

PYQ Vault

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DAY 27

Comparative Politics — Approaches & Method

· 11 questions

Every question carries a **Flow Snapshot** — and a handwritten model answer on the channel.

No PYQ will be unfamiliar.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2016 · 10 marks

Critically examine the Marxist aspect of political economy approach to the study of comparative politics.

FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1 locate Marxist strand inside political economy → politics read through economic structure + class → set against liberal market faith **R2** Marxist PE reads comparative development through mode of production, not markets → exploitation as the organising idea

Body flow

historical materialism → mode of production = economic base shapes political-legal superstructure → state as instrument of bourgeoisie (not neutral) → applied to uneven development across nations → **Frank's** dependency (core/metropole drains periphery/satellite → underdevelopment) → **Wallerstein's** world-systems (single capitalist world economy → core extracts surplus from periphery)

Counter-view

economic determinism → reduces politics to bourgeoisie-proletariat struggle → ignores culture/ideational factors + understates agency → **Kenworthy:** ignores political-cultural context + India's poverty fall through capitalism weakens the thesis

Conclusion routes

R1 strong tool for exposing exploitation + structural inequality → but limited unless balanced with agency + context **R2** valuable diagnosis of global inequality → needs agency, culture, and empirical variation to complete it

The Marxist strand of the political economy approach studies comparative politics through economic structure and class conflict, against the liberal faith in markets. It rests on historical materialism.

Karl Marx held that the mode of production forms the economic base, which shapes the political and legal superstructure. The state, therefore serves as an instrument of the bourgeoisie, not a neutral body.

Andre Gunder Frank's dependency theory showed core i.e. metropole countries exploiting peripheral i.e. satellite countries, draining wealth outward and locking them in underdevelopment. Immanuel Wallerstein's world-systems analysis placed states within a single capitalist world economy, where strong core extracts surplus from the periphery.

Critics argue that it reduces politics to a bourgeoisie-proletariat struggle, overlooks cultural and ideational factors & understates agency. Lane Kenworthy argues it ignores political & cultural context and cases like India reducing poverty through capitalism weaken this thesis.

The Marxist aspect remains a strong tool for exposing exploitation and structural inequality, though its power is limited unless balanced with agency and context.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2017 · 10 marks

Explain the Political-Sociological Approach in the field of comparative politics and discuss its limitations.

FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1 politics read through society → **Lipset's** inversion: society as the starting point, its effect on the state → this inversion = the founding claim **R2** approach maps state-society relations → begins from society, not the state → frames its comparative-politics use

Body flow

Marx (modern founder): society's basic structure explains political power → caste-class ties drive governance → **Weber** widens it: bureaucracy + types of authority, Marx's view too monocausal → strength in the developing world → caste, religion, informal groupings shape political behaviour

Counter-view

the tilt toward society becomes its weakness → **Huntington**: sociological reductionism → state loses autonomy + correlation mistaken for causation → confined to society, blind to inter-state conflict

Conclusion routes

R1 **Skocpol**: bring the state back in → society explains much of politics, not all
R2 strength and limitation are one coin → the state must be restored for a complete account

The political-sociological approach understands politics through society. S.M. Lipset states that political science starts with the state and asks how it shapes society, while political sociology starts with society and examines how it shapes the state.

Karl Marx, its modern founder, held that the basic structure of society explains political power, as caste and class ties drive governance. Max Weber widened this, studying bureaucracy and types of authority and rejecting Marx's monocausal view. The approach proves useful in the developing world, where caste, religion and other informal groupings visibly shape political behaviour.

It invites what Samuel P. Huntington called sociological reductionism, whereby the state loses its autonomous character and correlation is mistaken for causation. Confined to society, it cannot explain inter-state conflict.

Therefore, Theda Skocpol argues to bring the state back in, reminding that society explains much of politics, but not all of it.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2018 · 10 marks

Describe the changing nature of Comparative Politics. Briefly explain the Political Economy approach to the study of Comparative Politics.

