

# Politics: From Assumption to Reality - A Historical and Methodological Study

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## Abstract

This study traces the historical development of the study of politics in thought, philosophy, and eventually science, culminating in the field of political culture. It focuses on defining the subject and materials of study, its methodology, and objectives, shedding light on contemporary methodological debates in political studies. The paper highlights the contribution of the field of political culture, also known as political anthropology, to this domain. It delves into the evolution of political culture as a science, addressing its topics, methodologies, and perspectives, particularly the dichotomy between pre-state and post-state societies. The research underscores the importance of collaboration with political science, especially in the field of international relations, to conduct a cultural analysis of politics.

**Keywords:** political philosophy, political culture, anthropology of political action, Michel Foucault

## Introduction

Political action plays a uniquely significant role in the social and cultural formations of nations, unmatched by any other aspect of public life. With the increasing centrality of the state and its economies on a national level, as well as the influence of international powers and actors globally, Aristotle's statement that "man is a political animal" has taken on new meanings. It now transcends negotiation and cooperation, encompassing the essence of political production by humans. This dynamic is amplified in bureaucratic states, particularly rentier states like Iraq.

This study examines politics as a subject of thought, philosophy, and science through history, tracking changes in its topics, methodologies, and objectives. It explores the transition from assumed ideals to political realism and expands the boundaries of political research beyond organizational limitations. The paper investigates how culture and global influences shape political systems and authorities.

A significant focus is the contribution of political culture, or "anthropology of politics," as a field of study. Employing ethnography as its scientific strategy, it explores the connections between culture and political authority. The study considers cultural phenomena in today's globalized world and emphasizes the importance of anthropological propositions that view culture as both the material and subject of this discipline in local and global contexts. This exploration occurs within the broader methodological debates that have dominated political knowledge since the early 20th century.

## **Research Topic**

The study examines politics as a scientific subject, tracing its intellectual, philosophical, and scientific transformations throughout history. It investigates the convergence and divergence of various disciplines in the study of politics.

## **Significance of the Study**

This research is vital for advancing political studies and establishing theoretical and methodological foundations that align with the contextual structures of the Arab and Islamic worlds. These regions often rely on Western achievements in modern sciences as a basis for their approaches.

## **Politics: Its Scope, Topics, and Methodology**

### **Introduction**

In his paper titled *Political Anthropology and Anthropology of Politics: An Overview*, Suresh Dhakal highlights the ongoing debate surrounding the scope of political studies. According to some scholars, political science has struggled to establish sufficient distance between itself and its subject matter, unlike other disciplines that have successfully redefined their subjects to achieve independence, such as "culture" in anthropology, "society" in sociology, and "economics" in political economy.

Political science studies governance methodologically, applying empirical analytical methods to examine the state, its apparatuses, and institutions. This includes exploring cultural, social, and psychological factors that mutually influence government actions and the political body. However, the dichotomy between "political" and "politics" often extends beyond linguistic distinctions, raising questions about the essence of the field. This issue is not just methodological but is intrinsically linked to the nature of political systems and the interactions between cultural and political factors on a fundamental level, rather than through traditional formalist perspectives.

This paper examines the discipline of political culture within the historical context of political thought, philosophy, and science to define its scope, contributions, and differentiation. While the interdisciplinary nature of contemporary political science texts enriches the field, it does not fully address the structural crises within political research, particularly in the Arab world. These crises are compounded by mid-20th-century shifts in political knowledge, especially with the emergence of behavioralism, which critiqued the descriptive and historical nature of political studies, emphasized institutional analysis, and advocated for a more scientific approach to politics. Behavioralism, inspired by biological and social sciences, focused on human behavior in individuals and groups, assuming universal laws could govern this behavior. These laws could be deduced through scientific studies detached from values and grounded in empirical methodologies.

Despite such methodological advances, political studies have yet to give culture its deserved attention, even with the rise of grassroots movements as key players in governance and politics.

