

# Critical Comparison of the Strengths and Weaknesses of Positivism and Interpretivism as Two Approaches to the Study of Politics

Balamurugan Kaliyamurthi\*

Department of Politics, Sheffield University, South Yorkshire, England

## ABSTRACT

Understanding politics gives people a choice between “Bullet or Ballot”. No doubt, Aristotle called politics as the ‘Master Science’. This paper will put positivism and interpretivism approaches side by side and analyse on their merits and constraints for utilising them as a study of politics. To address this, one needs to be clear on the fundamental question of why the study of politics requires different approaches. Ted Benton explains the requirement of a philosophical toolkit to study politics. Society is dynamic due to interaction between individuals, and it is subjected to change which Wright mills calls as social imagination. Fixing on what kind of truth a researcher is searching (for example male/female sex which is a universal truth or gender, a socially constructed truth) and accordingly finding that truth through various ways of knowledge acquisition approaches were evolved for studying social issues. Taking this example, if the search of truth is about sex, the researcher will find knowledge through empirical statistics or if the search is about gender, in the minds of people. These factors led to the evolution of various epistemological approaches. Among them, this paper will critically compare the strength and weakness of positivism and interpretivism. The paper will explain the basic terminologies concerning the topic and will elucidate about positivism and interpretivism. It will proceed to the first section for a critical comparison of the strength and weakness of positivism with respect to interpretivism. In the second section, the strength and weakness of interpretivism will be analysed in critical comparison with positivism. This paper will conclude with a stand that these two are foundational approaches with exclusive merits and the varied mixed approaches having the combined strength of both these approaches (and cancelling their weakness) are evolved and shall be suitably applied for political study.

**Keywords:** Positivism; Interpretivism; Ontology; Epistemology

## INTRODUCTION

In this section, the paper will explain the essential terminologies and basic concepts that are relevant to the topic. First, what is meant by politics, and what is its origin? Politics is derived from the Greek word polis, which means a city-state or an administrative unit that protects people and takes care of their wellbeing [1-6]. Politics as an arena is defined as “the art of government and public affairs”. Politics as a process is defined as the “compromise and consensus power and the distribution of resources” [7]. Laswell calls politics as a study about who gets what, when and how [8].

Moving to the origin of politics, the work of Immanuel Kant, an 18<sup>th</sup> Century polity philosopher, explains there is no requirement of political order if all human beings are naturally social and cooperate on a rational basis. As they are not, a pattern of political order emerges [9]. However, Fukuyama has explained the origin of political order from certain default type of human sociability. It is mainly based on kin selection or inclusive fitness that make one favour genetic relatives to the extent of genes shared and reciprocal altruism that make one favour a genetic stranger in expectation or guarantee of a return favour. He further argues that the ability of human beings to create norms

and institutions based on emotions or abstract ideas (example religion) rather solely on reasons are some of the founding principles of political order [10].

## LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Andrew Heywood the root cause of politics is disagreement among people on how resources should be distributed, who should hold power, how collective decisions should be made and if such resolution should be by cooperation or conflict. Nobel laureate north argues that human society is prone to violence, and the major reason for the violence is to acquire wealth and power. He explains that the elite individuals, groups and organisation of a society create institutions (a persistent pattern of human behaviour shaped by formal rules or informal norms) to control the political and economic system and in this process, they access certain privileges towards resources. In their interest in protecting their rents, they control violence and maintain peace. The elites keep limiting the access of other rival individuals or organisations towards this rent generating system, and therefore he says the politics sustain.

These basic concepts about the complex and the inter-disciplinary

**Correspondence to:** Balamurugan Kaliyamurthi, Department of Politics, Sheffield University, South Yorkshire, England, E-mail: getachew.hailemariam@fau.de

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nature of politics involving sociology, anthropology, economics, law, governance and management, also justify the necessities of different approaches for its study.

Other terminologies that are key for the study of approaches to politics are 'ontology' and 'epistemology'. Anchoring on a philosophical orientation is important for social research, which necessitates a researcher to probe on these words [11]. Ontology is the theory of 'being'. Ontology is derived from the Greek word 'onto' meaning 'to be or being'. It is the study of 'existence'. It probes whether the existence of a 'thing' is independent of an observer or dependent on an observer [12]. Once the ontological position is decided on the nature of reality, what knowledge can be generated out of that reality is decided by a researcher based on her epistemological position. Epistemology is the theory of knowledge [13]. It is rooted in the Greek word episteme meaning 'to know'. The way humans acquire knowledge out of reality may be limited by the type of sensory we possess as much as the limitation of bat's sensory in acquiring its reality through echolocation.

