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CHAPTER 2

The Study of Politics: Logic, Approaches and Methods

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Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of the methodological issues relating to the study of politics. The chapter will examine the logic, approaches and methods that underpin the study of politics. It will explain the relationship between logic, approaches and methods in political science research. The chapter will review the nature, features and basic assumptions underlying each of the three methodological issues surrounding the study of politics, and provide an understanding of how these issues frame the study of politics. Before I proceed, let me note that my discussion of the study of politics in this chapter is a bit simplistic, so the reader should not take it as definitive. My style is informed by the aim of the chapter, which is to introduce the reader, in an unsophisticated manner, to the overall thrust of research in political science. Thus, if some elements of my discussion look shallow in some way, the reader is assured that there are more nuanced and advanced versions of the subject published somewhere.

There is a close connection between the logic, approaches and methods of political inquiry. The logic of political inquiry refers to the underlying ontological and epistemological justification of the approaches and methods of political inquiry (Brewer 2000: 2). This provides the framework within which approaches and methods of political inquiry are couched. It is a common practice in the social sciences to locate research approaches and methods within broader ontological and epistemological foundation of knowledge. In fact, a specific field of study examines the 'fit' between research methods and the logic that validates them. This field of knowledge is known as the philosophy of social research (Hughes 1990).

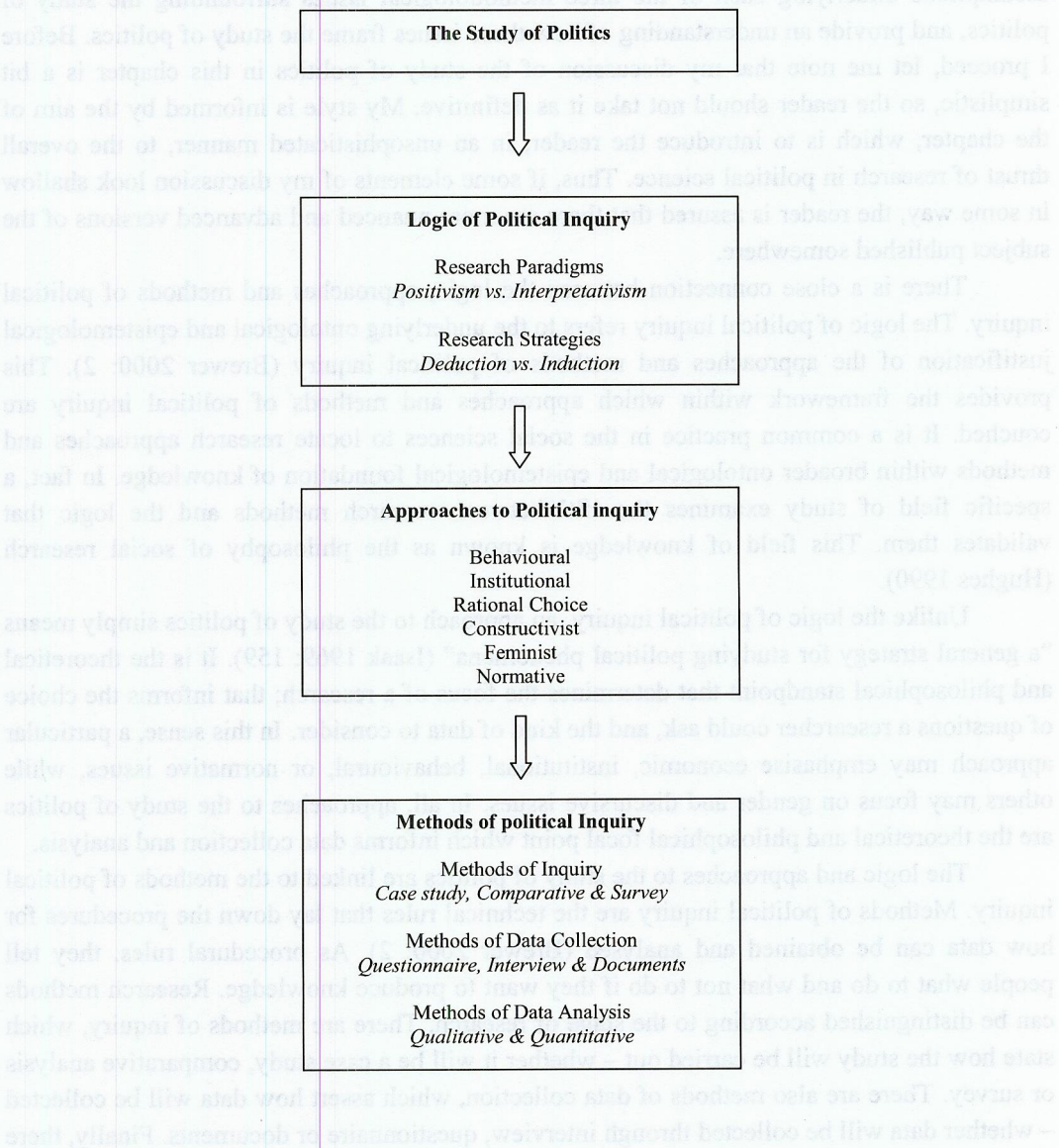
Unlike the logic of political inquiry, an approach to the study of politics simply means "a general strategy for studying political phenomena" (Isaak 1969: 159). It is the theoretical and philosophical standpoint that determines the focus of a research; that informs the choice of questions a researcher could ask, and the kind of data to consider. In this sense, a particular approach may emphasise economic, institutional, behavioural, or normative issues, while others may focus on gender and discursive issues. In all, approaches to the study of politics are the theoretical and philosophical focal point which informs data collection and analysis.

