

The rational choice approach



Whilst people all around the world debate over which political system is the most effective, social scientists are still in debate over which is the best way to analyse politics. Without the correct analysis of political objects how is one supposed to decide which political system or party is the most effective? It is for this reason that the way in which we analyse political objects is so important. There are many different ways to go about analysing politics. One main distinction to be noted is how in America the subject is called politicalscience, whereas many European universities just call it politics.

European scholars would suggest that the name political science is flawed in the sense that you cannot conduct certain political experiments. Rational choice theorists would suggest otherwise as I will explain later on in the essay. In a lecture delivered by Professor Mark Franklin at the European University Institute, he stated; “ We cannot take a random sample of people and give them a new political system to see what happens” (Franklin, 2006). Debates such as these go far further than just cross-national. In this essay I intend to give a brief background to the various approaches to studying politics.

I will then go on to outline the strengths and weaknesses of the rational choice approach to understanding the political, paying close attention to the definition of self-interest, using various scholars work to form a critique of the rational choice theory. The studying of politics can be dated back to the ‘ Platonic era’ of ancient Greece, as early as 420 B. C. However, the departments of politics came much later. Within these departments one of the earliest forms of analysing politics was through the method of institutionalism. This involved the studying of institutions.

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Institutionalists looked at how institutions were formed, what they did and how they were structured. Rather than looking at philosophical questions, institutionalists concentrated on normative questions. Institutionalism was criticised for its lack of rigour as it was mainly a descriptive process. Others called it elitist and described it as “clever people telling others about their own system” (Parvin, 2013). The 1930s saw the American way of thinking revised as a result of the increasing numbers of European scholars entering America.

As a result of this, and with the growing criticisms of the conventional approach, analysis took a behavioural standpoint. At the same time of behaviouralism, rational choice theorists were in writing. However, it only flourished in the 1980s. Rational choice theory involves more questioning of people's decisions and political objectives and was a lot less descriptive. Rational choice theory, first used in the field of economics, suggests individuals are rational and therefore act in their own self-interest. They do this by weighing up the costs and benefits of a situation.

It also assumes individuals are rational meaning they do not act outside the norm. Another assumption is that individuals make their decisions whilst taking into account what other individuals do, or what they believe the other individuals will do. The first weakness of the rational choice theory I wish to analyse is the assumption that all individuals are self-interested. To tackle this it is important to define being self-interested. It is often defined as one gaining pleasure from an act. However, is an act still self-interested if the person gains pleasure from helping others?

If your answer is no, then what if an act pleases one's self whilst helping others, but also putting others at a disadvantage. Is this now self-interested again? For example, when a pressure group member of 'fathers 4 justice' climbs a building to encourage politicians to allow him to see his child he would be seen as self-interested. On the other hand, he is doing it in order to care for his child and give him the correct up-bringing he needs. In this instance he may not be considered self-interested. On a further note, by climbing up said building police and other services would be called out to resolve the situation.

This could lead to a delayed call-out for police to attend another crime scene, putting others at a disadvantage. Does this now make the act self-interested again? From this series example it is evident that there are usually several parties affected by a particular political movement or decision. It is also evident that upon making political decisions people often have multiple incentives which may involve benefiting ones self and benefiting others, making it extremely difficult to give determine if an act is self-interested or not.

Furthermore, assuming it was possible to narrow down an act to being self-interested or not, it is impossible to say every single person is self-interested. This is outlined by the 'black swan theory'. This theory suggests that no matter how many white swans you see, you can never rule out the possibility of there being a black swan. One strength of the rational choice theory is that it offers an explanation as to why there has been a dramatic decrease in political participation since the middle of the 20th century, as outlined in Colin Hay's book 'Why we hate politics'. For example, between

1950 and 2001 electoral turnout in the UK has decreased by 24.2% (Hay, 2008: 49).

Decreases in electoral turnout doesn't stop at the UK, since the middle of the 20th century lots of countries including of the OECD countries, bar two. This decrease in political participation may be as a result of voters weighing up the costs and benefits of voting and then coming to the conclusion the costs outweigh the benefits. People feel as if their vote would count for nothing and that one vote is highly unlikely to change who forms the government. Hay goes on to deliver this point of view in the equation of $[U_{\text{chosen}} - U_{\text{other}}] p > C_{\text{voting}}$.

