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Q2(b)

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

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2021 · PSIR GS 1 · 15 marks · Political Theory

Political Theory: meaning and approaches.

Core demand of the question

- Examine the importance of behavioral approach in political theory. What led to its decline? (15 marks)

Revision summary

The behavioural approach studied observable political behaviour instead of legal form alone.

Easton's systems model and **Dahl**'s decision studies were its theoretical core.

It professionalised comparison and survey, which was its importance.

Decline followed Easton's post-behavioural turn and the return of values, Vietnam, and social movements.

Marx, Pateman, Kothari, and Jaffrelot show why attitude data could not exhaust political theory.

Introduction

The behavioural approach, spelled that way in the American science of the 1950s and 1960s, tried to make political theory a study of observable behaviour, not of legal texts and ought-statements alone. **David Easton** was its organiser and later its critic.

Body

Importance

- It shifted the question from "what does the constitution say?" to "what do voters, legislators, and groups actually do?"
- **Easton** defined politics as the authoritative allocation of values and mapped inputs, conversion, outputs, and feedback.
- **Robert Dahl** asked who governs in observable decisions, which disciplined elite speculation.
- Survey research, statistical correlation, and comparative indicators let new states after decolonisation be studied without waiting for a Westminster replica.
- **For political theory, the gain was empirical discipline:** concepts such as power, support, and participation had to meet data.

What it refused

- Classical **Aristotle**, **Mill**, and **Rawls** ask what is just. Behaviouralism postponed that as metaphysics.
- Legal-institutional study of offices was called formal and dead.

- The importance was real as a purge of untested sermon. It was costly as a purge of justice.

What led to decline

- **Easton's** 1969 post-behavioural credo admitted relevance, values, and the political crisis of the American 1960s: Vietnam, race, and campus revolt.
- The approach described equilibrium better than it explained **Marx's** class, **Pateman's** gendered exclusion, or **Lukes's** silent power.
- Rational-choice and later interpretivism, feminism, and critical theory took the next generation.
- Indian politics of caste, **Mandal**, and language could not be read as attitude items alone; **Rajni Kothari** and **Jaffrelot** needed institutions and social structure.
- Decline was not disappearance. Methods remain. The claim to be the whole of political theory did not survive.

Flow diagram

Behavioural approach -> Easton allocation
Behavioural approach -> Dahl decisions
Behavioural approach -> Decline
Decline -> Post-behavioural relevance
Decline -> Class gender caste justice

Conclusion

Behaviouralism mattered because it forced political theory to face observable allocation, support, and decisions, with Easton and **Dahl** as the teaching names. It declined when Easton himself called for relevance, and when justice, class, gender, and caste returned as unavoidable questions. It remains a method, not a monopoly.

Facts & figures

Easton, 1953/1965

The Political System and A Systems Analysis of Political Life stated allocation, support, and persistence.

Post-behaviouralism, 1969

Easton's APSA address demanded relevance and values after the behavioural creed.

Dahl

Who Governs? made observable decisions the test of power.

Mandal, 1990

Indian caste-class politics that attitude surveys alone could not explain as a system of power.

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