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Q3(a)

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

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2025 · PSIR GS 1 · 20 marks · Political Theory

Political Theory: meaning and approaches.

Core demand of the question

- Define the behavioural approach and the institutional approach
- Compare their units of analysis, methods, and pictures of politics
- Include the behavioural revolution and the new institutionalist return
- Reach a comparative judgement, not two separate notes

Revision summary

The behavioural approach studies observable political behaviour, attitudes, and systems, aiming at empirical, often quantitative, theory.

Easton, Dahl, Almond, and Verba made this the mid-century revolution against purely legal description of the state.

The institutional approach studies constitutions, organisations, and rules; **new institutionalism** adds routines, path dependence, and strategic constraint.

March and Olsen, North, and historical institutionalists restored the state and durable rules after behaviouralism had thinned them.

The two differ in unit and method; political theory needs both, because authority is lived as behaviour inside institutions.

Introduction

Behavioural and institutional approaches ask different first questions. One asks how actors actually behave, prefer, and respond. The other asks how rules, offices, and organisations shape and outlast those actors. Political theory and political science have swung between them since the mid-twentieth century. A comparison must hold both in one frame.

Body

Behavioural approach

The behavioural revolution, associated with **David Easton**, **Robert Dahl**, **Gabriel Almond**, and **Sidney Verba**, wanted political studies to be empirical, theory-oriented, and, where possible, quantitative. The unit is observable behaviour: voting, attitude, socialisation, demand and support in **Easton's** political system. **Easton** defined politics as the authoritative allocation of values. **Almond** and **Verba's** **civic culture** linked stable democracy to attitudes, not only to constitutions.

The philosophical mood was suspicion of armchair state-theory. Concepts should be operationalised. **Charles Merriam** and the Chicago school had prepared this turn. Behaviouralism promised cumulation and comparison across countries. Its critics, including **Christian Bay** and later post-behaviouralists whom **Easton** himself partly joined after 1969, said it evacuated justice, power, and the state, and that it smuggled a conservative status quo into "value-free" science.

Institutional approach

Classical institutionalism described constitutions, parliaments, federal bargains, and legal powers - the world of **Dicey**, **Bagehot**, and comparative government textbooks. It could be formal and legalistic. **New institutionalism**, from the 1980s, answered behaviouralism without returning to mere legal description. **James March** and **Johan Olsen** argued that institutions are collections of rules and routines that define appropriate action. **Douglass North** treated institutions as the rules of the economic game. Historical institutionalists study path dependence and critical junctures. Rational-choice institutionalists study how rules structure strategic interaction.

- **Here the unit is the durable constraint:** an electoral system, a Supreme Court, a **Planning Commission**, a party law. Individuals still act, but not on a blank field. **Theda Skocpol's** "bringing the state back in" belongs to this recovery.

Comparison

Behaviouralism is actor-centred, often survey-centred, and strong on micro-foundations of consent and cleavage. It is weaker on why two countries with similar attitudes produce different rights, and on how a written constitution channels conflict. Institutionalism is structure-centred, strong on path dependence, courts, and federal design, and weaker if it forgets that rules are staffed by socialised human beings.

For political theory the stakes are clear. A purely behavioural science can lose the normative meaning of authority. A purely formal institutionalism can miss the living culture that makes a parliament work or fail. **Easton's** later post-behavioural plea for relevance, and the new institutionalist turn, are both admissions that the study of political theory needs behaviour inside institutions. Indian politics illustrates the pair: voting surveys explain coalitions; **Articles 370 and 356**, the **Finance Commission**, and the **Election Commission** explain why some games are even playable.

Flow diagram

Behavioural -> Attitudes votes systems
Institutional -> Rules offices paths
Behavioural -> Easton Dahl Almond
Institutional -> March Olsen North Skocpol
Behavioural -> Complement
Institutional -> Complement

Conclusion

Behaviouralism studies what actors do and believe. Institutionalism studies the rules and organisations that frame those acts. The first rescued political science from empty legalism; the second rescued it from a politics without a state. A comparative political theory now treats them as complementary levels, not as rival churches.

Facts & figures

Easton

Politics as the authoritative allocation of values, and the political system as inputs of demand and support with outputs of decisions.

Civic culture

Almond and Verba linked democratic stability to a mix of participant, subject, and parochial attitudes, not to constitutions alone.

New institutionalism

March and Olsen treated institutions as rules of appropriateness; historical institutionalists added path dependence and critical junctures.

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