In this equation $[U_{\text{chosen}} - U_{\text{other}}] p$ represents the utility the voter receives if the party they vote for goes into power minus the utility received if the other party goes into power. C_{voting} represents the cost of voting and the cost is always greater than the benefits to a rational individual (Hay, 2008: 50). This is further examined by Mancur Olson in his book 'The Logic of Collective Action'. Olson highlights how individuals do not participate, letting others put in the work and then reaping the rewards of having a strong government (Olson, 1971).

This has also been linked to the power of the minority and how they can choose to opt out of a trade union but still get the benefits, for example; an increasing wage rate. Both theories presented are easy to accept as they suggest strong explanations as to why there has been a decrease in participation. However, on a closer examination to the voting system, it may appear that there are more benefits to be earned from voting. Many people

experience a feeling of pleasure from participating as they feel as if they have done a good deed.

Which arguably, they have. Moreover, some people may experience a sense of pride as a result of doing something to help their country. Another point to take into account when weighing up the benefits of voting is that some people may genuinely enjoy the process. On the contrary, when weighing the costs it must be noted that the effort and inconvenience of voting isn't the only cost in certain cases. Some individuals choose not to vote as they believe by voting they are accepting a certain party's policies, whereas some people do not agree with any party.

Others are anarchists who do not believe governments should exist. In this instance the cost would be far greater, providing further support for the rational choice theory. The rational choice theory has also allowed us to predict behaviour through its vigorous methodology. In the introduction I briefly mentioned the various views on whether or not politics can be viewed as a science. Although we may not be able to conduct experiments which involve observing people in different political systems, we can put them in situations to observe their decision making and relate it to the political.

One experiment involving offering two bank robbers the opportunity to either stay quiet or hand over their accomplice saw individuals being rational. The best outcome was if they both stayed quiet and saw them both have reduced sentences, whilst if one stays quiet and the other hands the accomplice over, the accomplice will be sentenced with the one who handed him over going free. However, if they both handed each other over they would both have an increased sentence. This is part of game theory and is known as the <https://assignbuster.com/the-rational-choice-approach-research-paper-samples/>

prisoner's dilemma. Being rational, the prisoners near enough always handed over their partner.

Rational choice theorists would suggest this can be transferred to the political arena by explaining that they would act with this level of self-interest in all situations, including within the political arena. Nonetheless, it is important to note that choosing between imprisonment and who governs are two completely different scenarios. To say that individuals would act the same in both situations with little evidence to show this is somewhat illogical. For example when confronted by a woman asking you for your wallet you may decide to refuse, but when she is holding a gun to your head your answer may change.

The game show whereby similar outcomes are offered to two people but instead of prison sentences, the outcome is how much money they receive is evidence of how the answer depends on what is at stake. Within this show there were always different combinations of answers with both self-interested people and people willing to share. From this essay it is clear that there are many weaknesses. However, it should not go un-noticed that one of the most influential factors that caused the increasing use of the rational choice approach was its vigour. Whilst other approaches offer mere descriptions, rational choice theory goes into deep questioning.

Furthermore, the methodology is greater than any other with the use of experiments to allow for more precise, qualitative data to be recorded. On the other hand it could be argued that the use of rational choice approach ignores the study of institutions by focusing solely on the individual. All theories possess strengths and weaknesses. It is also apparent that different

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approaches may offer more concise measurements in different areas so it is important not to rely on one particular approach, but instead use a variety to allow for a more reliable analysis.

Despite the outlined weaknesses, it has had much success in the field of economics. Some may argue that this means we should stick with it as a way of analysing politics. However, I fear that it is not plausible to simply transfer a theory from one subject to another, despite both being social sciences. This is due to the nature of politics being focused on equal distribution and fairness (in the vast majority of countries due to the democratic values resulting in a government for all the people).

If people were as self-interested as the rational choice approach suggests then there would be a lot more extreme right-wing and left-wing parties present where the rich want to keep all of their money and the poor want as many benefits as possible. Instead we find a middle ground such as the liberal democrats in England. For this reason, it appears that the methodology does not compliment the ontology as no matter what experiments are carried out, none can be related to the political, as the European University Institute outlined.