities—essence, purpose and value—which transcend the category of time'.

Some of the critics say that it is impossible to follow the ancient ideas in the contemporary world. It is thus said what history reveals is partly correct. David Easton warned against living 'parasitically on a century-old ideas' and failing to develop a 'new political synthesis'. Another factor is most of the modern political life has special features, uniqueness and problems. All the historical incidents are not relevant to most of these features.

Regarding the scope of history, it is broad as it encompasses varied fields such as literature, science and art, whereas the scope of political science is limited. It explains only the state and features that is concerned with it. Emphasizing on the difference we can say that political science is concerned with the welfare of the individuals, their security and all kinds of benefits.

History is only concerned with the past events. However, the modern renewal of interesting values has led to a transformed interest in the rich heritage of political thought as a guiding principle for our own age. As a case in point, John Rawls has built his celebrated theory of justice for which he has borrowed the methodology from Locke and Kant. Similarly, C. B. Macpherson has built his theory of democracy by reverting to Aristotle and J. S. Mill while rejecting Bentham's utilitarianism and the contemporary elitism of Schumpeter and Robert Dahl.

Comparative Approach

This approach illustrates generalization through comparisons. Aristotle, for the first time introduced the comparative approach in political science. He studied 158 constitutions of his time and after analysing and comparing them he wrote the book *The Politics*. In modern times, several philosophers, like Herman Finer, Montesquieu, De Tocqueville, Bryce and many others, used this approach. The comparative approach intends to study about the available political institutions, constitutions, political culture and party system of various countries which have existed in the past. After making a comparative study, the investigator discovers the ideal types and implements it in the existing system for a speedy progress. Bryce compared the democratic systems of different countries and recommended their merits, demerits and the methods to be adopted for the success of democracy. The Constituent Assembly of India followed this pattern in the preparation of the constitution. F. W. Riggs and others also followed this approach in their theory of 'Comparative Public Administration'. J. S. Mill proposed three forms for the comparative method and stated that any one of them can be applied. According to him, in the first case, two 'identical political' systems are taken for consideration. From the process of difference between these systems a conclusion is derived. For instance, both the United Kingdom and the United States are democratic countries. The point of difference is that Britain is a welfare state while the United States is based on the ideal of free enterprise. The next two 'fairly opposite political systems' are the American and ex-Soviet Union systems. The former is democratic and the latter is a totalitarian state. In this way, two opposite systems and its qualities are compared. The third is the comparison between two 'dissimilar political parties' such as an ideal party and a radical party.

Recently, the comparative approach has come under intensified discussion. A research panel appointed by UNESCO has submitted a report on the 'Comparative Government' in 1944. The UNESCO project, and the handbook it published on *Contemporary Political Science* also has discussed about the contemporary issues of the world countries. The International Political Science Association in 1952 has discussed to a considerable extent about the contemporary issues in the world based on the report of W. A. Robson. The interest shown encouraged the International Political Science Association to devote a particular round-table on the study of 'Comparative Government', which was held in Florence in April 1954, followed by a report of Professor Gunnar Heckscher. The participants in the round-table came to an agreement on the importance of studying the comparative governments and the reasons for which such a study was regarded as profitable. Heckscher writes in his report,

Comparative studies as the core of any study of "foreign" government. They are of pedagogical importance, especially, if we are to gain a reasonable realistic and relativistic view of our own government. Because of the growth of international contacts, scientific political or economic comparisons between different countries, as well as a knowledge of foreign institutions, are of great political value.

Then he sums up the contribution of the comparative method to the development of political science itself. He says:

If we regard our field of study as mainly descriptive, comparisons are required to help us refine our fold of description. If we have hopes of establishing a general theory on an inductive basis, we can do so only through comparison. If we attempt to test specific hypothesis, this is possible only if we bring in sufficient number of examples, to be investigated by the comparative method.

Limitations of Comparative Approach

- Comparative approach is appreciable for being 'scientific'. Due to this, some valid conclusion can be derived. But the intricacy is, in some cases our evaluation may be substandard or may not suit the purpose or the results may be irrelevant.
- The danger of this method is that the divergent principles may not allow other systems to continue.

