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Q1(a)

Discuss the interpretive approach to the study of comparative politics.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2024 · PSIR GS 2 · 10 marks · Approaches to the Study of International Relations

Approaches to the Study of International Relations: Idealist, Realist, Marxist, Functionalist and Systems theory.

Core demand of the question

- Define the interpretive approach in comparative politics
- Name its intellectual sources (verstehen, meaning, culture, context)
- Show what it studies that behavioural counting misses
- State its limits for comparison and generalisation

Revision summary

The interpretive approach studies political action as meaning in context, following **Weber's** verstehen and later cultural and linguistic turns.

It replies to behaviouralism's search for covering laws by asking how votes, nations and authority are understood locally.

Thick description, ethnography and discourse analysis are typical tools.

It explains legitimacy, nationalism and everyday state practice that a constitution or a class map alone cannot supply.

Limits are relativism, weak generalisation, and neglect of material and institutional constraint if used alone.

Introduction

The interpretive approach to comparative politics studies political life as **meaning in context**. It asks how people understand authority, nation, caste, party and protest, rather than treating those words as empty boxes to be filled with numbers. Institutions still matter. They matter as they are lived and named.

Body**What the approach claims**

Max Weber's verstehen asked the analyst to grasp the subjective meaning of action. **Clifford Geertz's** thick description treated a ritual, a courtroom or a vote as a text that must be read in a local language of symbols. **Charles Taylor** argued that social science cannot copy physics because humans are self-interpreting. In comparative politics this becomes a method: constitutions, elections and revolutions are compared through the **stories, categories and practices** that make them intelligible to participants.

The approach grew as a reply to mid-century **behaviouralism**, which privileged surveys, covering laws and a search for universal regularities. Interpretivists do not deny that turnout can be counted. They deny that the count is the whole of politics. A vote in a consociational bargain, a vote in a clientelist village, and a vote in a polarised presidential republic may share a ballot paper and not share a meaning.

What it explains

It explains **legitimacy, nationalism, religious politics and everyday the state**. Why do similar federal texts produce unlike centre-state fights. Why does a coup in one country look like liberation and in another like crime. **Benedict Anderson's** imagined community, **James Scott's** hidden transcripts of resistance, and ethnographic work on Indian elections sit in this family even when the authors are not labelled 'interpretivists' on a syllabus list. Comparative politics needs this layer because **culture is not a residual**. It is how power is recognised.

The method uses ethnography, discourse analysis, history and close reading of law as practised, not only as printed. Cases are often few and deep. The payoff is a map of **political languages**: civic republicanism in one setting, divine kingship in another, developmental nationalism in a third.

Limits

Interpretation can slide into **relativism**, where every practice is only 'true for them' and comparison dies. It can become **impressionistic** if the scholar's reading is not checked against archives, votes and budgets. **Theda Skocpol** and historical institutionalists remind us that organisations, armies and tax systems constrain what meanings can do. **Immanuel Wallerstein's** world-system and class analysis remind us that meaning sits inside a material hierarchy of core and periphery. The interpretive approach is strongest as a **necessary reading of politics**, not as a claim that structures do not exist.

Flow diagram

Interpretive approach -> Meaning and context

Interpretive approach -> Culture legitimacy language

Behavioural counting -.incomplete without. -> Interpretive approach

Structures institutions economy -.constrain. -> Interpretive approach

Conclusion

Comparative politics needs interpretation because people act on meanings, not only on incentives printed in a model. The approach recovers culture, legitimacy and everyday power. It must still sit beside institutions and political economy, or comparison becomes a collection of local stories.

Facts & figures

Weber, verstehen

Social action is to be understood through the subjective meaning actors attach to it, not only through external regularities.

Geertz, thick description

Culture is a web of significance; the analyst reads public symbols in context rather than scoring isolated attitudes.

Behavioural revolution

Mid-twentieth-century comparative politics privileged surveys and general laws; interpretivism returned meaning and history to the centre.

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