

Political Inquiry as a Way of Knowing: History, Assumptions, Implications for Research, and  
Synthesis

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### Scoring Rubric for the "knowing" paper

20.5  
40

1. Focus: the way of knowing is clearly identified and its historical roots are clearly described  
**Accomplished:** the focus of the paper is clearly stated and its historical roots are clearly described.

18  
75

**Basic:** the focus of the paper is either clearly identified and its historical roots are not clearly described or vice versa.

**Unsatisfactory:** the focus of the paper and/or its roots are neither clearly identified nor clearly described.

2. Presentation of Assumptions: the fundamental assumptions about the nature of knowledge in the "way" are explained clearly and the key terms necessary to understand this way of knowing are defined.

12  
-5

**Accomplished:** the fundamental assumptions are clearly explained and the key terms are defined. — a new way of knowing is clearly explained and related to regular approaches

**Basic:** the fundamental assumptions are explained and some key terms are defined.

**Unsatisfactory:** neither are the assumptions made clear, nor are the key terms defined.

3. Demonstrated understanding of the implications for research: the nature of the research questions this way of knowing has been used to explore are included and described clearly.

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**Accomplished:** the nature of the research questions are included and relevant examples are clearly presented

**Basic:** either the nature of the research questions or the examples are not included or are not clearly presented

**Unsatisfactory:** neither the research questions are clear nor are the examples clearly presented

4. Organization and Clarity: the paper is well-organized; the argument flows easily from point to point; follows APA writing guidelines.

3.5  
4

**Accomplished:** the paper is well-organized with the logic following from point to point; follows APA guidelines; there are no grammatical errors, typos, misspelled words, etc.

**Basic:** the paper jumps from topic to topic; there are grammatical errors, typos, misspelled words, etc.; APA guidelines used inconsistently.

**Unsatisfactory:** the paper is hard to follow as the points are not connected into a coherent whole; inattention to grammar, typographical errors and misspelled words; failure to consult APA is evident.

5. Discussion of why this is a new way of knowing for you

12  
6

**Accomplished:** Delineations between your way of knowing and that of this "other" perspective are clear.

**Basic:** Distinctions are drawn, but not developed in enough depth to see what you learned from the exercise.

**Unsatisfactory:** No attention is given to how this way of knowing is new to you.

A student paper

... addition of ...  
... summary / explanation of ...  
... your ...  
... 8 ...

## Introduction

Political inquiry is the methods used to measure and establish knowledge in the field of political science. Political science is the study of political behavior from both a systematic and individual perspective. The methods of political inquiry have evolved over time to include theoretical, traditionalist, and empirical approaches (Theodoulou & O'Brien, 1999). These methods fail to account for some aspects of political behavior and the current trend proposes that these methods be adapted to allow for a contextual approach. Several contemporary theorists have proposed models that accomplish this goal but the field has adopted none of them. This paper will outline the historical roots of political inquiry, include some of the contemporary models that account for the contextual approach, identify the underlying assumptions, discuss the implications for research, and finally present a synthesis of the information of how the author discovered political inquiry as a new way of knowing.

## Historical Roots

### *Theoretical*

Aristotle was an early political scientist who identified the difference between theoretical and applied science. Previous philosophers had established the concept of the ideal government through discussion. Aristotle was interested in studying what was real and conducted a study where a large number of governments were compared to that ideal. That information was used to develop a normative model of government through which deductions could be made about other governments. In addition to the large system of government, Aristotle was also interested in the goal-oriented behavior of individuals (O'Brien, 1999). Aristotle focused on phronesis,

which can be defined as practical wisdom and was used to study how values and interests influenced political practice (Flyvbjerg, 2006).

### *Traditionalist*

The traditionalist view was adopted in the mid-nineteenth century and was a combination of historical, legalistic, and institutional perspectives. The historical view employs the use of case studies and compares current political systems to the advantages and disadvantages of previous ones. The legalistic view applies the same method to the study of laws and political doctrine while the institutional approach focuses on political systems such as a branch of government. Case studies in these three areas have the potential to provide an abundance of detail for each of these perspectives. However, it fails to account for some of the cause and effect interactions of these systems that is available in other sciences (Theodoulou & O'Brien, 1999).

### *Empirical*

The empirical approach to political science emerged from the concepts of behaviorism where the scientific method was applied to study political behavior (Theodoulou & O'Brien, 1999). The application of empirical methods made it possible to test different hypotheses, which differentiates from the descriptive study employed in the traditionalist method (Dahl, 1999). The results of empirical studies are then used to generate models that can predict political behavior (Fiorina, 1999). While this has the potential to provide valuable information, the focus in this method is on how politics are studied as opposed to what components of politics should be studied (Theodoulou & O'Brien, 1999). Since political decisions are made by human beings

there will always be variability in the accuracy of predicting the outcome of those decisions (Ethridge, 1999).