FLOW SNAPSHOT – how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1 CP defined by method, not subject matter → the method itself keeps being redefined **R2** formal-legal description → scientific, process-based analysis → contemporary interdisciplinary phase

Body flow

legal-institutional origin (**Aristotle**; description over analysis) → post-war critique of institutionalism → behavioural/process turn → **Easton**'s systems theory (empirical, scientific) → **von Beyme**'s three phases: pre-modern → modern → contemporary/interdisciplinary → contemporary phase absorbs political economy → PE: politics and economy shape each other (**Marx** — interdisciplinary) → roots: **Kautilya**'s Arthashastra → **Smith**'s Wealth of Nations → PE explains state's macroeconomic policy, development, global economy

Counter-view

the two strands inside PE pull opposite ways: liberal laissez-faire markets vs Marxist class exploitation

Conclusion routes

R1 PE as one product of CP's contemporary, interdisciplinary turn **R2** PE ties domestic institutions and state policy to the global economy

Comparative politics is defined less by a fixed subject than by its method. It began as a legal-institutional study: Aristotle compared the constitutions of Greek city-states.

The post-war critique of this institutionalism turned the field towards political behaviour and processes. David Easton's systems theory made it empirical, scientific & process-oriented.

Klaus von Beyme defines this in three phases: pre-modern and normative, modern and legal-constitutional and contemporary phase that is interdisciplinary and neo-institutional, absorbing political economy, political sociology and globalization.

The political economy approach studies how political institutions and the economic system shape each other. Karl Marx called it an interdisciplinary study drawing on economics, law and political science.

Traced from Kautilya's Arthashastra to Adam Smith's Wealth of Nations, it runs along two strands: a liberal favouring laissez-faire markets, and a Marxist stressing class exploitation. It explains the state's macroeconomic policies, its development paths and its place in the global economy.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2019 · 20 marks

Examine the significance of the comparative method in political analysis. Discuss its limitations.

FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1 method defines the sub-discipline, not its subject (**Lijphart**) → comparison = political science's laboratory-substitute **R2** the mind cannot proceed without comparison (**Tocqueville**) → comparison-as-control is the discipline's core method

Body flow

Sartori: comparison works as control, the surrogate for the experiment social science cannot run → it tests theoretical propositions → **Durkheim**: keeps analysis from staying purely descriptive → **Landman**: four functions (description → classification → hypothesis-testing → prediction) → **Bara**: a conviction and objectivity single-country study cannot claim

Counter-view

the surrogate is imperfect because political life resists laboratory control → **Eckstein**: small N weakens rigour → **Sartori**: conceptual stretching + non-equivalence of concepts across contexts → selection bias, cultural/historical specificity, patchy data

Conclusion routes

R1 the flaws limit the method, they do not discredit it → corrective is care: operationalisation + guarded concepts → comparison stays indispensable **R2** **Landman**'s middle path — moderate universalism vs extreme relativism → used with awareness of its limits, comparison remains political analysis's central tool

Comparison is the method that defines political science rather than merely serving it. Arend Lijphart held that comparative politics is the one sub-discipline carrying "a methodological instead of a substantive level."

Alexis de Tocqueville argues that the mind has no way to proceed without comparisons to draw. The method matters because it is the discipline's substitute for the laboratory it can never enter.

According to Giovanni Sartori, comparison works as a form of control, taking the place the controlled experiment holds in the natural sciences. Since political life cannot be reproduced under lab conditions, comparison becomes the way theoretical propositions are tested. Emile Durkheim argues that comparison keeps analysis from becoming purely descriptive.

Todd Landman identifies 4 methods: contextual description, classification, hypothesis-testing and prediction. Judith Bara views a conviction of objectivity that no single country study can claim.

However, the lab substitute is imperfect because cases are few and rarely controlled. Harry Eckstein held that generalising from a small number of cases weakens rigour.

Santoni named the "conceptual stretching" a concept built for one setting distorts when forced onto another, as the same term carries different meanings across contexts. Selection bias, cultural and historical specificity and patchy data deepen the difficulty.

Therefore, the corrective measures include careful operationalisation, guarded concepts and what Landman calls the middle path between moderate universalism and extreme relativism.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2020 · 10 marks

Discuss the subject matter of comparative politics.
Outline the limitations of comparative political analysis.

