

Behaviouralism

Until the middle of the twentieth century, the discipline of political science was primarily qualitative-philosophical, descriptive, legalistic and typically reliant on case studies that failed to probe causation in any measurable way. The word 'science' was not entirely apt.

In the 1950s, the discipline was transformed by the behavioural revolution spearheaded by advocates of a more social scientific empirical approach. Even

though experimentation was the sine qua non of research in the hard sciences and in

psychology, the method remained a mere curiosity among political scientists. For

behaviouralists interested in individual-level political behaviour, survey research was

the methodology of choice on the grounds that experimentation could not be used to

investigate real-world politics (for more detailed accounts of the history of experimental methods in political science).

David Easton, an American political scientist, was the first to differentiate behaviouralism from behaviourism in the 1950s. In the early 1940s, behaviourism

itself was referred to as a behavioural science and later referred to as behaviourism.

However, Easton sought to differentiate between the two disciplines.

Behaviouralism is an approach in political science which seeks to provide an

objective, quantified approach to explaining and predicting political behaviour. It is

associated with the rise of the behavioural sciences, modelled after the natural

sciences. Behaviouralism seeks to examine the behaviour, actions and acts of

individuals rather than the characteristics of institutions such as legislatures, executives, and judiciaries, and groups in different social settings and explain this behaviour as it relates to the political system.

Prior to the 'behaviouralist revolution', political science being a science at all

was disputed. Critics saw the study of politics as being primarily qualitative and

normative, and claimed that it lacked a scientific method necessary to be deemed a

science. Behaviouralists would use strict methodology and empirical research to

validate their study as a social science. The behaviouralist approach was innovative

because it changed the attitude of the purpose of inquiry, moving toward research

supported by verifiable facts. During its rise in popularity in the 1960s and the 1970s,

behaviouralism challenged the realist and liberal approaches, which the behaviouralists

called 'traditionalism', and other studies of political behaviour that were not based

on fact. To understand political behaviour, behaviouralism uses the following methods:

sampling, interviewing, scoring and scaling, and statistical analysis.