The logic and approaches to the study of politics are linked to the methods of political inquiry. Methods of political inquiry are the technical rules that lay down the procedures for how data can be obtained and analysed (Brewer 2000: 2). As procedural rules, they tell people what to do and what not to do if they want to produce knowledge. Research methods can be distinguished according to the stage of research. There are methods of inquiry, which state how the study will be carried out – whether it will be a case study, comparative analysis or survey. There are also methods of data collection, which assert how data will be collected – whether data will be collected through interview, questionnaire or documents. Finally, there

are methods of data analysis, which specify how data will be analysed – whether the research will use statistical or non-statistical methods.

In sum, it is argued that knowledge production in political science follows the interconnectedness between the logic (the ontological and epistemological justification for approaches and methods), the approaches (the theoretical and philosophical basis for data collection and analysis), and methods (the procedural rules for data collection and analysis). Figure 1 below summarises the methodological issues surrounding the study of politics. The figure highlights the nature, features and interconnections between logic, approaches and methods of political inquiry. The following sections will present a synopsis of these three aspects of the study of politics.

Figure 1
Methodological Issues Surrounding the Study of politics



Logic of Political Inquiry

The logic of political inquiry revolves around two major issues – determining research paradigms and strategies. Research paradigms are the broad ontological and epistemological traditions through which scholars attempt to understand the social world. On the other hand, research strategies are the processes required to answer research questions, to solve intellectual puzzles, and to generate new knowledge (Blaikie 2007: 2). Research strategies specify the starting point, a series of steps, and the end point of any research endeavour. Together, research paradigms and strategies underpin the various approaches and methods of political inquiry.

Research paradigms

Research paradigms are different ontological and epistemological perspectives from which researchers approach the study of politics. Two major research paradigms are dominant in political science – the positivist and interpretivist paradigms.

The positivist paradigm

The positivist paradigm is modelled on the methods of the natural sciences. It posits that all sciences, whether natural or social, should use the epistemology of empiricism. The epistemology of empiricism emphasise the search for and discovery of reality. Positivists regard reality as consisting of discrete events that can be observed by human senses. They seek knowledge based on systematic observation and experiment, with the goal of discovering social laws analogous to the natural laws uncovered by the methods of natural sciences. Positivist analysis seeks to hypothesise and then evaluate causal inferences about social phenomena that will be generalisable beyond the specific data analysed. A fundamental assumption of the positivist paradigm is the existence of objective reality and facts, which can be known, understood or approximated through appropriate research methods. Positivist analyses must be both replicable and testable across cases, and the validity of the analysis can be evaluated accordingly. The positivist paradigm maintains that a true explanation or cause of an event or social pattern can be found and tested by scientific standards of verification.

Auguste Comte is believed to be the father of positivism (Ritzer 1996: 13). Comte was confident that scientific knowledge about the society can be accumulated and used to improve human existence. He insists that scientific study of the society is possible if scholars would restrict themselves to collecting data about phenomena which can be objectively observed and classified. Comte argued that social scientists should not be concerned with the internal meanings, motives, feelings and emotions of individuals, since these mental states exist only in a person's consciousness and thus, cannot be observed and measured in any objective way. Comte believes that it is possible to classify the social world in an objective way. Using these classifications, it was possible to count sets of observable social facts and so produce statistics. To Comte, positivist analysis entails a search for correlations and causal connections. A correlation is the tendency for two or more things to be found together and may refer to the strength of the relationship between them. A strong correlation between two or more social phenomena may prompt positivists to suspect that one of the phenomena is causing the other to occur. However, this might sometimes not necessarily be the case. Thus,

it is important to analyse data carefully before concluding that one phenomenon causes another.