### **Key Issues in Political Knowledge**

The field of political knowledge is shaped by a complex interplay of methodology, subject matter, and politicization. While these issues are actively debated in Western scholarship, the Arab world faces additional challenges in contributing meaningfully to these discussions.

### **Key Questions:**

- What is politics?
- How has it been studied scientifically?

The answers to these foundational questions form the core of this research. Etymologically, the Arabic word *politics* (*siyasa*) derives from the root *sas*, meaning to guide or manage, as in "a horse trainer." The English word *politics* originates from the Greek *polis*, meaning city, and *politia*, meaning governance.

### **First: The Scope and Topics of Politics in Greek and Early Christian Thought**

Some consider Socrates the founder of political philosophy, as his ideas, along with those of other Greek philosophers, revolved around describing what should and ought to be, rather than what actually is. Socrates argued that the state should be governed by wise, knowledgeable, and politically trained individuals. Plato, who shared this view, authored three works on politics, focusing on the structure of the soul, society, forms of governance, and the qualifications of rulers. He proposed a hierarchy linking rulers to wisdom, warriors to courage, and craftsmen or commoners to temperance, defining justice as the proper functioning of each class without interference.

Plato's idealism contrasted with Aristotle's realism, who asserted that ethics should follow politics, not the other way around. Aristotle viewed humans as inherently social and political beings and saw the state as a natural phenomenon emerging from the collective nature of human society. His political theory emphasized the practical and natural foundations of governance.

During the medieval Christian era, political philosophy retained many themes from its Greek predecessors but was infused with religious interpretations. For example, St. Augustine's *City of God* introduced the dichotomy of the "earthly city" and the "heavenly city," symbolizing two types of human allegiance: one to material desires and worldly authority, and the other to God and spiritual salvation. Similarly, Thomas Aquinas developed a legal framework dividing law into four types:

1. **Eternal Law:** Governing the entire universe through divine wisdom.
2. **Natural Law:** Reflecting God's design and order in creation.
3. **Divine Law:** Encompassing revelations and divine messages, such as religious scriptures.
4. **Human Law:** Created by humans to regulate society, derived from natural law principles.

### **The Scope and Topics of Politics in Greek and Early Christian Thought**

Socrates is often regarded as the founder of political philosophy. His ideas, along with those of other Greek philosophers, revolved around prescriptive ideals—what should and ought to be—rather than descriptive realities. Socrates believed that governance should be entrusted to the wise and knowledgeable, those who are trained in the art of politics. Plato echoed this view in his works, particularly in his exploration of justice and societal structures. Plato's political philosophy emphasized the division of society into three classes:

1. **Rulers:** Associated with wisdom.
2. **Warriors:** Associated with courage.
3. **Craftsmen/Commoners:** Associated with temperance.

Justice, according to Plato, lies in the harmony of these classes, where each performs its designated role without interference from others (Plato, trans. 1987). Despite Plato's idealism, his practical experiments in politics exposed him to political opposition and personal risk.

Aristotle, on the other hand, offered a more realistic approach to politics. He argued that ethics should be subordinate to politics and described humans as inherently social and political beings. For Aristotle, the state is a natural entity born out of the collective nature of human society (Aristotle, trans. 1992).

### **Christian Political Philosophy**

Medieval Christian political philosophy inherited much from Greek thought but incorporated strong theological themes. Augustine's *City of God* introduced a dichotomy between the "earthly city" and the "heavenly city." The former represented materialism and self-love, while the latter symbolized divine allegiance and spiritual salvation (Augustine, trans. 1998). This division underscored the moral imperatives of Christian governance.

Thomas Aquinas advanced political philosophy by creating a comprehensive framework for understanding laws:

1. **Eternal Law:** The divine wisdom governing all creation.
2. **Natural Law:** Human participation in divine reasoning.
3. **Divine Law:** Revelation-based principles found in scripture.
4. **Human Law:** Practical laws created by humans to govern society, rooted in natural law (Aquinas, trans. 2002).

