

An Introduction to the Discipline of Political Science

David A. Hughes, Ph.D.

Auburn University at Montgomery

david.hughes@aum.edu

August 28, 2019

What is a “Science of Politics”?

What is a “Science of Politics”?

- An accumulation of knowledge based upon observation that leads to a series of generalizable propositions.



Political Science as Empiricism

- We *know* all sorts of things that may or may not be so.
- Scientific empiricism tries to limit the number of false claims we make about the world around us.

What, then, is “empiricism”?

- Observable
- Explanatory
- Parsimonious
- Falsifiable
- Nonnormative
- Transparent

The Behavioral Revolution

- The field was arguably *not* political science until sometime after WWII.
- Behavioralism, largely influenced by psychology, revolutionized the field.



Philip Converse

Early Behavioral Research

- Scholars began quantifying political phenomena and employing statistical analysis.
- Prominent examples include:
 - *Southern Politics* (V. O. Key 1949)
 - *The American Voter* (Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes 1960)
 - *The Judicial Mind* (Glendon Schubert 1968)

The Quantitative-Qualitative Wars

- Not everyone was happy with the quantitative direction the field was taking.
- For *years*, political scientists fought over the appropriateness of quantification.

- Today, the discipline is heavily quantitative and trending ever more-so as computers allow us to increasingly mechanize our data collection and analysis.
- Interest in experimentation and causal inference, long dormant, is making a comeback.

Some Fields in Political Science Today (there are a lot)

- American institutions
- Federalism and state politics
- Public behavior
- Public opinion
- Political psychology
- Political economy
- Gender, race, sexuality
- International relations
- Comparative politics
- Normative or positive theory
- Political methodology
- Public law
- Human rights
- Political communication

Conclusion

- Political science began as a philosophy of government.
- At its founding, it was not explanatory, objective, testable, etc.
- Over the years, it has become increasingly scientific, though it still lacks a grand theory.