The interpretivist paradigm

The interpretivist paradigm has its roots in the field of anthropology. It is closely associated with the work of Clifford Geertz. Geertz (1973) proposed a shift away from positivist analyses towards the study of communally defined subjective understanding. Geertz contends that objective truth cannot be known since all attempts to understand “facts” are viewed through various subjective lenses, including the researchers’. This view sees people’s understandings, and therefore subjectively constructed social reality, as “fleeting, dynamic, and constantly changing” (Roth and Mehta 2002: 134). Geertz (1973:5) insists that the study of culture for instance, is not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretative one in search of meaning. He contends that what we construe as fact in our data cannot be truly objective because they are really “our own constructions of other people’s constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to” (p. 9). Because interpretative analysis is linked to specific cultural systems, it is hard to systematically theorise, assess or to empirically test its validity. Rather, interpretative analyses are taken to be self validating (Roth and Mehta 2002: 134). The legitimacy of the analysis is judged by how well the phenomenon is explained with the corroboration of the evidence put forth. The interpretivist paradigm does not seek an objective truth so much as to unravel patterns of subjective understanding. It assumes that all versions of the truth are shaped by the viewer’s perceptions and understanding of their world. The differences between the positivist and interpretative paradigms are summarised in Table 1 below. In sum, the interpretivist paradigm seeks to illuminate social meanings that reflect cultural beliefs and values while the positivist paradigm seeks to establish causal laws to explain objectively viewed phenomena.

Table 1
Summary of Positivist and Interpretivist Paradigms

<i>Positivism</i>	<i>Interpretivism</i>
Causation – Seeks to understand the causal explanation for a phenomenon or event.	Interpretation – Seeks to understand how people interpret a phenomenon or event.
Objective reality – Presumes the “existence of facts”.	Subjective reality – Recognises the “construction of facts”; facts are seen as interpreted and subjective.
Generality – Analysis seeks a “law” that extends beyond specific instances studied.	Specificity – Analysis is context specific and based only on the subjective understanding of individuals within a specific context.
Replicability – Analyses can be tested and verified empirically against other cases.	Self-validation – Analysis can only be self-validating, through the consistency and coherence of “thick description”.

Source: Roth and Mehta (2002: 136)

Research strategies

There are two major research strategies or style of reasoning in the field of political science, namely the inductive and deductive research strategies. An inductive research strategy begins with a number of specific statements and concludes with a general or universal statement.

The premisses of the inductive argument are statements about specific instances of some events or state of affairs and the conclusion is a generalisation drawn from the premisses. In an inductive argument, the conclusion makes claims that exceed what is contained in the premisses; it promises to extend knowledge by going beyond observed instances of some phenomenon.

Inductive research strategy consists of four stages that correspond to a popular conception of the activities of a scientist (see Hempel 1966: 11). These stages include:

- Make careful observations, that is, all facts are observed and recorded without selection as to their relative importance.
- Conduct experiments or tests, including comparison and classification of facts without the use of hypotheses.
- Rigorously analyse the data obtained and from this analysis, inductively draw generalisations as to the relations between them.
- Produce new discoveries, theories and generalisations, which will be subjected to further testing.

Opposed to the inductive research strategy is the deductive research strategy. Whereas inductivists look out for evidence to confirm their generalisation (justificationism), deductivists try to falsify their hypotheses, that is, unconfirmed speculations about phenomenon (falsificationism). A deductive argument moves from premisses, at least one of which is a general or universal statement, to a conclusion that is a specific statement. The deductive research strategy begins with a question or a problem that needs to be understood or explained. Instead of starting with observation, it begins by producing a possible answer to the question; to look for an explanation for the problem in existing theory, or to invent a new theory.

The deductive research strategy proceeds in the following order (see Popper 1959: 32-3):

1. Begin by putting forward a tentative idea, a hypothesis or a set of hypotheses that form a theory.
2. With the help of other previously accepted hypotheses, or by specifying conditions under which hypotheses are expected to hold, deduce a conclusion(s).
3. Examine the conclusion(s) and the logic of the argument that produced them. Compare this argument with existing theories to see if it constitutes an advance in our understanding.
4. Test the conclusion by gathering appropriate data; make the necessary observations/experiments.
5. If the data are not consistent with the conclusion, the theory must be false. If, however, the conclusion passes the test, the theory is temporarily supported; it is corroborated.

The deductive and inductive strategies follow the division between positivism and interpretativism. While the main concern of positivists is to establish causal explanation of social phenomena through theory testing, interpretativists seek to arrive at plausible interpretation of social phenomena through theory building. Theory building emphasises the exploration of meanings, as such, it involves an inductive strategy. Scholars attempting to build theory begins with data collection through observations, proceed to data analysis through comparison and classification of facts, and then end with the production of new

discoveries, theories and generalisations that will be subjected to further testing. On the other hand, researchers interested in theory testing are focused on establishment of truth or law. Following a deductive strategy, these scholars begin by putting forward a tentative idea or a hypothesis, with the help of other previously accepted hypotheses, or by specifying conditions under which hypotheses are expected to hold, they deduce a conclusion(s), and test the conclusion by gathering appropriate data and making the necessary observations/experiments. If the data are not consistent with the conclusion, the theory must be false, but if the conclusion passes the test, then the theory is corroborated. Thus, there is a close relationship between research paradigm and strategy. The choice of research paradigm and strategies has serious implications for research approaches and methods that scholars can adopt, especially in terms of determining the questions and methods that would lead to establishment of the truth or discovery of meanings. Before explicating these issues let me, first of all, examine the approaches to political inquiry.