## **Second: The Scope and Topics of Politics in Medieval Islamic Philosophy**

Medieval Islamic political philosophy offered unique contributions to the discourse on governance. Al-Farabi envisioned an ideal polity, the “Virtuous City,” where governance is entrusted to a ruler who acts as a divine intermediary. This leader is both teacher and moral guide, ensuring the population adheres to the principles of justice and virtue (Al-Farabi, trans. 2001). Conversely, cities that deviate from this ideal—such as “ignorant,” “wicked,” or “errant” cities—fall short of achieving moral and social harmony.

Ibn Sina (Avicenna) emphasized fairness in governance, advocating for justice, economic productivity, and the suppression of corrupt practices (Ibn Sina, trans. 2005). Similarly, Ibn Rushd (Averroes) revisited Plato’s ideas in his *Commentary on Plato’s Republic*, categorizing political systems into forms based on justice and virtue, such as collective governance, tyranny, and plutocracy (Ibn Rushd, trans. 1987).

The most significant turning point in Islamic political thought came with Ibn Khaldun, who introduced the concept of “asabiyyah” (social cohesion). He argued that political authority depends on strong social bonds and tribal solidarity. This approach shifted focus from abstract ideals to practical sociopolitical realities, laying the groundwork for a more empirical understanding of governance (Ibn Khaldun, trans. 2005).

## **Third: The Scope and Topics of Politics in Medieval European Thought**

In the 16th century, Niccolò Machiavelli’s *The Prince* (1513) marked a revolutionary shift in political thought, emphasizing the pragmatic and realistic aspects of governance. Often regarded as the father of modern political science, Machiavelli advocated for understanding politics “as it is” rather than “as it ought to be.” While his work has been criticized for its perceived immorality and endorsement of authoritarianism, Machiavelli’s primary contribution was his assertion that effective governance depends on pragmatism and adaptability. For instance, he argued that democratic systems are ideal only when citizens are educated and virtuous; otherwise, strong centralized authority may be necessary (Machiavelli, trans. 1988).

Machiavelli’s ideas paved the way for the philosophies of Thomas Hobbes and John Locke in the 17th century. Hobbes, in *Leviathan* (1651), posited a grim view of human nature, describing individuals as inherently self-interested and in constant competition. To prevent chaos, Hobbes argued for a powerful sovereign authority to ensure order and security (Hobbes, trans. 1996). Locke, by contrast, presented a more optimistic view of human nature, emphasizing reason, freedom, and the pursuit of happiness. He advocated for a democratic and secular political system, grounded in individual rights and the social contract (Locke, trans. 1980).

Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Montesquieu further expanded political thought in the 18th century by incorporating anthropological and environmental perspectives. Montesquieu, in *The Spirit of the Laws* (1748), analyzed how geography, climate, and social structures influence political systems. He argued that laws must align with the specific conditions of a society to ensure justice and freedom (Montesquieu, trans. 1989). Rousseau, in *The Social Contract* (1762), explored the origins of government, categorizing political systems into

monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy. He highlighted the role of collective will in forming equitable governance, asserting that societies with minimal inequality are more likely to adopt democratic systems (Rousseau, trans. 1978).

#### **Fourth: The Boundaries and Topics of Modern Politics**

By the mid-19th century, the study of politics expanded beyond traditional boundaries, incorporating culture, society, economics, and behavior. This interdisciplinary approach was heavily influenced by figures like Auguste Comte and Saint-Simon, who sought to develop a "social physics" capable of uncovering the scientific laws of societal progress (Comte, trans. 1975). Their efforts inspired the establishment of specialized fields such as political sociology, political economy, and political culture studies.

The collaboration between these disciplines enriched political science, yet it also introduced epistemological tensions. Clifford Geertz described this complexity, noting that disciplines like anthropology, sociology, political science, and history often engage with overlapping subject matter, resulting in both fruitful exchanges and academic rivalries (Geertz, 1973). In the Arab context, however, the integration of these disciplines remains limited, reflecting a broader challenge of producing original political scholarship that is not reliant on Western models.

