

— PSIR OPTIONAL · UPSC CSE

EDITION 2026

PYQ Vault

560

questions

50

days

10

years of PYQs

DAY 1

Political Theory · 10 questions

Every question, a **Flow Snapshot** — the routes in, the body, the counter-view, the routes out — and a **handwritten model answer** on the channel. Work through it: **no PYQ will be unfamiliar.**

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2024 · 20 marks

Elucidate the meanings inherent in the term ‘political’ with appropriate illustrations.

FLOW SNAPSHOT

how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1: ‘political’ an essentially contested concept → Greek *polis* → Aristotle’s “political animal”. **R2:** binding collective decisions under disagreement → the “Art of the Possible”.

Body flow

Art of government → public affairs (**Arendt**) → compromise/consensus (**Locke**) → power (**Leftwich**) → friend–enemy (**Schmitt**) → authoritative allocation of values (**Easton**) → hegemony (**Gramsci**) → political economy (**Marx**).

Counter-view

Institutional view too narrow; Schmitt overstates antagonism; too broad a view dissolves the ‘political’ into the ‘social’.

Conclusion routes

R1: meanings overlap, not exclude — a layered field of power, values, institutions, choices. **R2:** the contestation itself reflects the political.

The word **political** does not carry one fixed meaning. It is an essentially contested concept because different traditions of thought define it differently. The term itself comes from the Greek polis, meaning city-state or community.

Among the ancient Greeks, politics was not merely government; it was a way of living together. It arises whenever human beings disagree about ends, means, resources, values and authority. Politics, therefore, is the activity by which groups reach binding collective decisions through reconciliation of differences.

It has also been called the "Art of the Possible" because it finds workable solutions under conditions of disagreement. Aristotle claimed that "Man is by nature a political animal", since human beings realize their full life only within a political community.

Politics is understood as the art of government. Here it is identified with the state, the legislature, executive, judiciary, parties and bureaucracy.

The limitation is that it narrows politics to government alone and ignores society, class, caste, gender and civil society. Another meaning sees politics as public affairs. Aristotle linked politics with the good life of the community. Hannah Arendt treats politics as a public realm of action and discourse where citizens appear before one another. Public debate, citizenship and civic freedom become central.

The next meaning treats politics as compromise & consensus. It is a method of resolving conflict without force, through discussion, negotiation and conciliation. John Locke's theory reflects this, where political society is formed to preserve natural rights through law and consent.

Politics is also linked and understood with power. Adrian Leftwich gives the widest formulation: "politics is at the heart of all collective social activity, formal and informal, public and private, in all human groups, institutions and societies". Politics in this view is present in family, class, caste, workplace, media and international relations.

Carl Schmitt gives another meaning when he identifies the political with the friend-and-enemy distinction. It highlights conflict but may overstate hostility & underplay cooperation. Another meaning comes from David Easton, who defines politics as authoritative allocation of values: institutions convert demands into binding decisions that distribute rights, resources and obligations.

These meanings are not mutually exclusive. Together they show that political extends from the state to society, from government to power, from compromise to conflict and from law to ideology. Political theory therefore studies politics as a field of power, conflict, values, institutions and collective choices.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2023 · 15 marks

Eurocentrism is both the target and the motive force of the post-colonial political theory. Discuss.

FLOW SNAPSHOT

how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1: Eurocentrism as Western universality → post-colonial theory grows against it → dual relation. **R2:** European thought “indispensable and inadequate” — target + motive force in one stroke.

Body flow

Define Eurocentrism → target: **Said** (*Orientalism*), **Fanon** (race/psyche), **Spivak** (subaltern) → motive force: can’t escape European categories → Kautilya–Machiavelli trap → Global South conflicts read as religious/tribal.

Counter-view

Aijaz Ahmad: the culturalist focus can hide capital and class.

Conclusion routes

R1: aim is plural analysis, not reverse Eurocentrism. **R2:** Eurocentrism — the wall to dismantle and the floor to stand on.

Post colonial political theory grew against the Western frameworks that long shaped political thought, and its relationship with Eurocentrism runs two ways at once: **Eurocentrism** is its target, and also energy that drives it. It views the world from a privileged Western perspective - the cultural West of liberal modernity and colonial **Knowledge** - as universal and superior, pushing the East and Global South to the margins.

It is the target because Eurocentric knowledge justified colonial domination. Edward Said's **Orientalism** is foundational the West constructed the Orient as backward & inferior, so that knowledge became a form of power. **Frantz Fanon** exposed the psychology of colonialism, while Gayatri Spivak, in **Can the Subaltern Speak?** asks whether suppressed voices can be heard within Western frameworks. It is also the motive force: colonialism shaped knowledge itself, so the theory cannot proceed without engaging Europe.