Approaches to Political Inquiry

There are several approaches to political inquiry, each stressing different ideas and political reality. I will not attempt to review all the approaches in political science due to dearth of space; instead, I will focus on the following to give the reader a sense what a research approach means: the behavioural, institutional, rational choice, constructivist, feminist, and normative approaches.

The behavioural approach

Historically, the behavioural approach originated as a protest movement within political science. Behaviouralists share a strong sense of dissatisfaction with the achievements of conventional political science, especially the historical, philosophical, and descriptive-institutional approaches. Dahl (1961: 766) observed that all behaviouralists share “a mood of scepticism about the current intellectual attainment of political science, a mood of sympathy toward ‘scientific’ modes of investigation and analysis, a mood of optimism about the possibilities of improving the study of politics”. Apparent in the mood of behaviouralists are methodological and theoretical questions. The advent of the behavioural approach signals the absorption of scientific method into political science. It also underscores the efforts within political science to give meaning to behaviour by relating it to some empirical theoretical context. Thus, the behavioural approach sought to improve our understanding of politics by seeking to explain the empirical aspects of political life through the means of methods, theories, and criteria of proof that are acceptable according to the canons, conventions, and assumptions of modern empirical science (Dahl 1961: 767).

The behavioural approach emanated as a psychological concept adopted to help eliminate from scientific research all reference to subjective issues such as intentions, desires, or ideas (Easton 1967: 12). To the behaviouralists, only those observations obtained through the use of the sense organs or mechanical equipment were to be accepted as data. The subject matter of behavioural research is the observable behaviour generated by external stimuli rather than inferences about the subjective state of mind of the person being observed. As a psychological concept, the behavioural approach is concerned with the individual, especially the face-to-face relationship among individuals. Behaviouralists look at actors in the political system as individuals who have the emotions, prejudices, and predispositions of human

beings. As such, they tend to elevate human beings to the centre of research attention. They argue that the traditionalists have been reifying institutions, treating them as entities that stand apart from the individuals that constitute them (Easton 1953: 201-205). Behaviouralists therefore study the political process by looking at how it relates to the motivations, personalities, or feelings of human actors.

The key idea behind the behavioural approach is the conviction that there are certain fundamental units of analysis relating to human behaviour out of which generalisations can be made, and that these generalisations might provide a common base on which the specialised science of man in society could be built (Easton 1967: 23). This has led to the search for a common unit of analysis that could easily feed into the special subject matters of each of the social science disciplines. Ideally, the units would constitute the particles out of which all social behaviour is formed and which manifest themselves through different institutions, structure, and processes. The adoption of the label “behavioural science” symbolises the expectation that some common variable may be found, variables of a kind that will stand at the core of a theory useful for the better understanding of human behaviour in all fields.

The institutional approach

The institutional approach focuses on the construction and operation of political institutions. Political scientists place emphasis on four basic types of political institutions (see Rothstein 1996: 133). The first is the rule making institutions that make collectively binding decisions about how to regulate the common interests in the society. The second is rule applying institutions that implement collectively binding decisions. The third is rule adjudicating institutions that deal with disputes about how to interpret the general rules laid down by rule making institutions. Finally, the rule enforcing institutions punish rule breakers. The study of the above institutions has occupied a central place in political science as a discipline. For a long time, political scientists studied these institutions as formal, static organizations such as parliaments, bureaucracy and courts.

However, interest in the institutional approach waned during the long behaviouralist interlude, when emphasis shifted to the analysis of individual agents as rational actors. The study of institutions in political science was resuscitated after March and Olsen (1984) published their groundbreaking work: “The New Institutionalism: Organizational Factors in Political Life”, in the mid-1980s. Among other things, March and Olsen (1984) deplored the tendency of scholars to reduce the explanation of the political process to individual interests. They criticized political scientists for presenting an individualistic instrumental view of politics which gives individuals precedence over institutions. In a later work, March and Olsen (1989) called for the rediscovery of institutions. Since the late 1980s, institutional analysis has been “rediscovered” in political science as well as in many other social science disciplines such as economics, sociology, and anthropology (North 1990, Powell and DiMaggio 1991, Koelble 1995). Today, many political scientists have migrated from the “old institutionalism” which sees political institutions as formal political organizations to the “new institutionalism” which defines institutions as organized, established, procedures that have become “the rules of the game” (Jepperson 1991).