Institutional Approach

The institutional approach is closely related to legal approach but there are minor differences also. This approach alone gives independent identity to the systematic study of politics among the traditional approaches. The traditional approach studies the subject of formal and informal institutions resembling state, government and its various forms. All the organs of the government such as executive, legislative and the judiciary, and the forms of the government like unitary, federal parliamentary and presidential are studied separately in this approach. This approach enables us to learn about the structure, functions and powers of the institution, persons with specific position and role of organizing each of the institution. All these will be studied and their relation with the people and government will be analysed. The approach intends at giving an elaborate description of facts. Vernon Van Dyke aptly summed up by stating 'An institution is any persistent system of activities and expectations, or any stable pattern of group behavior'. The success of democratic countries depends upon efficient functioning of its organs. Therefore, an analytical study is essential to learn about the functions of its organs. Thus, the institutional approach helps in learning about the functioning of various systems present in the country. The decentralization of power and independent status raised the importance to these organs, thus, facilitating to learn much about these institutions. From the times of Plato and Aristotle till today, the importance of this approach is identified.

Limitations of Institutional Approach

- This approach is confined to institutions and hence it is considered as a narrow approach.
- Modern thinkers involve sociological, psychological and economic conditions in their study and as a result the traditional approach is neglected because it is confined to a particular subject.

- This approach gives importance only to institutions and gives least, if not negligible, importance to factors that encourage them in fulfilling their duties.

Philosophical Approach

This approach is aimed to study how to accomplish a philosophy. A philosophical approach is a method of doing some activity in a systematic or patterned way. A common view is that philosophy is distinguished by the methods that philosophers follow in tackling philosophical question. This approach establishes certain facts, which are highly historical and theoretical in their nature. Plato and Rousseau are the prominent exponents of this approach. The deductive approach involves analysis from a particular conclusion of from a number of general principles to its consequences. In political science, this approach starts from some theoretical innovative idea about human nature and draws deduction from that idea concerning the nature of the state. This approach synchronizes its theories with the real facts of history. The philosophical method, unlike other methods of political science, stresses a separate and goal-oriented view. Though, none are objective, it is a desideratum and we must strive for it as best as we can.

Limitations of Philosophical Approach

- This approach will not suit the modern studies as the latter stresses on realism.
- Only inductive and deductive methods are given importance here.
- This philosophy tries to replace opinion of knowledge postulated by others.

Legal Approach

The legal approach of a country fundamentally deals with the legitimacy, allocation of powers between union and states, the control of the state and powers of the political societies. The concepts and principles of the state have come out of moral and ethical foundations of power. As a result, structural modifications came out in the government. Many philosophers and their ideologies advanced to support the present patterns of power relationships. Due to their contribution, the legality has acquired a shape in the consequent wide-ranging changes of political processes and activities. This approach intends to recognize politics in terms of law. It concentrates on the legal and constitutional framework on which different organs of the government have to function and their legal positions, powers and the procedures. The legal approach of the Indian politics analyses about the legal implications and various provisions of the Indian Constitution, the decisions of the Supreme Court of India, the opinions of legal personalities, procedures and legal positions of the two houses of the parliament and state legislatures, procedures of election or appointment, powers and position of the president, prime minister and governors.

Limitations of Legal Approach

- The legal approach will not entertain the complex political conditions that exist outside the legal formal framework.

- As Vernon Van Dyke points out,

'Nor is the legal approach to be disparaged. After all, both the procedures and the substance of political action at every level are often controlled by law. In the field of both domestic and international politics, law frequently prescribes the action to be taken in given contingencies; it also forbids action or fixes the limits of permissible action.'

CONTEMPORARY APPROACHES/MODERN APPROACHES

Contemporary approach studies about the new trends in political science. The emergence of intellectual revolution of the United States developed new trends in political science. This wave created a new intellectual order in the subject. Almond and Powell classified these changes into four methods, which are as follows:

- i. The search for comprehensiveness
- ii. The search for realism
- iii. The search for precision
- iv. The search for theoretical order to justify the situation

The end of liberal tradition witnessed the unique expansion of the university system with the beginning of the innovative phase in the development of political science. A common argument is that these modifications are the result of immeasurable sociological, economic, scientific and technological revolutions. A. B. Mathur noticing this change says, "The expanded dimensions of Political Science, therefore, present a vast mosaic which can be understood partly historically and partly analytically". These contemporary approaches are studied according to the following methods:

- i. Behavioural approach
- ii. Power approach
- iii. Marxian approach

Behavioural Approach

After World War II, many changes have taken place in the field of political science. A new generation of political scientists emerged, and their aim was to explain life in relation to the struggle for power by the government, people and administration. They believe that the old pattern of study of social or political sciences must come out of the nucleus of the study of government. These old methods must be replaced by the sociological, psychological and economic factors. Therefore, it is said that traditional theories are recognized as 'value-based and the behavioral theories are facts-based'. Professor Charles Merriam is known as the father of Behavioural Revolution. A host of his students provided