

Political Theory: Meaning & Approaches

Day 1 of your revision. Every concept and scholar from the Foundation & OGP class, compressed for fast recall. **Revise → write a little → don't break the chain.**

Exam load on this unit (UPSC 2016–2025): **8 × 10-markers · 4 × 15-markers · 2 × 20-markers.** A foundation that pays every single year.

1 Why “Political”? — the meanings inside the word

From the Greek **polis** (city-state, community). Politics is the activity of reaching **binding collective decisions** by reconciling differences — over ends, means, resources, values and authority. Hence the “**art of the possible**”: workable solutions under disagreement.

Working definition

“Politics is the activity by which groups reach binding collective decisions through attempting to reconcile differences among their members.”

Five meanings of “the political”

- **As government** — the art of governing; office, authority, the machinery of the state.
- **As public affairs** — citizenship, public life, the common good. **Aristotle**: “Man is by nature a political animal”; **Hannah Arendt**: politics as action and speech among free citizens.
- **As compromise & consensus** — conciliation rather than force; the peaceful settling of conflict.
- **As power & domination** — **Adrian Leftwich**: politics lies in all collective activity, “formal and informal, public and private”; **Carl Schmitt**: the friend–enemy distinction; **Antonio Gramsci**: **hegemony**; **Karl Marx**: class power and political economy.
- **As authoritative allocation** — **David Easton**: politics is the **authoritative allocation of values** for a society.

UPSC 2024 · 20m Elucidate the meanings inherent in the term ‘political’ with appropriate illustrations.

2 Politics, Power & the State

Politics is **power-laden** — the acquisition, retention and exercise of power. **J.W. Garner**’s state-centric maxim, “Political science starts and ends with the state,” once ruled the discipline; it now competes with **society-wide** readings that locate power across all social relations, not the state alone.

3 Political Theory: Meaning & Nature

George H. Sabine defines political theory broadly as “anything about politics or relevant to politics.” It runs along three connected dimensions:

- **Historical** — political ideas read in their context.
- **Philosophical** — questions of justice, liberty, obligation and the good society.
- **Scientific** — behaviour, institutions and processes studied through observation.

Political theory is therefore both **explanation** and **evaluation**: it describes political life, criticises it, and helps reconstruct it. It clarifies concepts and supplies the ideas that political science then tests.

4 Theory · Science · Philosophy · Thought · Ideology — know the splits

Category	Core question	Pointers
Political Philosophy	What <i>ought</i> to be? (justice, liberty, equality)	Plato, Aristotle, Rawls — normative
Political Theory	Explains political phenomena; may borrow from philosophy	Leo Strauss : the search for the “right and good order”
Political Science	What / how? (empirical, observable)	Observation, statistics, comparison
Political Thought	Time- and place-bound communal ideas	Machiavelli , British idealists
Political Ideology	Programmatic, dogmatic defence of a power arrangement	Marx , liberalism, feminism

Political Theory	Political Ideology
Analytical and critical; open to criticism	Defensive and programmatic; often dogmatic
Seeks understanding and evaluation; dispassionate	Seeks support for a power arrangement; passionate
Clarifies concepts	Mobilises belief

Norman Jacobson: “Every political scientist plays a double role — part scientist and part philosopher; no theorist can make a lasting contribution unless he works in the realms of both.” — **without science, theory is a “worthless ethical residue”.**

5 Five-Stage Evolution of Political Science

From ethics to relevance — the journey of the discipline



6 The Map of Approaches — Traditional vs Contemporary

Traditional approaches	Contemporary approaches
Philosophy, history, law, institutions	Behaviour, systems, society, context, identity
Largely normative	Normative + empirical
State and formal institutions	State, society, groups, individuals, power
Justice, authority, sovereignty, liberty	Identity, discourse, difference, sustainability
Often Eurocentric	Open to global and post-colonial perspectives

7 Normative Approach

Prescribes the **best possible order** — concerned with values, ends and "what ought to be."

"Justice is the first virtue of social institutions, as truth is of systems of thought." — **John Rawls**

- **Gerald Allan Cohen**: a normative principle is "a general directive that tells agents what they ought, or ought not, to do."
- **Charles Taylor** ("Neutrality in Political Science"): political science cannot be value-free.
- **Significance**: values are unavoidable — "not deciding is simply deciding to allow others to decide for you."
- **Criticism**: subjectivity; resists testing and prediction.

8 Empirical Approach & the Normative–Empirical Debate

Empirical: describe, explain, predict; facts over values. **Locke** on property and consent; **Easton** on systems analysis.