Under the new institutionalist approach, institutions can be both formal and informal. A formal institution is constituted by a set of formal rules that can be derived from codified

legal orders such as a written constitution. On the other hand, an informal institution encompasses informal rules derived from particular established norms, conventions or codes of conduct, which shape the behaviour of people who implicitly or otherwise have a loyalty to that code and are subject to certain level of controls if they violate the norms (Rothstein 1996:145-146). Formal institutions are often secured by the means of the employment of physical violence against non-compliance, while informal institutions are usually guaranteed by the means of non-violent sanctions such as expulsion and shaming (Lane and Ersson 2000:34). Institutions can also be divided into micro-, macro-, and meta-institutions. A typical micro-institution operates at the individual level and it is characterised by rules set by agents who are few that they can meet in a face-to-face situation and regulate their own common interests. On the other hand, a macro-level institution operates at the state level and it is represented by a general law decided by a government to steer the behaviour of actors who may or may not have participated directly in deciding the rule (Lane and Ersson 2000:34). Finally, a meta-institution acknowledges the heterogeneity of institutions and serves to bring together several inter-related institutions. Meta-institutions allow different institutions to intersect with each other so that ambiguities in the operations of the different institutions can be resolved. Meta-institutions are particularly useful in plural and complex societies where there are different groups and interests pursuing their own logic of action; through meta-institutions such societies can establish order, consensus and contain divisive class and ethnic conflicts.

Although the new institutionalist approach has a coherent mission, it does not constitute a unified body of thought. Peter Hall and Rosemary Taylor (1996) observed the existence of three new institutionalisms. The first is historical institutionalism which borrowed ideas from group theories and structural-functionalism, and sees institutions as “formal and informal procedures, routines, norms and conventions embedded in the organisational structure of the polity or political economy” (Hall and Taylor 1996: 938). Historical institutionalists emphasise path dependence and unintended consequences in the process of institutional development. They call for the integration of institutional analysis with contributions that other factors, such as ideas, can make to political outcomes.

Rational choice institutionalism is the second perspective within the new institutionalism. Rational choice institutionalism developed out of the study congressional behaviour in America. This perspective draws its analytical tools from the “new economics of organization”, arguing that the relevant actors in an institutional set up have a fixed set of preferences, behave entirely instrumentally so as to maximize the attainment of these preferences, and do so in a highly strategic manner that presumes extensive calculation (Hall and Taylor 1996: 944-945). Rational choice institutionalists claim that an actor’s behaviour is likely to be driven, not by impersonal historical forces, but by a strategic calculus – a calculus that is deeply affected by the actor’s expectations about how other actors are likely to behave. Thus, the process of institutional evolution, continuity and change depends largely on the agreement of the relevant actors.

The sociological institutionalism is the last perspective of the new institutionalism. This perspective grew out of the subfield of organisational theory. Sociological institutionalists define institutions “much more broadly than political scientists do to include, not just formal rules, procedures or norms, but the symbol systems, cognitive scripts, and moral templates that provide the ‘frames of meaning’ guiding human action” (Hall and

Taylor 1996: 947). They argue that many of the institutional forms and procedures used by modern organisations were culturally-specific practices that draw from the myths and ceremonies devised by many societies and assimilated into organisations. Thus, they call for cultural explanation of the formal life, including bureaucratic practices. In summary, the institutionalist approach provides us with a diversified perspective of looking into how the polity is organised and the role of political institutions in the society.

The rational choice approach

The rational choice approach is concerned with understanding human behaviour. It began as an approach in the field of economics, but over the years, it has become more widely used in political science. The basic assumption of the rational choice approach is that complex social phenomena can be explained in terms of elementary individual actions of which they are composed (Scott 2000). The rational choice approach is based on the standpoint of methodological individualism. This standpoint holds that the elementary unit of social life is the individual human action. According to Elster (1989: 13) “to explain social institutions and social change is to show how they arise as the result of the action and interaction of individuals”. In the rational choice approach, individuals are seen as motivated by the wants or goals that express their preferences as well as other incentives like reward or promise of reward. In pursuit of their preferences, individuals act within specific constraints such as punishment, threat of punishment, or lack of adequate information about the condition under which they are acting. The rational choice approach assumes that the choices made by actors are the choices that best help them achieve their objectives, given all relevant factors that are beyond their control. In other words, people do their best to achieve their interests under the prevailing circumstances shaped by incentives and constraints.

The rational choice approach in political science is based on the belief that *homo economicus* equals *homo politicus* (Gandhi 2006: 2). Rational choice theorists in political science try to provide a rational behaviour rule for democratic government, in the way that economists can provide rules for rational consumers and producers (see Downs 1957). These theorists begin with the assumption that self-interest is the cornerstone of political behaviour. They consider the choice behaviour of one or more individual decision makers like voters or politicians involved in coalition negotiation. The rational choice approach holds the following axioms regarding the rational actor (Green 2002: 4):

1. The actor faces a known set of alternative choices.
2. For any pair of alternatives (say, A and B), the actor either prefers A to B, prefers B to A, or is indifferent between A and B. This is known as the axiom of completeness.
3. The actor's preferences are transitive, that is, if an actor prefers A and B, and is indifferent between B and C, then she is necessarily indifferent between A and C.
4. The actor will choose the most preferred alternative. If the actor is indifferent between two or more alternatives that are preferred to all others, he or she will choose one of those alternatives – with the specific choice from among them remaining indeterminate.