FLOW SNAPSHOT – how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1 CP defined by method, not substance (**Lijphart**) → subject matter is fluid, widening as the discipline grows **R2** comparison as the analytical core → what it compares expands from institutions to the whole political process

Body flow

traditional subject matter: formal institutions/constitutions/forms of government, mostly Western → modern shift to political processes + behaviour → systems & functional analysis → political culture, civic attitudes (**Almond & Verba**) → political economy (economics-politics) → political sociology (state-society) → class structures + modes of production + developing world

Counter-view

Macridis: parochial/ethnocentric/static → modern approaches: jargon + abstraction; Marxists: status-quoist + Western-centric → selection bias/many variables/scarcely data weaken objectivity → **Chandhoke**: loss of certainties strains a grand-theory field → over-comparison erases the uniqueness of states

Conclusion routes

R1 limitations real but not disabling → CP still widens political science beyond the West, aids theory-building **R2** the same breadth that limits also enriches → value lies in comparison handled with care, against conceptual stretching

Comparative politics is defined less by a fixed subject than by its method : Arend Lijphart view that it carries a methodological rather than a substantive label, with comparison as its analytical core.

Its subject matter has therefore widened over time. The modern phase moved beyond structures to political processes and behaviour : systems and functional analysis, the civic attitudes of Almond and Verba. The economics - politics interface of political economy and the state - society relations of political sociology, extending to class structures, modes of production and the developing world.

R.C. Macridis faults traditional analysis as parochial, ethnocentric and static. Modern approaches invite jargon and abstraction & Marxists calls the systems approach as status-quoist and Western-centric. Selection bias, many variables and scarce comparable data weaken objectivity.

Neera Chandhoke argues that the loss of certainties strains a field built on grand theories, while forced comparison risks erasing the uniqueness of states.

However, comparison widens political science beyond the West and aids theory-building.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2021 · 10 marks

Discuss the political economy approach to the comparative analysis of politics.

FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1 polity and economy shape each other → **Marx**: interdisciplinary study (economics, law, politics) **R2** Oxford Handbook definition — state's economic policies + processes → **Kautilya's Arthashastra** → **Smith**: modern political economy born

Body flow

two strands → liberal (→ **Hayek, Friedman**): free markets, minimal state → Marxist (**Frank** dependency, **Wallerstein** world-systems): core-periphery exploitation → comparative payoff → regularities & causal mechanisms across systems → corporation-government links & autocracy-vs-democracy policy differences → global integration alters state decisions

Counter-view

economic determinism → **Kenworthy**: ignores historical, political, cultural contexts

Conclusion routes

R1 PE compares systems through the economy-polity interface → shows why policy and regime behaviour differ, as institutions alone cannot **R2** hold its comparative value but read with cultural and institutional context (**Kenworthy**), not economic reductionism

The political economy approach studies how political institutions and the economic system shape each other. **Karl Marx treated it as an interdisciplinary study drawing on economics, law and political science.**

The Oxford Handbook of Political Economy defines it as the study of the state's economic policies and its political and economic processes. From Kautilya's Arthashastra to Adam Smith, it grew into the modern study of the politics - economy interface.

The liberal strand, including F.A. Hayek and Milton Friedman, links development to free markets and minimal state action.

The Marxist strand, through Andre Gunder Frank's dependency theory and Immanuel Wallerstein's world-systems analysis, explains underdevelopment as core-periphery exploitation.

For comparison, it isolates regularities and causal mechanisms across political systems. It also explains why corporation-government relations and policies differ between autocracies & democracies and how global economic integration alters state decisions.

Its weakness, as Lane Kenworthy argues, is that it ignores historical, political and cultural contexts, reducing politics to economic determinism.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2022 · 10 marks

Discuss the main limitations of the comparative method to the study of Political Science.