The fault line that runs through all of political theory



9 The Other Approaches — one-liners & their critics

Approach	In one line	Champions	Classic critique
Historical	"History is the root, political science is the fruit"	Sabine , Machiavelli	Over-traditional, state-centric
Philosophical	Purpose and morality of rule; the good order	Leo Strauss	Relativity of values (Berlin)
Legal	State as a legal, sovereign order	Austin , Dicey	Formalistic; ignores reality
Institutional	Formal institutions — Van Dyke : "any persistent system of activities and expectations"	Bryce , Finer	Formalism, descriptiveness
Sociological	Politics embedded in social structure	Catlin	Can downplay institutions
Textual / Contextual	Text as timeless artefact vs writings in their milieu	Macpherson , Tully	Anachronism vs over-contextualism

C.B. Macpherson reads Locke through an emergent bourgeois lens; **James Tully** situates Locke's property theory amid dissenters' rights.

10 Behavioural Approach — the scientific turn

Background: positivism (**Auguste Comte**) demands value-free science. Seeds after World War I; full bloom after World War II. **Aim:** place the “**actual human being**” at the centre — the systematic, empirical study of political behaviour.

Major thinkers: **Charles Merriam**, **Harold Lasswell**, **Gabriel Almond**, **V.O. Key**, **Herbert Tingsten**.

David Easton's eight intellectual foundations

Regularities Verification Techniques Quantification Value-neutrality Systematisation Pure science Integration

Achievements: precision, survey tools, comparative data — the discipline finally “looked scientific.”

Decline: over-complication (jargon over clarity), reductionism (numbers flatten meaning), an ethical vacuum and a status-quo bias. **Easton** faulted scholars for sitting in “ivory towers,” perfecting techniques while ignoring real problems; **Robert Dahl** called it “more revolutionary in technique than in validated theory.”

Behaviouralism is “rather like the Loch Ness monster: one can say with considerable confidence what it is not, but it is difficult to say what it is.”

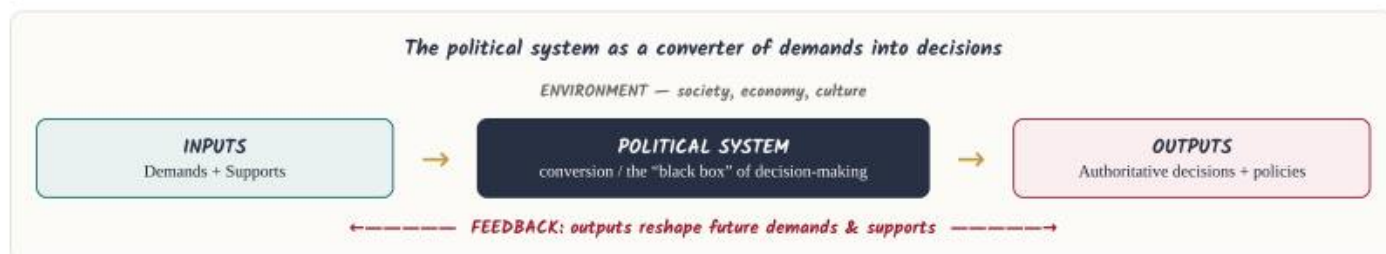
Critical School: **Germino** — “quantification without reflection” killed theory; **Adorno & Horkheimer** — instrumental rationality props up capitalism; **Habermas** — technique colonises the lifeworld; **Marcuse** — one-dimensional man.

11 Behavioural vs Institutional — a comparison

Basis	Institutional	Behavioural
Focus	Formal institutions	Actual political behaviour
Unit	State, government, constitution, organs	Individuals, groups, voters, elites
Method	Descriptive, legal, institutional	Empirical, scientific, quantitative
Concern	Structure and functions	Processes and behaviour
Strength	Knowledge of political structures	Knowledge of real political conduct
Limitation	Formalism, descriptiveness	Reductionism, value-neutrality

UPSC 2025 · 20m Provide a comparative analysis of behavioural and institutional approaches to the study of political theory.

12 Systems Approach — Easton's input-output model



Extension: **Gabriel Almond's** structural-functionalism — system capabilities and conversion functions. **Criticism:** status-quo bias; neglects power and conflict.

UPSC 2022 · 10m Explain the systems approach.

13 Post-Behavioural Approach — the Credo of Relevance

Trigger: the crises of the 1960s — war, poverty, civil rights. **Sparks:** **Thomas Kuhn** (paradigms) and **Karl Popper** (falsification).

David Easton: a “genuine revolution, not a reaction; a becoming, not a preservation; a reform, not a counter-reformation.” — **substance before technique**

Credo watch-words: **Action · Relevance · Social change · Values · Reality**. Values are “an integral part of our personality... so long as we are human beings”; the intellectual must “protect the human values of civilisation.”

