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Q1(a)

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

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2023 · PSIR GS 2 · 10 marks · Comparative Politics

Comparative Politics: Nature and major approaches; political economy and political sociology perspectives; limitations of the comparative method.

Core demand of the question

- State the crucial functions and role of empirical political theory in Comparative Politics
- Keep the answer within a 10-mark length

Revision summary

Empirical political theory studies observable political facts with concepts that evidence can test.

Its functions are description, classification, explanation, **middle-range theory**, and checking claims against practice.

It shifted Comparative Politics from legal texts alone toward behaviour and institutions.

Sartori's warning against conceptual stretching is part of that discipline.

It does not cancel culture or critical theory; it supplies the evidence those approaches still need.

Introduction

Empirical political theory in Comparative Politics studies observable political behaviour, institutions, and outcomes with concepts that can be checked against evidence. It does not replace philosophy. It tests what states and citizens actually do.

Body

What empirical political theory is

- It grew with the behavioural movement associated with **David Easton**, **Gabriel Almond**, and later quantitative and case-work that asked for statements that data can support or refute.
- It treats votes, cabinets, parties, courts, and public spending as facts that can be classified and compared, not only as legal texts.
- **Giovanni Sartori** insisted that concepts must travel without stretching, so empirical work needs clear definitions before counting.

Crucial functions

- **Description:** it records how governments, parties, and citizens behave across countries.
- **Classification:** it groups regimes, party systems, and federal designs so that like cases sit together.

- **Explanation:** it links causes such as class, institutions, or political culture to outcomes such as stability or turnout.
- **Middle-range theory:** it builds limited generalisations, for example about coalition cabinets or consociational bargains, rather than one law for all politics.
- **Evaluation of claims:** it checks whether a constitution or a slogan matches practice.

Role in Comparative Politics

- It moved the field from formal-legal catalogues of constitutions toward comparison of real processes.
- It supplies the evidence base on which later interpretive and critical work, including **Robert Cox's** distinction between problem-solving and critical theory, can still argue.
- It remains limited when culture, meaning, and history are ignored, yet without it comparison becomes opinion.

Flow diagram

Empirical political theory -> Describe and classify
Empirical political theory -> Explain and test
Explain and test -> Comparative Politics
Describe and classify -> Comparative Politics

Conclusion

Empirical political theory describes, classifies, and tests political life across states. In Comparative Politics its role is to keep concepts tied to evidence so that comparison is more than a list of unique stories.

Facts & figures

David Easton

Defined politics as the authoritative allocation of values and asked for a scientific, systems account of political life.

Gabriel Almond

Comparative Politics after the 1950s used structural-functional categories to compare political systems, not only constitutions.

Giovanni Sartori

Warned that concepts that travel too far become stretched and stop explaining anything.

Middle-range theory

Limited generalisations about a class of cases, rather than one covering law for all states.

Robert Cox

Distinguished problem-solving theory that works within a given order from critical theory that asks how that order arose.

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