Calling Kautilya the Machiavelli of India makes Indian thought dependent on a European reference and Global South conflicts are read as religious or tribal, erasing colonial roots.

Marxist critics like Aijaz Ahmad object that this culturalist focus hides capital and class. Even so, the aim is not reverse Eurocentrism but plural analysis: multiple histories, non-Western agency and decolonised knowledge. Eurocentrism is thus both the wall to be dismantled and the floor on which the theory must stand.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2023 · 15 marks

‘Credo of Relevance’ in post-behaviouralism advocates the importance of action science. Analyze.

FLOW SNAPSHOT

how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1: 1969 APSA address → behaviouralism perfected technique, lost relevance (“ivory towers”). **R2:** 1960s crises unanswered → knowledge committed to use = action science.

Body flow

Easton’s “genuine revolution, not a reaction...” → twin watchwords: relevance + action → keeps method, adds values → relevance before precision → brute realities → protect human values → politicise the profession.

Counter-view

Beardsley: false science-vs-relevance dichotomy; still leans on systems theory. **Waldo:** “raving, rumbling structure”.

Conclusion routes

R1: knowledge must serve action — science committed to human purpose. **R2:** a redirection, not a surrender.

In 1969, David Easton announced the post-behavioural revolution at the American Political Science Association. Behaviouralism had perfected technique but lost relevance, leaving scholars in "ivory towers" while war, inequality & civil-rights crises went unanswered. The Credo of Relevance is his response: it turns political science from a detached pure science into an action science committed to use.

Easton called it "a genuine revolution, not a reaction; a becoming, not a preservation; a reform not a counter reformation." Its twin watchwords are relevance & action. It is not anti-behaviouralism: it keeps scientific method's gains and adds relevance and values. Relevance comes before technical precision and research must touch the brute realities of politics.

This action orientation is the heart of the credo. Easton rejects value free political science: values are inseparable

from inquiry and the intellectual must protect human values. Knowledge must be used to solve social problems, and the profession must be politicised to shape goals and foresee crises.

Critics oppose. Philip Beardsley argues that Easton creates a false dichotomy between science & relevance, while post-behaviouralism still leans on systems theory and stays partly value-neutral. Dwight Waldo dismissed it as 'a raving, rumbling structure without any ultimate destiny.' The credo demands that political knowledge serve action - committing science to human purpose, not surrendering it.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2025 · 20 marks

Provide a comparative analysis of behavioural and institutional approach to the study of political theory.

FLOW SNAPSHOT

how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1: two stages — institutional (formal structures) vs behavioural (actual conduct). **R2:** structure vs behaviour — each one face, neither complete.

Body flow

Institutional: **Van Dyke's** definition → organs + constitution → Aristotle, **Bryce** → behavioural reaction: **Merriam** → **Easton** “actual human being to the centre” → contrast: macro-formal vs micro-scientific; state vs individual.

Counter-view

Each incomplete — institutionalism too descriptive (weak for developing societies); behaviouralism neglects values (**Strauss**); technique over theory (**Parsons**).

Conclusion routes

R1: complementary, not rival — institution = skeleton, behaviour = life within. **R2:** form + conduct = the complete study.

The institutional & behavioural approaches mark two stages in the study of politics, one traditional, one contemporary. The institutional approach studies the formal structures of government; the behavioural approach studies the actual conduct of political actors.

Van Dyke defines an institution as "any persistent system of activities & expectations, or any stable pattern of group behaviour." Close to the legal approach, the institutional view studies the legislature, executive, judiciary and constitution, descending from Aristotle's classification of governments & James Bryce's studies. Its strength is a clear map of formal structures.

Behaviouralism arose as a reaction against this formalism. Graham Wallas, Arthur Bentley & Charles Merriam turned attention to how people actually behave. David Easton sought "to elevate the actual human being to the centre of attention."

The contrast is sharp, Institutionalism is descriptive & macro-formal, its unit the state & constitution; behaviouralism is scientific and micro-level, its unit the individual and group. One sees politics as institutional authority, the other as observable behaviour.

Neither is sufficient alone. Institutionalism is too descriptive, ignoring behaviour and social & economic forces, which makes it weak for developing societies. Behaviouralism, through value-neutrality, neglects values, justice and rights; Leo Strauss saw this as a crisis of theory, and Talcott Parsons noted it changed technique more than theory. The two are therefore complementary: institutionalism supplies the skeleton, behaviouralism the life within it.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2019 · 10 marks

Comment on resurgence of political theory. (150 words)

FLOW SNAPSHOT

how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1: death declared → premature — what fell was positivist science, not theory. **R2:** behaviouralism sidelined values → normative theory revives.

