

Research Methodology
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Scientific Research

In political science research, scientific research methodology involves the use of several key elements to investigate and explain political phenomena. These elements—**concepts, theories, facts, laws, generalizations, and predictions**—are interconnected and serve as the foundation for systematic inquiry. Below is a detailed explanation of these terms with relevant examples from political science.

1. Concepts

Definition: Concepts are fundamental ideas or terms that help to describe and classify political phenomena. They provide the basic vocabulary of political science and are used to develop theories and analyze facts.

Characteristics:

- Abstract in nature but grounded in observable reality.
- Formulated to be measurable and defined.

Example:

- "Democracy" as a concept refers to a political system where power is vested in the people, typically through elected representatives.
- "Political participation" refers to actions by individuals or groups to influence political decision-making, such as voting or protesting.

2. Theories

Definition: Theories are systematic explanations of political phenomena. They connect concepts and facts to explain relationships, patterns, and causes within political systems.

Purpose:

- Provide a framework for understanding political processes.
- Generate hypotheses for empirical testing.

Example:

- **Rational Choice Theory:** Suggests that individuals make political decisions based on cost-benefit analysis.
- **Dependency Theory:** Explains the economic disparities between developed and developing nations as a result of historical exploitation and dependency relationships.

3. Facts

Definition: Facts are verified observations or pieces of information about political phenomena. They are the empirical evidence upon which theories are tested.

Characteristics:

- Objective and verifiable.
- Collected through observation, surveys, historical records, or experiments.

Example:

- The fact that the United Nations was founded in 1945 is a historical and verifiable truth.
- Statistical data, such as voter turnout rates in the 2020 U.S. presidential election, is factual information.

4. Laws

Definition: In political science, laws are recurring patterns or relationships that are consistently observed across different contexts. They are less rigid than natural science laws but highlight trends that often hold true.

Characteristics:

- Describe consistent outcomes in similar conditions.
- Based on empirical observations.

Example:

- **Duverger's Law:** States that first-past-the-post electoral systems tend to produce two-party systems.
- This law is observed in countries like the United States and the United Kingdom, where majoritarian voting systems have led to two dominant political parties.

5. Generalizations

Definition: Generalizations are broad conclusions drawn from specific instances or data. They identify trends or tendencies that help to understand political behavior or structures.

Purpose:

- Bridge specific facts and overarching theories.
- Useful for policy-making and comparative studies.

Example:

- "Countries with higher levels of economic development are more likely to maintain stable democracies" is a generalization derived from comparative studies of democratic governance.

6. Predictions

Definition: Predictions are forecasts of future events or trends based on existing knowledge, theories, or data. They test the practical applicability of theories and generalizations.

Characteristics:

- Probabilistic rather than absolute.
- Derived from past trends and patterns.

Example:

- Using modernization theory, a researcher might predict that a country experiencing rapid urbanization and economic growth will likely transition towards democratization.
- In the 2024 elections, regions with high voter engagement in the previous cycle may see increased turnout again, based on trends.

Interrelations between These Concepts:

- **Concepts** are the foundational ideas.
- **Facts** provide empirical evidence to support or challenge these concepts.
- **Theories** organize and explain how concepts and facts relate to one another.
- **Laws** emerge from repeated observations of patterns within theories.
- **Generalizations** draw broader conclusions based on laws and data.
- **Predictions** apply these insights to forecast future outcomes.

Practical Example in Political Science:

1. **Concept:** "Electoral system."
2. **Fact:** The U.S. employs a first-past-the-post system.
3. **Theory:** Duverger's Law predicts this will result in a two-party system.
4. **Law:** First-past-the-post systems generally favor the formation of two dominant parties.
5. **Generalization:** Countries with proportional representation systems have more multi-party systems.
6. **Prediction:** If a country shifts from proportional representation to first-past-the-post, its political landscape will likely consolidate into fewer parties.

Normative Approach

The **normative approach** in political science focuses on evaluating political systems, institutions, and behavior through the lens of values, ethics, and ideals. Unlike empirical approaches that describe "what is," the normative approach is concerned with "what ought to be." It is rooted in political philosophy and seeks to prescribe solutions for creating better political systems or practices.

Key Features of the Normative Approach:

1. **Value-Oriented:** It emphasizes moral and ethical standards, such as justice, equality, liberty, and human rights.
2. **Prescriptive:** The approach is not just descriptive but aims to provide recommendations for improving governance and achieving ideal societal conditions.
3. **Philosophical Roots:** It draws heavily on the works of philosophers like Plato, Aristotle, Rousseau, and John Rawls, who explored concepts of ideal governance, justice, and the social contract.
4. **Critical:** The normative approach critiques existing systems by comparing them against ideal models, questioning their legitimacy or fairness.

Importance in Research Methodology:

- Provides **frameworks for critique:** Researchers can evaluate how well a political system adheres to ethical principles like fairness or representation.
- Guides **policy recommendations:** Helps propose reforms aligned with normative goals such as reducing inequality or increasing public participation.

- Integrates **philosophical and empirical research**: While normative questions are rooted in philosophy, empirical data can be used to analyze gaps between reality and ideals.

Examples in Political Science:

1. **Democracy:**

- **Normative Question:** What makes a democracy truly inclusive?
- A normative researcher might argue that democracy is not just about elections but also about ensuring equal representation of marginalized groups. For instance, the principle of "substantive representation" evaluates whether elected officials truly reflect the interests of all societal segments.

2. **Justice and Equality:**

- **Normative Question:** What is the fairest way to distribute resources in a society?
- A study inspired by John Rawls' *Theory of Justice* might examine whether public policies align with the "difference principle," which advocates for improving the conditions of the least advantaged.

3. **Human Rights:**

- **Normative Question:** How can states ensure adherence to universal human rights?
- Researchers might critique policies that undermine human dignity and propose reforms to align with global human rights norms.

Strengths of the Normative Approach:

1. **Encourages Inspirational Thinking:** It promotes a vision for what political systems can achieve at their best.
2. **Addresses Ethical Concerns:** It integrates moral reasoning into political analysis, which is crucial for policymaking and governance.
3. **Critical Perspective:** It provides tools to evaluate and critique systems that perpetuate injustice or inequality.

Limitations:

1. **Subjectivity:** The approach often relies on subjective interpretations of values and ideals.

2. **Practicality:** It may propose solutions that are idealistic and difficult to implement given political realities.
3. **Lack of Empirical Basis:** Critics argue that it sometimes ignores the complexities and nuances of real-world politics.

Practical Application:

Case Study: Evaluating Electoral Systems A researcher using the normative approach might explore whether a country's electoral system promotes fairness and inclusivity. For example:

- In the United States, a normative critique of the Electoral College might argue that it undermines the principle of political equality by giving disproportionate influence to smaller states.
- The researcher could propose reforms, such as adopting a popular vote system, based on the normative ideal of "one person, one vote."

In summary, the normative approach in political science is a vital tool for addressing the ethical and philosophical dimensions of political systems. By focusing on "what ought to be," it inspires critical reflection and the pursuit of ideal governance. This approach complements empirical research by providing a moral and ethical framework for understanding political phenomena.