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Q1(a)

Discuss the psychological approach to the study of comparative politics.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2025 · 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 psychological approach in comparative politics
- Name the main scholars, methods and concepts (personality, attitude, civic culture, cognition)
- Show what it explains better than pure institutional or class analysis
- State its limits as a stand-alone method

Revision summary

The psychological approach studies personality, attitudes, civic culture and cognition in comparative politics.

Lasswell, Adorno, Almond and Verba, Easton and later political psychology are the main lineage.

It explains voting, protest, obedience and leadership better than a constitution or a class map alone.

Surveys, experiments and psychobiography are typical methods.

It is a layer, not a substitute for institutions and political economy.

Introduction

- **The psychological approach to comparative politics studies** political man**:** personality, attitude, cognition and learning. It asks how inner life becomes public power. Constitutions and classes still matter, but they do not vote, fear, or follow a leader. Minds do.

Body

Core claims

Harold Lasswell treated politics as the displacement of private motives onto public objects: who gets what, when, how. Theodor Adorno and colleagues, in The Authoritarian Personality, linked rigid child-rearing and prejudice to a potential for fascist followership. **Gabriel Almond** and **Sidney Verba**, in The Civic Culture, compared participant, subject and parochial orientations and argued that stable democracy needs a mix, not only a perfect constitution. **David Easton placed those orientations inside a systems model: demands and supports are psychological inputs. Later Fred Greenstein**, the Michigan voting school, and experimental political psychology added heuristics, motivated reasoning and leader images.

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The approach is comparative because it treats **civic culture**, trust, efficacy and threat perception as variables that travel. Weimar's subject culture, Britain's allegiant mix, and high-threat polarisation in several democracies after 2016 are the same family of questions. Open societies socialise through plural media and parties; closed ones through fear and a single script - a point taken up in the short note on socialisation.

Method and payoff

Surveys, experiments, psychobiography (**Alexander and Juliette George** on Woodrow Wilson) and, now, digital trace data are the tools. The payoff is explanation of **turnout, protest, obedience and charismatic followership** that a legal text cannot supply. **Robert Putnam**'s later social-capital work and **Ronald Inglehart**'s post-materialism sit in the same neighbourhood: values and feelings, not only GDP, sort regimes.

Limits

Psychology can slide into **reductionism**. A "national character" story once excused empire. Samples are often WEIRD. **Dependency** and **new institutionalism** remind us that credit, oil, electoral rules and courts structure the menu of feelings. **Kenneth Waltz** would say that structure, not the leader's childhood, is the first cut in international politics; the same caution applies when comparing states. The approach is a necessary layer, not a complete map.

Flow diagram

Psychological approach -> Attitudes and civic culture

Psychological approach -> Leader personality

Psychological approach -> Cognition and voting

Attitudes and civic culture -> Regime stability

Institutions and class -.constrain. -> Psychological approach

Conclusion

Comparative politics needs minds as well as machines of state. Personality, civic culture and cognition explain why similar rules produce unlike regimes. They do not replace political economy or institutions; they sit beside them.

Facts & figures

Almond and Verba
The Civic Culture (1963) compared participant, subject and parochial political cultures across five democracies.

Lasswell
Politics: Who Gets What, When, How; private motives displaced onto public objects.

Authoritarian personality
Adorno and colleagues linked rigid personality to prejudice and susceptibility to fascist appeals.

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