Body flow

Germino: theory “rising from the ashes” → **Berlin:** survives while rational curiosity lives → **Rawls’s** *A Theory of Justice* = the decisive moment → field widens: feminism, multiculturalism, environment, post-colonial.

Counter-view

Not a rejection of empirical science — science supplies the means, philosophy decides the ends.

Conclusion routes

R1: synthesis of facts and values. **R2:** a rebirth, not a return to old moralism.

The resurgence of political theory means the revival of normative, value-based theory in the later twentieth century, against positivism, behaviouralism and the claim that political theory was dead.

Dante Germino argued that what was called decline was only a crisis of positivist science, writing that "political theory is today rising from the ashes." Isaiah Berlin tied theory to permanent human concerns, holding that it cannot perish so long as rational curiosity exists.

The decisive moment came with John Rawls, whose A Theory of Justice rebuilt field around justice as fairness. The revival also widened it, as feminism, multiculturalism, environmental and post-colonial theory took up inequality, diversity and climate-concerns value-free science had ignored.

The resurgence did not reject empirical science ; its achievement was synthesis, where science supplies the means and philosophy decides the ends. It is best read not as a return to old moralism , but as the reunion of facts and values.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2015 · 15 marks

Discuss David Easton's model of system analysis.

FLOW SNAPSHOT

how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1: politics as one living whole → Easton builds on **Bertalanffy + Parsons** → biological analogy. **R2:** the aim — how a system survives and converts pressures into decisions.

Body flow

System within environment + boundary → inputs (demands/supports) → conversion → outputs = authoritative allocation of values → feedback keeps it dynamic.

Counter-view

Too abstract, equilibrium-fixed, weak on conflict and change; **Miller:** a status-quo ideology of American capitalism.

Conclusion routes

R1: a systematic, dynamic map — but mapping is not judging. **R2:** its strength (survival, feedback) is also its limit (silence on conflict).

The systems approach studies politics not as separate institutions but as one living whole. David Easton built this into a full model, drawing on Ludwig Bertalanffy's general systems theory and Talcott Parson's structural functionalism. The analogy is biological: as organs work in a body, institutions interact within one system. Easton's aim was to explain how the system survives and turns social pressures into binding decisions.

For Easton, political system makes and executes social policy. It works within an environment of social, economic and cultural variables, with a boundary. Into it flow inputs – demands and supports – which the conversion process handles through debate and policy. The result is outputs – decisions, laws and policies – the authoritative allocation of values. Feedback keeps it alive, as outputs return to shape the next round of inputs.

The model has drawn strong criticism. It is faulted as too abstract and fixed on equilibrium, weak on conflict and change. By taking the system as given, it leans toward the status quo and claims a neutrality it cannot hold; the Marxist scholar Eugene Miller calls it a status quo ideology shaped by American capitalism.

Easton's model gave political science a systematic, dynamic way to study political life. Its neglect of conflict suggests a system can be mapped without being judged - and politics needs both.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2021 · 15 marks

Examine the importance of behavioural approach in political theory. What led to its decline?

FLOW SNAPSHOT

how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1: chief legacy of positivism → revolt against formalism → politics as empirical science. **R2:** its scientific ambition = both its rise and its fall.

Body flow

Merriam's call → **Easton** recentres the human being → foundations + tools → **Almond, Dahl** → **Parsons:** technique outran theory → neglect of values (**Strauss**) → 1960s crises, status-quo charge.

Counter-view

Its methods and empirical gains were absorbed, not discarded — only the value-free claim fell.

Conclusion routes

R1: decline as correction, not death — post-behavioural relevance restores values. **R2:** synthesis of fact and value.

Behaviouralism was the chief legacy of positivism in political science. It rose in the US against the traditional study of constitutions & institutions, seen as too descriptive & detached from political life. Its aim was an empirical science of how people behave – an ambition that explains both its importance and its decline.

The call came from Charles Merriam, who urged scientific study of behaviour. David Easton carried it forward, placing the human being at the centre, with foundations like regularities, verification & value-neutrality. New tools followed – surveys and statistics – and the field widened: Gabriel Almond opened political culture, Robert Dahl studied pluralism and power.

The features that gave behaviouralism strength became its weakness. Talcott Parsons noted it was more revolutionary in technique than theory. Its obsession with method bred jargon and neglected values, justice and rights.

Leo Strauss treated this neutrality as a crisis of theory. The detachment showed in the 1960s, when it could not speak to war, inequality and civil rights and so seemed to defend the status quo.

The decline was a correction, not a death. In 1969 Easton announced a post-behavioural turn on relevance and action, folding values and purpose back while keeping its empirical gains. The methods of behaviouralism survived; only its claim to be value free did not.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2020 · 15 marks

Discuss the significance of a normative approach to political theory.