Coming to the approaches for studying politics, the word positivism was derived from the French word 'positif' which means 'imposed on mind by experience'. 19<sup>th</sup> Century French philosopher August Comte invented positivism by which he applied a scientific approach to social issues [7,14]. Positivism is based on foundational ontology. It was rooted in empirical tradition attempting for a dispassionate analysis of social event [15]. Positivism finds a causal relationship between events in society utilising statistical methods. Here social studies are restricted with what one can observe by human senses (empirical), and the observer is independent of what is observed (value-neutrality) [16]. A political researcher who follows positivist epistemology chooses quantitative methodology such as questionnaire, survey, experimentation and test of the hypothesis [17].

Unlike positivism, interpretivism proposes to study society subjectively by interpreting the meaning of social phenomena. Interpretivists are anti-positivist with anti-foundationalist ontology relying on multiple realities. They believe that the social world should be studied within, by understanding values, culture, emotions, perspectives and language [18]. Researchers who follow the interpretivist epistemology choose qualitative methodology such as unstructured interview, ethnography or case study [19].

Having explained the features of approaches, this section will critically compare the strength and weakness of positivism with respect to interpretivism engaging with the literature.

To start with, the main strengths of positivism are brought down as follows. The strength of positivism stems from being a pioneer in the first scientific study of politics. According to David Sanders, Positivism is the 'gold standard' based on which other philosophies are evaluated. He quotes on the debates from Lapid strengthening the position of positivism as a yardstick to judge the position of other theories of approach to study politics [17]. Many post-positivist epistemologies were evolved based on positivism. Positivism is claimed as the third stage of knowledge development in society departing from the previous stages of acquiring knowledge from superstitious and normative beliefs of theology and metaphysics [20].

Unlike interpretivism, the scientific approach enables positivism to be more accurate and precise in the study of society. The cause and effect relationship between variables help to give a specific statistical picture and help to develop causal models. One example is the study of the effect of income growth in a country towards reduction (or increase) of inequality in society [21]. Heather Savigny explains this with another hypothetical example that female voters are more likely

to vote democrat. This hypothesis is tested by empirical evidence of say survey. If the outcome can confirm cause and effect to establish that gender is a criterion in electoral success [22].

Positivist research methods enable a researcher to replicate the results to different subpopulation and will later help to generalise research findings to the population. For example, by studying the relationship of poverty and crime in a specific locality, the results can be tested at different locations, and a researcher shall arrive at a general conclusion [23]. Such generalisation is impossible in the case of interpretivism as each individual/ community/subpopulation is approached differently in a qualitative manner. Further, compared to interpretive approaches, positivist research can be easily conducted in less time, with the simplicity of parsimony [24].

The quantitative methodology of Positivism helps to predict a social event. The objective data enable a social researcher to make scientific assumptions, unlike in qualitative methods. In support of this claim, Carl Hempel has developed a model to explain an event. He stresses the advantage of a positivist approach to finding its likelihood [25]. He says in detail that any event can be explained by law which if analysed over a period can lead to building a 'deductive nomological model'. Further, the alternative 'inductive statistical' model he says can help to predict a particular event [17]. Bourdeau Michel substantiates this claim that Comte's positivism philosophy is fundamentally futuristic with a chronological order of not the past-present-future but past-future-present [26].

The positivist approach has merit over the interpretivist as the researcher can remain objective not influenced by the subject of study. For example, finding the relationship between democratic nations and their economic growth where the researcher can collect data without any need for a personal interview. The result of the positivist approach has the advantage of transparency and reliability [27]. Also, the results are easily validated and tested independently with established theories and models. Such credible results of positivism approach may sometimes be useful for politicians, administrator and the project funder. Whereas, in the case of interpretivism approach, the challenge is the possibility of researcher's influence over the subject and researcher herself can become biased to the subject [28].

Steve Smith quotes the work of Llyod and emphasises the strength of positivism approach to study and understand the International Relations (IR). He claims that International relations largely follow the theory of naturalism, which falsifies the distinctions between society and the natural world. He quotes an example of how facts and objectivism helped to understand the US role in Vietnam. Steve Smith remarks that even other paradigms of realism, pluralism, globalism, neo-realism and neoliberalism are centred on the positivist assumptions in International relations [17].

Now, we shall find the comparative weakness of positivism approach in the political study. The main weakness of positivism which is the cause of objection by interpretivist is positivist's consideration of people as numbers with disregard to underlying values and emotions. Interpretivist rejects this approach on the ground that factual analysis of truth by empiricism and value neutrality is not sufficient to study human being. Interpretivist criticises that in the positivist approach there is no concept of what is bad or what is good, but facts are accounted with the presumption that there is no difference between 'matter' and 'actor'.