FLOW SNAPSHOT – how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1 comparison is the sub-discipline's defining method (**Lijphart**: method, not substance) → but the method itself is limited **R2** comparison stands in for the laboratory control social science lacks (**Sartori**) → yet that scientific promise is only partly met

Body flow

subject resists science (behaviour not purely rational → no uniform scientific method → individuals & institutions follow no fixed rules → scarce data on systems and non-state actors) → **comparison distorts** (generalisation from few cases → systems too different or too alike resist it: India vs Bahrain → concepts travel badly, **Sartori's** conceptual stretching) → **bias intrudes** (cases picked to fit a prior view → **Macridis**: non-comparative, descriptive, parochial, Eurocentric → Marxist charge: systems approach status-quoist, Western as ideal)

Counter-view

flaws temper the method, not discredit it → careful operationalisation + **Landman's** moderate universalism keep comparison workable

Conclusion routes

R1 read comparative findings as provisional generalisations, not scientific laws
R2 despite its limits, comparison still widens political science beyond the West

Arend Lijphart view comparative politics is defined by its method rather than its substance. Giovanni Sartori treats comparison as a substitute for the lab control social science lacks.

However, Its subject resists scientific treatment. Political behaviour is not purely rational, so the scientific method can't be applied uniformly. The role of individuals and institutions follows no fixed rules and data on political systems and non-state actors is scarce.

Comparison rests on generalisation from few cases and systems either wholly different or wholly identical. Concepts travel badly, matching Sartori's caution against conceptual stretching.

R.C. Macridis found traditional comparison non-comparative, descriptive, parochial and Eurocentric, while Marxists rejected the systems approach as status-quoist and Western in its ideal.

But these flaws temper the method rather than discredit it. With careful operationalisation and Todd Landman's moderate universalism, comparison still widens political science, its findings provisional generalisations rather than scientific laws.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2023 · 10 marks

What are the crucial functions of empirical political theory in Comparative Politics?

FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1 EPT = abstract facts → generalisations + hypotheses → tested against evidence → gives CP its scientific character **R2** **Popper**: deductive side → proposition first → empirical research verifies against facts → functions flow from this

Body flow

empirical testing of assumptions (median voter theorem) → systematic comparative analysis across countries → prediction of trends → policy evaluation → democratic processes (electoral systems/parties/voter behaviour) → institutional analysis → advanced statistical methods → **Lijphart & Dahl**: essential to understanding systems → replication (**King, Keohane, Verba**: shared goal = logical inference) → refine/build new theories

Counter-view

purely empirical focus can neglect the state → concept of political system left elusive

Conclusion routes

R1 EPT makes comparative knowledge cumulative + testable, not merely descriptive **R2** strength lies in replication → scientific, theory-building character is EPT's core contribution to CP

Empirical political theory (EPT) abstracts political facts into generalisations and hypotheses that are tested against evidence. Karl Popper places it on the deductive side i.e. theory begins with a proposition that empirical research then verifies against facts.

Its functions give comparative politics its scientific character. The median voter theorem is examined for its real-world applicability. EPT enables systematic comparative analysis across countries, from which political trends can be predicted.

It supports policy evaluation and the study of democratic processes, covering electoral systems, party politics and voter behaviour, alongside institutional analysis and the development of advanced statistical methods. For Lijphart and Dahl, theory is essential to understanding political systems.

Keohane and Verba hold that qualitative and quantitative work share one goal, logical inference, so comparing cases lets EPT refine or build new theories. An exclusively empirical focus can neglect the state, leaving the concept of the political system elusive.

The EPT makes comparative knowledge cumulative and testable, not merely descriptive.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2024 · 10 marks

Discuss the interpretive approach to the study of comparative politics.

FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1 approach recovers meanings actors attach to actions → culture/ideas/interpretation over empirical-structural factors **R2** politics read through meaning, not measurement → positivist empirical lens set aside

Body flow

Geertz + Taylor: culture/ideas shape action → **Geertz's thick description**: behaviour read through cultural context, not outward acts → **constructivism**: actors shaped by social constructions of reality → defined against rational choice: self-interest vs beliefs/emotions/norms → **Snyder's contextualized comparisons**: events within own cultural-historical-ideological frame → fits non-Western societies

Counter-view

weak generalisation → risk of cultural relativism → difficulty of cross-cultural interpretation

Conclusion routes

R1 trades predictive breadth for depth of meaning **R2** restores meaning to a discipline long drawn to measurement

The interpretive approach studies politics by recovering the meanings that people attach to their actions. It explains political phenomena through culture, ideas and human interpretation, rather than through empirical or structural factors.