FLOW SNAPSHOT

how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1: asks “what ought to be”, not “what is” → Plato/Aristotle as founders. **R2:** facts alone cannot give politics its point — values do.

Body flow

Links politics with ethics (**Cohen**) → standards of justice, liberty, equality → checks mere technique → actual vs ideal keeps reform alive → revival: **Rawls** → **Macpherson**, **Dworkin**, **Sen**.

Counter-view

Subjectivity, abstractness, utopianism; **Berlin**’s value pluralism doubts one final moral order.

Conclusion routes

R1: empirical explains what is; normative says what is worth pursuing. **R2:** the revival after Rawls proves it indispensable.

The normative approach studies politics through values, asking not what political life is, but what it ought to be. It is as old as Plato and Aristotle, who treated political order as inseparable from ethics and the good life.

The approach links politics with ethics. G A Cohen defines a normative principle as "a general directive that tells agents what they ought, or ought not, to do." It supplies standards for judging government by ideals of justice, liberty and equality, stops politics from shrinking into technique and enables critique of norms. By holding the actual against the ideal, it keeps reform alive.

For a time, positivism and behaviouralism pushed it aside, demanding a value-neutral science. Yet it returned.

John Rawls restored moral reasoning: "Justice is the first virtue of social institutions, as truth is of systems of thought." His revival was carried forward by C B Macpherson on democracy, Dworkin on rights and Sen on justice.

Difficulties remain. Critics point to the subjectivity of values, abstractness and utopianism; Isaiah Berlin's value pluralism doubts whether one final moral order is possible. Even so, its place is secure: empirical study explains what exists; the normative approach tells us what is worth pursuing.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2016 · 10 marks

Comment on Post-Behavioural approach. (150 words)

FLOW SNAPSHOT

how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1: late 1960s → **Easton's** turn to relevance and values — a reform, not a reaction. **R2:** pure science exhausted → “ivory towers” → the demand for relevance.

Body flow

Behavioural detachment amid 1960s crises → keeps empirical gains, adds relevance + values + action → pure → applied, method → purpose → the 1969 Credo → twin slogans: relevance + action.

Counter-view

Waldo: a “raving, rumbling structure without any ultimate destiny”.

Conclusion routes

R1: reconnected the discipline with purpose without losing rigour. **R2:** a reform and synthesis, not a counter-revolution.

Post-behaviouralism arose in the late 1960s, when David Easton called for a turn back toward relevance and values. It was not a rejection of behaviouralism but a correction - a reform, not a reaction.

By then behaviouralism's stress on pure science, method and value-neutrality had left scholars in their "ivory towers," perfecting technique while war, inequality and civil rights went unaddressed.

Post-behaviouralism kept the empirical gains but added relevance, values, action and public responsibility, moving it from pure to applied and from method to purpose.

Easton set this out in his 1969 presidential address, the Credo of Relevance, calling it "a reform not a counter reformation." Its twin slogans were relevance and action: substance before technique, research touching the brute realities of politics, values treated as integral.

Critics like Dwight Waldo dismissed it as a "raving, rumbling structure without any ultimate destiny." Its lasting worth was to reconnect political science with purpose and values without abandoning empirical rigour.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2018 · 10 marks

Comment on decline of political theory. (150 words)

FLOW SNAPSHOT

how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1: mid-20th-century death verdict — ironic against **Sabine's** “perennial concern”. **R2:** the positivist-behavioural turn dismisses normative philosophy.

Body flow

Laslett/Dahl pronounce it dead → **Easton's** four causes: historicism → moral relativism (Hume-Weber) → science-theory confusion → hyper-factualism.

Counter-view

Berlin: theory cannot perish while rational curiosity lives — permanent human concerns keep it alive.

Conclusion routes

R1: not death but a crisis of a historicist, value-neglecting theory. **R2:** the debate itself cleared the ground for revival (post-behaviouralism, Rawls).

By the mid-twentieth century, several scholars announced the decline, even the death of political theory - a striking verdict, since Sabine had called it a subject of "perennial concern."

Laslett and Dahl pronounced it dead, and the pressure came from logical positivism and behaviouralism, which demanded a value-neutral science and dismissed normative philosophy.

David Easton gave the fullest diagnosis, identifying four causes: historicism, which made theory a parasite on past ideas; moral relativism, traced to David Hume & Max Weber, which reduced values to mere preferences; the confusion of scientific method with theory; and hyper-factualism, which piled up data without explanation.

Against this, Isaiah Berlin insisted that political theory cannot perish while rational curiosity survives. The decline, then, was not death but a crisis of a historicist, value-neglecting theory — and that debate itself cleared the ground for revival through post-behaviouralism and the work of John Rawls.

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