

The Need for Political Theory in the Analysis of Political Systems

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Abstract: *Political theory occupies a central position in the systematic analysis of political systems, offering the conceptual clarity, normative benchmarks, and interpretive depth necessary for rigorous political inquiry. In recent decades, the increasing dominance of empirical, behavioural, and data-driven approaches within political science has often relegated political theory to a peripheral role. This article argues that such a separation is analytically unsustainable. Political theory is indispensable not only for defining and classifying political systems but also for evaluating their legitimacy, performance, and transformative potential. Drawing upon classical, modern, and contemporary theoretical traditions, this article demonstrates how political theory enriches the study of political systems by clarifying key concepts, interrogating power relations, enabling comparative analysis, contextualizing institutions historically, and providing critical perspectives for democratic reform. The article seeks to reassert the relevance of political theory within mainstream political system analysis and contributes to ongoing debates on methodological pluralism in political science.*

Keywords: Political theory, political systems, normative analysis, power, comparative politics, democracy.

I. INTRODUCTION

The study of political systems constitutes a core concern of political science. From the classical typologies of Aristotle to contemporary analyses of democratic and authoritarian regimes, scholars have sought to understand how political systems are organized, how they function, and how they shape collective life (Locke, 1988; Rousseau, 1997). However, the methodological evolution of political science—particularly the rise of positivist, behavioural, and quantitative approaches—has increasingly emphasized empirical measurement over theoretical reflection (Schumpeter, 1942; Weber, 1978). While these approaches have contributed significantly to the precision and scope of political analysis, they have also generated a tendency to marginalize political theory as abstract, normative, or insufficiently empirical (Habermas, 1996; Held, 2006).

This article challenges such assumptions by arguing that political theory is not an optional supplement but a foundational requirement for the analysis of political systems. Political systems are not merely institutional arrangements or observable patterns of behaviour; they are normative orders embedded in historical, ideological, and social contexts. As such, their analysis necessarily involves theoretical judgments about concepts, values, and power relations. Without political theory, the study of political systems risks becoming descriptive, fragmented, and normatively indifferent.

Political Theory and Conceptual Foundations of Political Systems:

The study of political systems constitutes a core concern of political science. From the classical typologies of Aristotle to contemporary analyses of democratic and authoritarian regimes, scholars have sought to understand how political systems are organized, how they function, and how they shape collective life. Core analytical concepts such as state, sovereignty, power, legitimacy, and democracy are neither fixed nor universally agreed upon; rather, they are historically contingent and theoretically contested (Held, 2006). The state has been conceptualized as a moral ethical entity (Hegel, 1991), an instrument of class domination (Marx & Engels, 1978), a rational–legal authority structure



(Weber, 1978), and a diffuse set of governance practices (Foucault, 1991). However, the methodological evolution of political science—particularly the rise of positivist, behavioural, and quantitative approaches—has increasingly emphasized empirical measurement over theoretical reflection. While these approaches have contributed significantly to the precision and scope of political analysis, they have also generated a tendency to marginalize political theory as abstract, normative, or insufficiently empirical.

Similarly, democracy may be conceptualized as a procedural mechanism for aggregating preferences (Schumpeter, 1942), a substantive system ensuring political equality and participation (Dahl, 1971), or a deliberative process grounded in communicative rationality (Habermas, 1996). Each conceptualization shapes how political systems are classified, evaluated, and compared. Without theoretical reflection, empirical analyses risk treating these concepts as self-evident, thereby obscuring their normative and ideological assumptions. Political theory thus performs a foundational epistemic function: it stabilizes analytical categories while simultaneously revealing their limits. By situating political concepts within broader philosophical debates, political theory prevents conceptual reductionism and enhances analytical rigor in the study of political systems.

Normative Evaluation and the Question of Legitimacy:

Questions of political legitimacy have long occupied a central place in political theory, from classical discussions of justice and virtue (Plato, 2008; Aristotle, 1998) to modern theories emphasizing consent, rights, and constitutionalism (Locke, 1988; Kant, 1991). Beyond conceptual clarification, political theory is indispensable for the normative evaluation of political systems. Political systems are not only mechanisms of governance; they are systems of authority that demand obedience, compliance, and consent. Assessing their legitimacy requires normative criteria that cannot be derived solely from empirical observation.

Classical political theory, from Plato and Aristotle to Cicero, foregrounded questions of justice, the common good, and ethical rule. Modern theorists such as Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, and Kant reframed legitimacy around consent, rights, and constitutionalism. Contemporary political theory further extends these debates through discussions of social justice (Rawls, 1971), recognition (Honneth, 1995), democracy beyond the nation-state (Held, 2006), and postcolonial critiques of power (Fanon, 1963).