Durkheim's famous empiristic research of suicide, taking crime as a 'thing', was criticised by interpretivist noting that the cause and effect of an event without observation on motives within the event is

fundamentally flawed. Here causation is limited to correlation without explanation on why or how [29]. Positivism was criticised that it made a science out of sociology than understanding society as it is [30]. However, against this argument, Villmoare notes that this separation of facts and values in positivism approach ensures 'no politics' entering into political research [31].

The other important weakness of positivism is that knowledge generated out of this approach by studying a large population might be abstract which cannot be necessarily localised to specific context/individuals/group. Also, a researcher's theory may not be understood or reflected upon the subjects at all as found by Basu in his study on the importing of Jersey cattle breed to developing countries [32]. Here the import from Europe has failed to deliver the expected additional milk yield from the high breed Jersey cows in the developing countries as the positivist study has not taken into account of the acceptability of local people, availability of specific fodder for the cows and climatic conditions for their survival, which can be only arrived by an interpretivism study or in this case by a microplanning at village level where the cows were imported.

Further, the foundation of positivism using empirical analysis to study social events is criticised as an improper approach. Quine, in his work on 'two dogmas of empiricism' rejects that the theory testing system developed by positivism is merely a filling system where sensory observations remain a web of belief [33]. The reason he said is that we cannot see the truth with our senses as it is since we mediate the truth with our interpretation inside our head [34]. Kuhn criticises that, the scientific claim of positivism itself is hollow. He says that a positivist falsifies the fact if it is inconsistent with theory while the theory itself might be wrong. Over a period, there might be a paradigm shift in the belief of theory due to scientific observations. For example, one can consider the shift of theory of the universe (or solar system) from Geo-centric to the heliocentric paradigm. The shift will falsify a theory; however, until this time, a positivist will keep rejecting observation that does not fit into that theory. A researcher here merely tends to focus on testing a theory or hypothesis rather than generating a theory. Whereas, it is noted that in the case of interpretivism approach of study, there is a possibility to generate new theories [35].

Many post-positivist thinkers reject the empirical base of positivism. A popular example to negate empiricism is that empirical methods cannot fully understand natural science. For example, gravity is not seen, yet it is true that it exists and hence shows positivist-empiricism as an inadequate epistemology. As mentioned by Bhaskar, a positivist observer can see a person in front and thereby can see her face but cannot see the 'human nature' for example one cannot see if one is selfish or not and thus the positivist approach he says is not rational as it claims [36].

Moving to the next approach, this section will critically compare the strength and weakness of interpretivism as an epistemological approach to the study of politics.

First, the comparative strengths of interpretivism are analysed as below. The main strength of the interpretivist approach is that it is more humanistic for political study when compared to the Positivist approach. Instead of limiting the research questions with 'what is', interpretivism approach through qualitative research, understands the nature of human emotions. Only the interpretivist approach can analyse the human mind on how individuals construct her social reality on crucial issues such as self-esteem or happiness [37]. This is relatively ethical in comparison to the positivist approach wherein human beings are merely quantified as a number or unit [38]. This

approach helps to find the idiographic causation of particular event and has the potential to resolve the roots of complex social-cultural issues such as gender bias, casteism or racism. Keith Dowding says that only interpretivist can bring out social problem and contradictions such as old and new traditions and their clashes within a culture [39].

The contextual nature and in-depth study in this approach are helpful to research on limited case/area and serve the local stakeholder/situations. Unlike positivism, it understands the motives, meanings, reasons and other experiences of individuals which are time and context-bound. For example, the study of a family dispute, taboo, organisational change management, leadership needs interpretation of context to conclude. Heather Savigny says positivism can only explain the cause of say, how taxation affects social inequality. Only an interpretive approach can find out what conditions and context made this happen, and in this way, it gives a scope to change such conditions. He says in the social world, there are 'series of competing truths' which demands interpretation [22].

Fukuyama emphasises the benefit of interpretivism in studying and bringing development in human society. He says development is not a mere directory of resources, technology or policy but it is about the course by which the social, political and economic institutions originate, evolve and ultimately perish. Since human being attaches intrinsic value to institutions and follows norms (and even worship, for example, religious norms) that are mostly grounded on emotions, he reveals that they can be studied only through the interpretivist approach. The persistent and entrenched nature of human institutions makes it difficult to change even if the circumstances that created the institutions do not exist any more (example prevalence of casteism in India for about 1500 years) and hence it requires interpretation of mind and cannot be studied through the scientific lens of positivist approach [40].

Moreover, Khan has reported the role of norms and distribution of organisational power in his political settlement theory explaining development (or under development) of societies, and the study of such informal institutions can be approached only through the methods of interpretivism [41].

Fukuyama also quotes the merits of interpretivism in studying the emergence of identity politics (based on language, colour, creed, culture, race or region) as evidenced by the British exit from the European Union or re-election of Donald J Trump in 2016 [42].