Rational choice behaviours are only behaviours that are in accord with the above axioms. Thus, a choice is rational when an actor's choice reflects the most feasible alternative implied by preferences that are complete and transitive.

The constructivist approach

The constructivist approach focuses on the role of ideas, norms, knowledge, culture, and argument in politics, stressing in particular the role of collectively held ideas and understandings on social life (Finnemore and Sikkink 2001: 392). The constructivist approach is opposed to materialist approaches, which see political behaviour as determined by the physical world alone, and the individualist approaches, which treat collective understanding as simply an off-shot of individual action. Unlike the materialist and individualist approaches, the constructivist approach focuses on understanding the processes by which identities and interests originate and change. It seeks to understand how actors are shaped by the social environment in which they live and the consequences of these social transformations. The fundamental assumptions of the constructivist approach include (Finnemore and Sikkink 2001: 392-392, see also Adler 1997, Ruggie 1998, and Wendt 1999):

1. Human interaction is shaped primarily by ideational factors, and not simply material ones.
2. The most important ideational factors are widely shared beliefs, which are not reducible to individuals.
3. These shared beliefs construct the interests and identities of purposive actors.

In terms of method of inquiry, constructivists adopt several research tools to capture intersubjective meanings. These tools include discourse analysis, process tracing, genealogy, structured focused comparison, interviews, participant observation, and content analysis (Finnemore and Sikkink 2001: 395). They assume that all research involves interpretation, and thus, there is no neutral stance from which they can gather objective knowledge about the world (Price and Reus-Smit 1998). However, constructivists are divided over how interpretation should be done and what kinds of explanation it can yield. For instance, the postmodernist constructivists reject efforts to find a point from which to assess the validity of analytical and ethical knowledge claims, while the modern constructivists claim that all interpretations or explanations are not equal, as some types of explanation and evidence are more persuasive and plausible than others (Finnemore and Sikkink 2001: 395). In analysing evidence, constructivists compare evidence with alternative explanations. They look out for evidence that would confirm alternatives and refute the explanation being assessed. Finally, they investigate whether an explanation is supported by multiple streams of data (see Putnam 1993).

The feminist approach

The feminist approach focuses on the significance of gender as a central element of social life. It is used mostly by female scholars writing on issues of women and gender. The feminist approach has three distinctive characteristics (Harding 1987: 7-9). First, it insists that research must be based on women's experiences as a source of research problems, hypotheses and evidence. This is to counter the fact that social sciences has traditionally dealt with questions that are problematic within the social experiences characteristic of men. Secondly, as men dominate traditional research; feminist research must be designed for women, to deal with what they regard as problematic from their experiences. Thirdly, in recognition that the cultural background of the researcher is part of the evidence that enters into the research, the feminist approach adopts a subjectivist stance, where the researcher places herself or himself

in the same critical plane as the subject matter. This challenges the objectivist stance that makes the researcher appear as an invisible, autonomous voice of authority.

The foundation of the feminist approach is a critique of the dominant approaches in the natural and social sciences. Feminists claim that sciences are based on a masculine world view and, thereby, omit or distort women's experiences (Stanley and Wise 1983). Again, they criticise the tendency by scientists to assume a "single society" and to ignore the possibility that men and women may inhabit different social worlds, in spite of living in the same physical location (Bernard 1973). The feminist approach challenges the norm of objectivity in science, particularly the use of quantitative method. It argues that this method can prevent the discovery of information that may be crucial for understanding issues of women and gender. Oakley (1998: 709) outlines other reasons why the feminists reject the quantitative approach as follows:

- The choice of topic in quantitative research often implicitly supports sexist values.
- Quantitative method excludes or marginalises female subjects.
- The relations between the researcher and the researched in quantitative research are intrinsically exploitative.
- The data that come out of quantitative research are usually superficial and overgeneralised.
- Quantitative research is generally not used to overcome social problems.
- The preference for working with variables rather than people in quantitative research restricts the ability of researchers to relate to and understand people. This facilitates manipulation, control, misunderstanding and misrepresentation of women by quantitative researchers.

Considering the above, the feminist approach prefers the qualitative method, particularly the method of in-depth interview. It is argued that this method allows for a more interactive and participatory research, with the possibility of non-hierarchical, non-manipulative and non-exploitative relationship between the researcher and the researched (Reinharz 1983).

The normative approach

The normative approach involves the discovery or application of moral notions in the study of politics. It represents all sorts of theory making about "what ought to be", as opposed to "what is" in political life. The normative approach draws from the philosophical thought of Greek, Roman, English, French, and German traditions in the West as well as Chinese and Indian traditions in the East. More recently, scholars such as John Rawls, Ronald Dworkin, and Robert Nozick have renewed interest in the normative approach. Normative thinkers focus on social institutions, especially those concerned with the exercise of public power, and the relationship between individuals and those institutions. They also evaluate the justifications given for the existing political arrangements and the justifiability of possible alternative arrangements (Glaser 1997: 22). The outcome of normative analysis is usually prescriptive or recommendatory.