### *Current Trends*

While the practice of empiricism is good for making large generalizations about political phenomenon, it does not account for some of the more contextualized situations. As with many sciences, there are currently attempts to shift the paradigm to account for these contextualized situations (Kuhn, 1996; Schram, 2006). The current trend in the study of political science is to either move away from or supplement the empirical approach. The Perestroika movement recommends a pluralistic approach meaning that different methods may be used to appropriately answer a research question. Schram contends that the field should adopt Flyvbjerg's phronetic approach to social inquiry. This approach employs the practical wisdom of Aristotle to smaller issues that can be contextualized rather than focusing on large political issues from which only basic generalizations can be made (Schram, 2006). On the contrary, Laitin criticizes the phronetic model and argues for his tripartite model. The tripartite model includes narrative, statistics, and formal modeling, to establish truth in the field (Laitin, 2006). Flyvbjerg in turn rejects Laitin's model and proposes that political science no longer be viewed in terms of the Kuhnian scientific paradigm because the contextualized situations are too unstable (Flyvbjerg, 2006). These issues remain unresolved and no model has been adopted as the universal successor.

*The text  
provides a  
novel perspective  
on the*

## Assumptions

The epistemological study of political science currently makes assumptions to legitimize itself as a science. These assumptions are that: it promotes the understanding of political truth, research increases the knowledge about politics through objective means, explanatory theory facilitates the increasing of knowledge, the development of theory depends on generalizations about political actors, hypotheses are empirically tested by using the theories to make predictions, this accumulated body of knowledge can be applied to society to include policymakers (Schram, 2006). These assumptions currently move along a continuum from deductive practices to empirical study in order to establish a positivist truth of political science. Opponents of the positivist approach discuss the importance of context and interpretation in studying political behavior (Schram, 2006). This section will discuss each of these assumptions and include discussion on the current trend of moving away from positivism to a constructivist approach.

In order to develop the understanding of truth in a political system, it will be defined as a pattern of relationships that involve power, rule or authority. The system of political science itself lies within the larger system of social science. Relationships that include power, rule or authority can be viewed from different perspectives in which no truth exists (Dahl, 1999). Therefore, political science establishes its purpose by assuming that it will pursue this truth in an attempt to establish a universal understanding of political phenomenon. Political science can be studied in a historical context where one examines the behavior of a previous system to increase knowledge of political behavior as a whole. However, the historical context only describes past events without studying the cause. In order to advance the scope of knowledge, objective

research is required to account for the proper interpretation of all of the facts (Theodoulou & O'Brien, 1999).

As conclusions are being drawn from research, models can be developed from the results that will predict and explain political behavior. The knowledge gained from research can also be used to develop models of how the political system ought to be. These models are constantly being refined to be more accurate based on the results of ongoing research. As the accuracy of these models increases, generalizations can be made about the behavior of different political actors. The models and generalizations provide the ability to make predictions about the behavior of political actors and institutions (O'Brien, 1999; Schram, 2006). These predictions can be used to develop hypotheses, which can be tested through empirical procedures that utilize both experimental and statistical procedures. Once these hypotheses have been proven to be true or false, the knowledge gained from these exercises can be generalized to the population as a whole. These generalizations can be used to influence the development of policy and the decisions made by major political figures (MacDonald, 2003).

While utilizing these assumptions facilitates the development of broad generalizations, critics of this practice believe it to be impractical. Broad generalizations are too vague and do not capture the essence of what is important in both practical and contextual terms (Schram, 2006; Flyvbjerg, 2006). These approaches also overlook the importance of interpreting values as they are applied to political behavior (Gibbons, 2006). The proposed solution to this issue<sup>15</sup> is to abandon the assumption that empirical methods will allow one to make generalizations about the population at large. This will be replaced by the bottom-up practice of studying practical issues within specific situations to build the base of knowledge (Flyvbjerg, 2006). This knowledge

*Method* (pp. 33-55). New York and London: New York University Press.

Lowi, T. (1999). The State in Political Study: How We Become What We Study. S. Z.

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Scrimgeour, F. G. & Pasour, E. C. (1996). A Public Choice Perspective on Agricultural Policy Reform: Implications of the New Zealand Experience. *American Journal of Agricultural Economics*, 78(2) 257-267.

Theodoulou, S. Z. & O'Brien, R. (1999). Where we stand today: The State of Modern Political Science. S. Z. Theodoulou & O'Brien (Eds.) *Methods for Political Inquiry: The Discipline, Philosophy, and Analysis of Politics* (pp. 1-12). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.



results, they did find that their overall hypothesis was correct. In this study, data about public opinion was gathered through a survey and analyzed using statistics. The hypothesis was confirmed and the researchers were able to make a generalization about interests, socialization, and influence, on public opinion between two countries (Goldsmith, Horiuchi, & Inoguchi, 2005).