Critique: **Dwight Waldo** — a “raving, rumbling structure without any ultimate destiny”; and it still leans on the systems theory it once denounced.

UPSC 2023 · 15m “Credo of Relevance in post-behaviouralism advocates the importance of action science.” Analyse.

14 Decline & Resurgence of Political Theory

Declared dead, then reborn



Why it declined (per **Easton**): **historicism** · **moral relativism** · **hyper-factualism** · **science-fetish**. Hyper-factualism piled facts without theory — Easton’s “theoretical malnutrition and surfeit of facts.” **James Bryce** had demanded “facts, facts, and facts”; **Alfred Cobban** judged that theory “played no role.”

Why it returned: **John Rawls** (*A Theory of Justice*) restores normative reasoning; **Isaiah Berlin** — “so long as rational curiosity exists... political theory will not wholly perish from the earth”; **Hannah Arendt** recovers the public realm — theory is “an arduous calling, not an escape mechanism”; with **Michael Oakeshott** and **C.B. Macpherson**.

UPSC 2018 · 10m

UPSC 2019 · 10m

UPSC 2023 · 10m

Decline and resurgence of political theory.

15 Post-Colonial Theory & Eurocentrism

Recovers the political experience of the “other” and challenges the universal claims of Western theory. **Edward Said** (*Orientalism*), **Frantz Fanon**, **Gayatri Spivak**.

The hinge of the 2023 question

Eurocentrism is both the **target** (what post-colonial theory sets out to dismantle) and the **motive force** (the very engine that drives its agenda).

UPSC 2023 · 15m

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

16 Scope at Work — three classic themes

- **Political obligation**: **Filmer** (divine right) → **Hobbes** (escape from a life “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short”) → **Locke** (“the end of government is the good of mankind”); grounded in the moral worth of social cooperation.
- **Right to property**: **Locke** — the “chief end... the preservation of their property”; **Marx** — communism as the “abolition of private property”; UDHR Art. 17 — the right to own property.
- **Politics as master science**: **Aristotle** — the good is the end of all action, and “the science which studies this good is politics.”

17 Power Quotes — carry these into the hall

“Man is by nature a political animal.” — **Aristotle**

“Politics is the authoritative allocation of values.” — **David Easton**

“Justice is the first virtue of social institutions, as truth is of systems of thought.” — **John Rawls**

Hyper-factualism is “theoretical malnutrition and a surfeit of facts.” — **David Easton**

“So long as rational curiosity exists... political theory will not wholly perish from the earth.” — **Isaiah Berlin**

18 Scholar Index — if a name feels unfamiliar, go back to your notes

Adorno · Almond · Aquinas · Arendt · Aristotle · Augustine · Austin · Barker · Berlin · Bryce · Carl Schmitt · Catlin · Cobban · Comte · Dahl · Dicey · Easton · Fanon · Filmer · Germino · Gramsci · G.A. Cohen · Habermas · Hobbes · Jacobson · James Tully · Kuhn · Lasswell · Leftwich · Leo Strauss · Locke · Machiavelli · Macpherson · Marcuse · Marx · Merriam · Montesquieu · Oakeshott · Plato · Popper · Rawls · Rousseau · Sabine · Said · Spivak · Charles Taylor · Tingsten · Van Dyke · V.O. Key · Waldo

19 How UPSC Asks It — the last decade, mapped

Theme	Years & marks
Meanings of the 'political'	2024 / 20m
Normative approach	2020 / 15m · 2023 / 10m
Behavioural approach & its decline	2021 / 15m · 2024 / 10m
Philosophical approach	2025 / 10m
Systems approach	2022 / 10m
Post-behaviouralism / Credo of Relevance	2016 / 10m · 2023 / 15m
Decline of political theory	2018 / 10m · 2023 / 10m
Resurgence of political theory	2019 / 10m
Behavioural vs institutional	2025 / 20m
Post-colonial theory & Eurocentrism	2023 / 15m

20 Today's Practice — write before the evening

1. Provide a comparative analysis of behavioural and institutional approaches. (UPSC 2025, 20m)
2. "Credo of Relevance in post-behaviouralism advocates the importance of action science." Analyse. (UPSC 2023, 15m)
3. Elucidate the meanings inherent in the term 'political' with appropriate illustrations. (UPSC 2024, 20m)

Model answers drop tonight on the Telegram channel — [@psirbyamitpratap](#). Keep notifications on. Blank on a point above? It is covered in full in your **Foundation & OGP** class notes and handouts — revise it, then write. **Don't break the chain.**

See you tomorrow with Day 2 — Theories of the State.