Normative scholars undertake their analysis using three major methods (Glaser 1997: 22). First, they ensure that their moral arguments are internally consistent. They adopt argumentation styles from sources such as formal logic and analytic philosophy to measure this element. Secondly, normative scholars are concerned with the correctness of the

empirical premises of their arguments. In this regards, they draw from social science disciplines such as history and social anthropology. Thirdly, normative scholars measure the conclusions of their arguments against their own moral intuitions.

Since the 1970s, normative scholars have split into three major groups: the utilitarians, liberals, and communitarians. The utilitarians follow the traditions of the radical 19th century social reformer, Jeremy Bentham. They believe that human beings are motivated by the desire to achieve happiness and to avoid pain. Based on this assumption, utilitarians assume that the morally correct political decisions were those that sought the greatest happiness of the greatest number in the society (Glaser 1997: 23). Contrary to the utilitarians, the liberals opposed any conception of politics that might sacrifice individuals to higher purpose. The reference point in this line of thought is Immanuel Kant. Kant argued that individuals were the end and not the means, and as such they were inviolable. In other words, individuals should be free to define and pursue their own ends rather than having the ends of others imposed on them (Glaser 1997: 26). The communitarians reject the liberal concept of individual self. They argue that what we have is rather a “situated self” – one that is embedded in a community and defined by shared understandings which frame community life (Glaser 1997: 27). The community bequeath on us specific rights and obligations that define our moral make up. Most times, we get ourselves involved with the goals and aspirations of our community. Thus, the communitarians believe that individual self is possible only where communal ties have become eroded.

Methods of Political Inquiry

Although each of the approaches summarised above adopt different research methods, I will attempt to review what can be said to be the general research methods that most contemporary political scientists adopt. I will approach this task through three analytical standpoints – methods of inquiry, methods of data collection, and methods of data analysis.

Methods of inquiry

There are two main methods of inquiry, namely experiment and observation. However, students of politics rarely undertake experiments due to the complexity of political phenomena, especially their lack of regularity arising from indeterminacy and reactivity of political actors. Most analyses in political science are based on observation. There are three observational methods of political inquiry. The first is known as case study and it is based on a single case observation. The case study method involves a detailed examination of a phenomenon or an aspect of a phenomenon to develop or test explanations that may be generalisable to other cases. Case studies can serve five main purposes (Evera 1997):

- Creation of theories
- Testing of theories
- Identification of antecedent conditions
- Testing of the importance of antecedent conditions
- Explanation of important issues, events or phenomena

Some scholars see case studies as the weakest method of inquiry for two reasons: (1) they argue that case studies provide the least opportunity to control for the effect of intervening variables, (2) they argue that the results of case studies cannot be easily generalised to other cases (George and Bennett 2005). The above weakness notwithstanding, case study method

has two strengths that make it appealing to many scholars (Gerring 2004). First, because case studies show the causal processes, it is usually easier to infer and test explanations that define how independent variable causes the dependent variable. Secondly, case studies often produce strong tests because their explanations/predictions are usually unique.

Comparative method is the second observational method of inquiry in political science. Arend Lijphart (1971) defines comparative method as the analysis of a small number of cases, entailing at least two observations. The main goal of comparative analysis is to assess rival explanation as well as to examine two or more cases in order to highlight how similar or different they are. This will help the process of developing a framework for interpreting how parallel processes of continuity or change are played out in different ways within each context. According to Collier (1993: 105) comparison sharpens our power of description and plays a central role in concept-formation by bringing into focus suggestive similarities and differences among cases. Also, comparison is frequently used in testing hypotheses and it can contribute to the inductive discovery of new hypotheses and theory-building. The main strength of the comparative method is that given the inevitable scarcity of time, energy and resources, the intensive analysis of a few cases seems more promising than the observation of many cases (Lijphart 1971: 685). However, the comparative method is flawed by its weak capacity to sort out rival explanations. Because comparative analysis studies few cases, there is the danger of having more rival explanations to assess than cases to observe. Regarding this problem, comparativists have suggested three solutions: (1) increase the number of cases, (2) focus on comparable cases, and (3) reduce number of variables by combining variables or employing more parsimonious theory (see Collier 1993: 107).

The third observational method of inquiry in political science is the survey method. A survey is a method of inquiry in which information is gathered from large number of individuals, called respondents, by having them respond to questions (Monette et al 1994: 154). The survey method possesses a number of identifiable characteristics. First, surveys typically involve collection of data from large samples of people; therefore, they are ideal for obtaining data representative of populations too large to be dealt with by other methods. Secondly, surveys involve presenting respondents with a series of questions to be answered. These questions may address issues of fact, attitudes, opinions and future expectations. The most important strength of the survey method is the generalisability of its findings. Because the survey method makes use of standardised methods of drawing respondents, it is usually attractive as an objective method and its findings are held to be truly generalisable. An important point to note about surveys is that they only assess what people say about their thoughts, attitudes, behaviours, and beliefs. Surveys do not measure those thoughts, attitudes and behaviours directly. For instance, if public officials say in a survey that they are not corrupt, their actual attitude towards corruption has not been measured but only what they report about that behaviour. Thus, one can conclude that people report not being corrupt, but it cannot be concluded that people are not corrupt. Surveys therefore usually involve data on what people say about what they do, not what they actually do.