Rational Choice Theory studies the goal-oriented behavior of individuals as they make choices that will give the greatest benefit to them (MacDonald 2003). This is studied in the same terms of cost-benefit analysis that exists in economics (Lowi, 1999). Individuals will develop systems that may benefit the entire population but this behavior will also benefit them as individuals (MacDonald, 2003). Scrimgeour & Pasour (1996) conducted a study where they examined the deregulation of agriculture in New Zealand and its impact on the economy. In this article, they discussed that while deregulation was not only in the best interest of the farmer, but also <sup>the</sup> impact on the economy was beneficial to the entire population. They evaluated how this model would impact the agricultural community of the U.S. and discussed the implications for other countries. They concluded that while deregulation was an act of the government, it was the choice of the farmers to vote for that government and engage in the practice therefore creating the benefit for themselves and the rest of the population (Scrimgeour & Pasour, 1996).

While public policy analysis has occurred through methods similar to the cost-benefit analysis of economics, the current trend is to conduct it through a narrative, contextualized method referred to as postmodern public policy analysis. This strategy measures the efficacy and impact of public policy (Schram, 1993, Lowi 1999). Schram (1993) used the postmodern public policy analysis to examine the efficacy of current welfare policy. He reviewed the policy

in terms of how discourse creates an identity for welfare mothers. He concluded that the current policy applies to a more traditional family structure and does not account for the single parent family of which there are many welfare recipients. He concludes that a more realistic policy is required to effectively decrease poverty. By studying the policy in a narrative, contextual manner, Schram further argues that it is inappropriate to blame the mothers in poverty as this behavior will not create more effective policy. The narrative approach in this case not only identifies weaknesses in the current policy but provides reality based improvements on how to improve it (Schram, 1993).

### Synthesis

Prior to beginning research on this subject, my own personal way of knowing was that knowledge was gained solely through empirical practices. As hypotheses were found to be either true or false, we became closer to the truth of a particular topic. Research that was conducted without using experimental methodology or the application of statistical techniques to verify that some sort of significant phenomenon had been discovered was considered to be unreliable and I would not accept the results as truth. In addition to this perspective, I had very little prior knowledge of political science and the methods through which it is studied. Being that I am interested in education policy, I chose this topic to gain a better understanding of how knowledge is gained in the political field. While one of the techniques is consistent with my previous way of knowing, I have learned much about the other methods of political inquiry.

The theoretical and historical models that were outlined in the historical roots section are both new ways of knowing to me. While I was familiar with the concept of normative research utilized by Aristotle in his study of local governments, I was unfamiliar with the use of it in this

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manner (Theodoulou & O'Brien, 1999). My own experience with normative models consisted of how it applied to a normal curve in the practice of statistics as opposed to the more qualitative approach of measuring something against how it ought to be. The study of the historical, legalistic, and institutional, models allowed me to realize the importance of reviewing existing information in gaining knowledge and that much can be gained independent of scientific techniques (Theodoulou & O'Brien, 1999). This particular area helped me recognize that the ways of knowing I have gained from my undergraduate education in psychology are not the only ways of gaining knowledge.

In learning about the assumptions I came to realize the importance of developing theoretical models based on existing knowledge to determine the direction inquiry should take. I had not given any consideration to the methods employed in determining how research questions are developed (Schramm, 2006). The study of assumptions in this model helped me learn how political science engages in the entire process of developing its way of knowing. While empiricism appears to be on the decline, the assumptions that precede it in the process of knowing can continue to serve as the foundation for the newer methods. As these methods become more prevalent, the empirical assumptions are likely to change.

While public opinion uses empirical practices and statistics as a way to establish knowledge, it appears that the knowledge gained is not cumulative in the sense that it calls for additional research but rather it is a snapshot of public opinion on an issue at a moment in time. The strategy that political inquiry has borrowed from economics in cost-benefit analysis was completely new to me (Lowi, 1999). While it may be less methodical than an empirical approach, there is a clear set of logic that is being used. The case is presented and evaluated in

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terms of cost and benefit to determine if the benefit outweighs the cost. If the benefit does outweigh the cost then it is proven to be an effective practice. I am somewhat skeptical of this particular way of knowing because the lack of specific method can potentially remove objectivity and the cost-benefit analysis can be presented in a manner that skews the facts from reality in order to push a personal agenda and develop poor policy.

Finally, I learned that political science is currently a field in revolution in terms of its ways of knowing (Schram, 2006). Throughout the history of political science, it has adopted methods for gaining knowledge that have been effective for that era. Once it was determined that those forms of inquiry were no longer able to appropriately provide the sort of knowledge that was being sought, a new one was developed that could accommodate the needs of the field. Currently, empiricism is on the decline as when I tried to find empirical studies of policy in the last twenty years, there were very few. What I found instead were articles outlining the new ways of knowing and arguing for their merits in the hope they would become the new way of knowing for the field. This helped reinforce my understanding that every field experiences this and that education has its own challenges in the manner in which knowledge is gained. While I was initially an opponent of narrative inquiry, the process of writing this paper helped me realize that it answers the questions that the field of education asks more appropriately as the diversity of the classroom creates a more contextualized setting from which knowledge is gained.

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