Further, through interpretivism, rather than fitting the researcher's theory (as done in a positivist approach), one can understand the social meaning, new theories or frameworks [12]. Say that the interpretivist method can generate better survey questionnaire and design that can falsify the existing hypothesis. Interpretivist approaches by ethnography, focus group and interviewing help to elicit thinking among the majority to make them sensible on cross-cultural differences, morals, values and ethical standards. It makes a researcher empathetic and stands on other's shoes [27]. These results are impossible through a positivist approach which has divorced truth from values.

The weakness of interpretivism in comparison to other approaches will be analysed here. Majority of the strength explained in positivism are noted as the weakness of interpretivism. For example, here, research findings through the interpretivist approach may be unique and applicable to the local situation only. They cannot be generalised with the same level of certainty as done through statistical methods under positivism approach. What is true for a specific community/tribe/region that is found by ethnography cannot be universally true [43]. David marsh says interpretivist suffers from the issue of reflexivity if

the researcher is not fully cognizant of her partialities [44]. It demands a researcher to have high reflexivity to escape possible vulnerability. King, Keohane and Verba in their studies, criticise interpretivism that it just offers opinion which for positivist is equivalent to fiction that cannot be generalised. Bevir and Rhodes reject interpretivism methods of ethnography, transcribing the text, keeping diaries to produce 'thick description' calling it as just "our constructions of other people's constructions" [44]. Interpretivist is criticised that their research findings cannot predict the future as could be done by the positivist researcher. David Sanders remarks on interpretivist that it is just a fancy concept that only say on 'what people think, say and do' but cannot make statements on 'what people will think, say and do' [12].

The other constraint in the interpretivist approach of political study is that it is comparatively difficult to validate research findings. It is easy to validate a statistical result than validating the findings of a semi-structured interview [45]. Further interpretivist approach is a tedious and time-consuming process in comparison to the positivist approach. For example, ethnography, participant research action, case study, microplanning may take more time and resources than experimentation, statistical analysis and questionnaire survey [46].

## DISCUSSION

This paper is tasked to critically compare the prospects and constraints of two approaches to study Politics [47]. It started with the explanation of key terminologies and concepts of Politics, its origin, ontology, epistemology, and accordingly, the two key approaches of studying politics that is positivism and interpretivism [48]. In the first section, it critically compared the strength and weakness of positivism with respect to interpretivism and in the second section; it did the same on the interpretivism approach. It shall be concluded that positivism focuses on causal analysis of politics and create new knowledge by a scientific approach [49]. It has its merits in being precise, objective without getting influenced by the subject of study, the ability to collect data and quantify complex political issues by statistical models. It also has the strength of predictability and the capacity to generalise on a large scale [50].

Similarly, interpretivism approach has its exclusive prospects in the ability to understand the nature of human conditions causing the problem and gives scope to research and find solutions on mentally constructed social stereotypes which are not in physical reality out there. It is more ethical taking into account the cross-cultural differences, institutions and norms that are not universal but are significant to understand the human behavioural pattern and politics. Despite some of the challenges, both the approaches have strong merits in their ability to research for solving the socio-political problem.

## CONCLUSION

As Grinnell remarks, any research is a structured inquiry of justifying both these areas of knowledge and human conditions. Inclining to interpretivism without consulting on the knowledge may end up in mere reinventing the wheel from different perspectives. Also, much of knowledge focus (positivism) may create reductionism or trivial research without value to human. For example, an interpretivist can understand poverty or racism by ethnography, and finally, if the interpretivist wants to resolve the issues on a large scale, she needs to consult similar research or data (for example, percentage of people below the poverty line) which can be arrived through a scientific approach provided by the positivist approach. This situation demands the integration of these two approaches to solve field issues. King Keohane and Verba argue that the interpretivist approach has utility only if the data collected

is linked and confirmed with positivist or scientific principles. They say that "science and interpretation are not fundamentally different endeavours". Social thinkers and philosophers have thus pulled- in these extremes of positivism and interpretivism to a series of approaches such as critical/scientific realism. It is a midway approach based on anti-foundationalism with concepts of unobservable layers of truth on one side and admitting on causal explanation (positivism) on the other side. Based on foundational positivism, other approaches have been evolved to study politics such as behaviouralism, rational choice theory and liberal feminism. Also, based on anti-foundational interpretivism, there are approaches to study politics, such as constructivism, poststructuralism and post-structural feminism with fluid boundaries among them. As Sandra Halperin remarks about the tendency of a researcher to fall into the trap of exaggerating the differences between positivism and interpretivism and taking sides a researcher shall raise from the foundational approaches of positivism and interpretivism to choose the best-integrated approach that would fit to solve any socio-political issue on hand.

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