Clifford Geertz and Charles Taylor views that culture and ideas shape political action. Geertz's thick description calls political behaviour through the cultural context of the individuals & groups involved, not through outward acts.

The approach defines itself against rational choice. Where rational choice assumes self-interested actors, the interpretive approach sees behaviour shaped by beliefs, emotions and cultural norms.

Richard Snyder's contextualized comparisons study political events within their own cultural, historical and ideological frameworks. This makes the method especially useful for non-Western societies.

Its limitations include weak generalisation, the risk of cultural relativism, and the difficulty of interpreting across cultures. But it restores meaning to a discipline long drawn to measurement.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2025 · 10 marks

Discuss the psychological approach to the study of comparative politics.

FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1 inner human dimension (motivation, belief, perception, personality) over institutions → challenges rational-actor model **R2** politics as human behaviour → emotion + cognition drive voting, participation, leadership across systems

Body flow

Wallas/Lasswell pioneer emotion-cognition-personality → **Barber**: personality typology of leadership → **Simon**: bounded rationality, cognitive bias in processing → collective turn: **Almond & Verba** (socialization → attitudes to authority/participation) → **Tajfel** (social identity → political identities/conflict) → cross-cultural comparison explains why similar institutions function differently

Counter-view

reductionism vs multi-causal politics → difficulty measuring psychological variables → weak cross-cultural generalization

Conclusion routes

R1 not a standalone key → strongest when fused with structural/institutional approaches **R2** inner dimension completes, does not replace, institutional analysis

The psychological approach explains political behaviour by looking inside the individual and the collective at motivations, beliefs, perceptions and personality traits rather than at institutions alone.

It challenges the purely rational-actor model, arguing that emotion and cognition shape how people vote, participate and lead across political systems. Graham Wallas and Harold Lasswell pioneered this shift, placing emotion, cognition and personality at the centre of political action.

James David Barber carried it into leadership, building a typology of presidential character from personality traits. Herbert Simon showed through bounded rationality that cognitive biases shape how political information is processed.

Its comparative value lies in the collective dimension. Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba traced how political socializations forms attitudes towards authority and participation, while Henri Tajfel's social identity theory explains political identities and conflict. Such cross-cultural comparison helps show why similar institutions function differently across societies.

Critics find it reductionist, hard to measure, and weak in cross-cultural generalization. It works best combined with structural and institutional approaches.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2025 · 10 marks

Discuss the political socialization of open and closed societies.

FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1 define via **Easton & Dennis** → acquiring political orientations → character set by the system it serves **R2** socialization as a universal function (**Almond & Verba**: sustains the system) → but its content is regime-dependent

Body flow

common function (**Parsons**: cohesion + stability; **Almond & Verba**: incorporate, sustain) → what differs = agents + content → open societies: plural agents, critical thinking, debate, dissent, participant civic culture → closed societies: state monopoly, single regime ideology, controlled media, schooling serves state narrative, indoctrination

Counter-view

binary under strain → social media reshaping socialization even in closed societies → Arab Spring, Zapatista

Conclusion routes

R1 open-closed distinction holds, but the state monopoly is no longer secure in the digital age **R2** same universal function turned to opposite ends → citizens in open societies, subjects in closed ones

According to Easton and Dennis, political socialization is the developmental process by which a person acquires political orientations and patterns of behaviour.

Through it, individuals internalise their system's norms and values. Its character, however, is set by the system it serves. For Talcott Parsons, socialization promotes social cohesion and stability; for Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba, it incorporates individuals into the system, sustaining it. What differs is the range of agents and the content transmitted.

In open societies, socialization is pluralistic. Family, education, a free media and competing parties operate as agents, while critical thinking, debate and dissent are encouraged, building a participant civic culture.

In closed, authoritarian societies the state monopolises the process.

A single regime defined ideology, controlled media and an education system serving the state narrative produce indoctrination and limited critical engagement.

Social media is reshaping socialization even within closed societies, as the Arab Spring and Zapatista movement show. The state's monopoly, though still real is no longer secure.

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