#### **Fifth: Contemporary Political Science – Striving for Scientific Rigor**

The formal establishment of political science as a discipline emerged in the early 20th century. During this period, scholars sought to transform political studies into a rigorous scientific field. Charles Merriam, in his seminal article *The State of Political Science* (1921), called for the adoption of quantitative and statistical methods to test hypotheses and elevate the field's credibility. This call to action laid the groundwork for behavioralism, a paradigm that emphasized the empirical study of individual and group behavior in political contexts (Merriam, 1921).

Behavioralism gained prominence in the mid-20th century, particularly through the works of Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba. In *The Civic Culture* (1963), they combined behavioral and functionalist approaches to analyze political culture, highlighting the interplay between individual attitudes and systemic structures (Almond & Verba, 1963). However, behavioralism faced significant criticism for its perceived reductionism and inability to address broader sociopolitical complexities. Sheldon Wolin proposed an alternative approach, "epic theory," which sought to balance scientific rigor with normative concerns about public responsibility (Wolin, 1960). Despite its aspirations, epic theory struggled to gain widespread traction.

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#### **Sixth: Political Culture – Pre-State and Post-State Societies**

In the 1950s, anthropology experienced a paradigm shift, especially in the United States and Europe, driven by the transformative effects of World War II. Ted Lewellen described this as the "collapse of structural-functional dominance," which allowed anthropologists to broaden their research focus beyond relatively homogeneous tribal societies to include

complex nation-states. This transition also enabled scholars to study smaller units within these systems, such as individuals or small groups, offering a more nuanced understanding of political dynamics (Lewellen, 2003).

The field of political culture can be divided into two major historical trajectories: the study of pre-state societies and the study of post-state societies. While the former is rooted in classical anthropology, focusing on non-centralized tribal societies, the latter engages with modern state systems shaped by factors such as international relations, economics, technology, and media. These developments marked a significant departure from the traditional focus of anthropological studies in the mid-20th century, which concentrated on pre-state societies in regions like Africa, Australia, and the Americas.

### ***Pre-State Societies***

Classical political anthropology predominantly studied tribal and kinship-based societies, relying on ethnographic methods to examine governance structures, conflict resolution, and power dynamics. While these studies provided valuable insights into small-scale societies, their applicability to modern state systems was limited. Over time, scholars began recognizing the need to adapt methodologies to account for the complexities of modern governance, particularly in societies influenced by colonial legacies and state-building processes.

### ***Post-State Societies***

The study of post-state societies addresses the dynamics of modern political systems, including their interactions with globalization, economic dependency, and technological advancements. Scholars in this area, such as Clifford Geertz, argue that a society's political structure reflects its cultural design, emphasizing the need for nuanced analysis of the interplay between culture and politics (Geertz, 1973). However, this perspective has faced criticism for oversimplifying the relationship between culture and political outcomes, particularly in pluralistic or conflict-prone societies.

Moreover, post-structuralist critiques, notably those of Michel Foucault, challenged traditional assumptions about power and knowledge in political culture studies. Foucault's work emphasized the role of discourse in shaping political authority, highlighting the limitations of cultural determinism in explaining complex political phenomena (Foucault, 1980).

### **Conclusion**

The evolution of political science and political culture reflects the field's adaptability to the challenges of modern governance. From its origins in philosophical debates about virtue and justice, political thought has transformed into an interdisciplinary science that integrates empirical methodologies and cultural perspectives.

The ethnographic methodologies of political culture studies have demonstrated the value of qualitative analysis in uncovering the structural and contextual nuances of political systems. This shift has not only enriched our understanding of governance but has also

provided tools for analyzing the intersection of culture, politics, and power in diverse contexts.

As political science continues to evolve, it must address the epistemological and methodological challenges posed by globalization, technological advancements, and cultural pluralism. The integration of historical, anthropological, and sociological perspectives will be critical in ensuring that political studies remain relevant and capable of addressing the complexities of contemporary political systems.

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