Empirical indicators—such as voter turnout, regime durability, or institutional performance—cannot by themselves determine whether a political system is just, inclusive, or morally defensible. Political theory provides the normative benchmarks against which such indicators acquire meaning (Habermas, 1996). In this sense, political theory does not compete with empirical analysis; it gives it evaluative depth.

Power, Ideology, and Structural Analysis:

Political theory offers critical tools for analysing power beyond observable institutional behaviour. Marxist theory emphasizes the structural relationship between political systems and economic domination (Marx & Engels, 1978), while critical and post-structural approaches reveal how power operates through discourse, knowledge, and governance practices (Foucault, 1977, 1991). This critical contribution in the political theory lies in its capacity to interrogate power relations within political systems. While empirical political science often focuses on observable decision-making processes, political theory draws attention to hidden, structural, and ideological dimensions of power.

Theoretical traditions such as Marxism, critical theory, feminism, and post-structuralism have demonstrated that power operates not only through formal institutions but also through economic structures, social hierarchies, cultural norms, and discursive practices. For example, Marxist theory highlights how capitalist political systems reproduce class domination, while feminist political theory exposes the gendered nature of citizenship, representation, and public-private divides (Fanon, 1963; Honneth, 1995). By incorporating these perspectives, political system analysis moves beyond surface-level institutionalism toward a deeper understanding of domination, exclusion, and resistance. Political theory thus enables scholars to analyse not only how political systems function, but whom they serve and whom they marginalize.



Comparative Analysis and Theoretical Frameworks:

Comparative political analysis relies heavily on theoretical frameworks to make meaningful comparisons across political systems. Political theory provides the criteria for classification, comparison, and interpretation (Held, 2006). Concepts such as democracy, authoritarianism, welfare state, or constitutionalism are inherently theory-laden and cannot be operationalized without prior normative and conceptual grounding (Dahl, 1971; Schumpeter, 1942). For instance, comparing democratic systems requires theoretical clarity regarding what counts as democracy: electoral competition, liberal rights, participatory inclusion, or deliberative quality. Without such clarity, comparative studies risk producing misleading or normatively empty conclusions. Moreover, political theory enables cross-cultural and historical comparison by situating political systems within broader traditions of thought. Comparative political theory, in particular, challenges Eurocentric models by incorporating non-Western political ideas, thereby enriching the global study of political systems (Habermas, 1996).

Historical Contextualization and Institutional Development:

Political systems are emerged through historically situated struggles over authority, rights, and representation. The development of modern constitutionalism and state sovereignty reflects long-standing theoretical debates within political philosophy (Hegel, 1991; Kant, 1991). This system are products of historical processes shaped by revolutions, colonial legacies, ideological struggles, and social transformations. Political theory plays a crucial role in contextualizing these processes by linking institutional development to broader historical narratives. The emergence of modern constitutional states, welfare regimes, and democratic institutions cannot be fully understood without reference to theoretical debates on sovereignty, rights, representation, and citizenship. Political theory thus bridges history and political analysis, enabling scholars to trace how ideas shape institutions and how institutions, in turn, reshape political ideas. This historical-theoretical perspective guards against presentism and enhances the explanatory power of political system analysis (Weber, 1978; Held, 2006).

Political Theory and Democratic Transformation:

Finally, political theory provides critical resources for imagining and evaluating democratic reform. In an era marked by democratic backsliding, populism, technocracy, and governance crises, political theory offers alternative visions of political organization (Habermas, 1996; Held, 2006). Deliberative democracy, participatory governance, radical democracy, and post-liberal critiques each propose distinct pathways for political transformation. These theoretical models inform policy debates, institutional design, and civic engagement by articulating normative goals that empirical analysis alone cannot generate. Political theory thus serves not only as an analytical tool but also as a source of democratic imagination and critique.

II. CONCLUSIONS

This article has argued that political theory remains indispensable to the systematic analysis of political systems. Political theory provides the conceptual foundations, normative standards, critical perspectives, and historical insights necessary for rigorous political inquiry. By clarifying key concepts, evaluating legitimacy, interrogating power, enabling comparative analysis, contextualizing institutions, and envisioning democratic transformation, political theory complements and enriches empirical approaches (Held, 2006; Weber, 1978). The artificial separation between theory and empiricism ultimately weakens political science by producing analyses that are descriptively precise but normatively hollow. Reintegrating political theory into mainstream political system analysis is therefore not a nostalgic return to classical thought but a methodological imperative. Such reintegration strengthens analytical coherence, fosters methodological pluralism, and equips political science to address the complex political challenges of the contemporary world.

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