Methods of data collection

Data can be collected in political science research in three major ways: with questionnaires, interviews, or through documents. A questionnaire contains written questions that people respond to directly on the questionnaire itself, without the assistance of the researcher. A

questionnaire can be handed directly to a respondent, or it can be mailed to the members of a sample, who then fill it out on their own and mail it back to the researcher. An interview involves an interviewer reading questions to respondents and recording their responses. Interviews can be conducted either in person or over the telephone.

Both interviews and questionnaires contain two basic types of questions: closed-ended and open-ended. Closed-ended questions provide respondents with a fixed set of alternatives from which they are to choose while open-ended questions allow respondents to write their own responses, much as you do for an essay-type examination question. Theoretical considerations largely determine which type of question to one could adopt. Monette et al (1994: 155) advised that closed-ended questions should be used when all possible, theoretically relevant responses to a question can be determined in advance and the number of possible response limited. On the other hand, they recommend open-ended questions in exploratory studies in which lack of theoretical development suggests that only a few restrictions should be put on people's responses. In addition, they posit that when researchers cannot predict all the possible answers to a question in advance or when too many possible answers exist to list them all practically, then closed-ended questions are not appropriate.

Documents are one form of available data. Available data refers to observations collected by someone other than the investigator for purposes that differ from the investigator's but that nonetheless are available to be analysed (Monette et al 1994). Documents can contain data recorded in books, monographs, journal and magazine articles, letters, memoranda, diaries etc. Documents can also make up part of records maintained by various individuals and institutions such as libraries, archives, the central bank, the police, the electoral commission, and health institutions.

Methods of data analysis

Data in political science comes in two major forms: words and figures. The data in the form of words are called qualitative data while the data in the form of figures are called quantitative data. Quantitative data are statistics based. In contrast, qualitative data come in various forms such as interview transcripts, recorded observations, and other documents – published and unpublished. What distinguishes qualitative and quantitative data is a set of assumptions, principles and values about truth and reality. Researchers that are inclined to quantitative data believe that the goal of science is to discover the truths that exist in the world and to use scientific method as a way to build a more complete understanding of reality. Although some qualitativists operate from similar epistemological position, most of them recognise that the relevant reality in the social world is that which takes place in subjective experience. Thus, qualitativists are often more concerned about uncovering knowledge about what people think and feel about particular events or phenomena that they are in making judgements about whether these thoughts and feelings are valid.

Quantitative data can be analysed by the used of statistics. There are two broad types of statistics: descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics are procedures that assist in organising, summarising, and interpreting data. Inferential statistics are procedures that allow us to make generalisations from sample data to the populations from which samples were obtained. Descriptive statistics include such simple statistical techniques as frequency distribution, measures of central tendency and dispersion etc. Inferential statistics

include procedures such as Chi-square, analysis of variance (ANOVA), and multivariate analysis of variance and covariance (MANOVA).

Analysis of qualitative data is a bit more complex. This involves three concurrent flows of activity, namely data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing (Miles and Huberman 1984). Data reduction refers to the process of selecting, simplifying, focusing, and transforming the raw data collected from the field research. Qualitative data can be reduced through selection, summary, paraphrase, and subsumption of data in a large pattern or metaphor. Data display is the organised assembly of information that permits conclusion drawing. Looking at displays helps us to understand the situations or phenomena and to conduct further analysis. Data displays come in the form of descriptive or explanatory figures and matrices such as charts and tables. Conclusion drawing involves drawing meanings from reduced and displayed data. This takes the form of noting the meanings of specific regularities, patterns, themes, configurations and causal flows. In recent times, several computer-based qualitative analysis programmes have been devised to undertake the process described above.

Recapitulation

This chapter presented an overview of the methodological issues surrounding the study of politics. It examined the three core aspects of political science research, namely logic, approaches and methods of political inquiry. The chapter explored the linkages between logic, approaches and methods of political inquiry. In a nutshell, the logic of political inquiry is the ontological and epistemological justification for approaches and methods of political inquiry, the approaches of political inquiry are the theoretical and philosophical basis for data collection and analysis, while methods of political inquiry are the procedural rules for data collection and analysis. The study of politics is composed of the interrelationship between these three important elements.

This chapter reviewed the nature, features and basic assumptions of the logic, approaches and methods of political inquiry. It discussed the two major issues surrounding the logic of political inquiry, namely research paradigms and research strategies. The chapter also examined six approaches to the study of politics – the behavioural, institutional, rational choice, constructivist, feminist, and normative approaches. Finally, the chapter discussed the methods of political inquiry, exploring the methods of inquiry, data collection and data analysis.

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