

**The Behaviorist Empire and its Enemies: a Comparative Study of
Successes and Dissatisfactions in American Political Science**

Aldo F. Ponce

University of Connecticut

Abstract

This paper sheds light on the reasons that explain the dissatisfactions because of the behaviorist dominance within American political science academia. I show how and why the flaws and failures of the behaviorist analysis have created more room for the emergence of alternative approaches or new ideological movements in the study of politics. These competing paradigms or approaches are mainly post-behavioralism, postmodernism, and the Perestroika movement. Moreover, under a comparative framework, I explain why behavioralism is still the dominant paradigm within American political science academia despite all the efforts of the alternative paradigms to displace it.

Key words: behavioralism, American political science, postmodernism, Perestroika movement, methodology

This article was written in 2004.

Overview

Behavioralism is the dominant orientation in contemporary political science in the United States. Before the emergence of behavioralism (1930s), the discipline had been dominated by dispersed approaches based on political history, the study of constitutions and legalistic procedures, and the legal structures of institutions such as legislatures, executives, and courts. The emergent behavioralists argued that these previous approaches did not provide us with reliable knowledge. Moreover, these scholars pointed out that reliable knowledge could only be achieved through the study of observed behavior and the use of scientific methods (Isaak, 1981).

Under this new paradigm, the use of scientific methods must satisfy all Popper's scientific requirements: testability, falsifiability, neutrality, and tentativity (Ricci, 1984).ⁱ Because of the expansion of this emergent behavioralism, the strong influence of economics and its individualistic assumptions, and perhaps, an increasing dissatisfaction with the weak explanatory capacity of the former approaches of the discipline, several political scientists started to explain social and political phenomena through methodological approaches developed in economics, such as econometrics, rational choice and game theory. This new generation of political scientists considered behavioralism and its methods attractive for two reasons. First, political scientists set up a method to distance themselves from normative political philosophy. They

achieved this goal by using the notion of “best means” to explain actors’ behavior in pursuing a given end. Second, these researchers found a new and potentially powerful way to address generalizations on actors’ behavior.

Thus, to achieve their goals, behavioralists have basically developed two different methodological approaches in order to make generalizations. First, these scholars implemented an extensive use of econometric and statistical techniques. By decomposing the world into workable chunks, behavioralists attempt to construct logical structures that connect and relate variables to explain a particular phenomenon. Their final goal is to measure and calculate the degree of causality that exists between two or more variables. This exercise allows them to confirm or deny any hypothesis on actors or institutions’ behavior (Isaak, 1981).

The second approach, called “rational choice”, is based on the assumption of rationality, which conceives of actors as utility-maximizers subject to some constraints imposed by the world. The approach is methodologically individualist, yet its focus is not on individual choice but on the aggregation of individual choices (Levi, 1997). Through the use of mathematics and deductive techniques, they aspire to construct models that can explain and predict behavior and make generalizations on particular types of political phenomena. Models with more explanatory power replace previous models, which become flawed because of their limited explanatory scope. The repeated exercise has encouraged rational choice scholars to perfect their models, theories, and predictions (Lalman,

Oppenheimer & Swistak, 1993). With this argument, behavioralists state that “knowledge” is cumulative and achieved through the use of scientific methods.

After a few decades of development, the rational choice approach has achieved a dominant position within American political science academia. Rational choice has taken over political science professional journals and several mathematical courses are generally required for graduate students. For example, one recent count put the percentage of rational choice articles in the most important American journal of politics (*American Political Science Review*) at about 40 percent (Cohn, 1999).

Thus, through these two methodologies, econometrics and rational choice, behavioralism has become the dominant paradigm in the discipline. However, this dominance has been questioned by several scholars from different traditions. These critics have focused on the lack of responsibility of “political action” among political scientists, flaws in epistemological and ideological aspects of behavioralism, the explanatory limitations of the behavioralist methodologies, the concept of accumulation of “knowledge”, and the lack of methodological pluralism in the most important American organization of the discipline (APSA) due to the behavioralist predominance.ⁱⁱ

This paper will shed light on the reasons that explain this dissatisfaction, and also, its consequences. I will show how and why the flaws and failures of the behavioralist analysis have created more room for the emergence of alternative

approaches or new ideological movements in the discipline. These competing paradigms or approaches are mainly post-behavioralism, postmodernism, and the Perestroika movement. Finally, under a comparative framework, I explain why behavioralism is still the dominant paradigm within American political science academia despite all the efforts of the alternative paradigms to displace it.

The Post-behavioralist challenge

The first reason for dissatisfaction came with the rigid concept of neutrality. During the 1960s, a group of scholars, led by David Easton (1969), called for action and relevance in the discipline. This movement is called post-behavioralism. These scholars believed that with “knowledge” must come the responsibility of “action”. Based on these assumptions, this group of scholars, called post-behavioralists, criticized the behaviorist indifference to face the increasing social and political crisis that the international community was experiencing during those years. The threat of a nuclear holocaust and the increasing totalitarianism were the two main concerns for this new wave of American political scientists.

Easton and this group of political scientists also declared its dissatisfaction for the excessive use of methods borrowed from the natural sciences. Easton saw that methods and techniques were more important than substance under the behaviorist paradigm. Instead, Easton argued that “If one must be sacrificed for the other-and this need not always be so-it is more important to be relevant and meaningful for contemporary urgent social problems than to be sophisticated in the tools of investigation.”

The main problem with discussing post-behavioralism is that this school cannot be defined as a coherent movement within American academia. Aside from some oblique references to it, we cannot argue with any certainty that any distinct movement known as post-behavioralism has ever existed in the discipline (Graham and Carey, 1972). Rather, post-behavioralism can only be said to exist insofar as the behavioral era has been followed by an era in which political scientists undertake research in a markedly different way and a slightly altered methodology has accompanied this new approach. Thus, the lack of a clear alternative methodology and a cohesive organization among post-behavioralists diminished the impact of this emerging approach within American academia. Therefore, despite their attempts, post-behavioralists could not alter the behaviorist dominance in the discipline.

Epistemological and methodological concerns. Kuhn and the postmodernist alternative

Perhaps the most successful attacks on the behaviorist doctrine have been focused on its most basic assumptions and principles: the concept of accumulation of “knowledge”, its explanatory and methodological procedures, and its epistemological and ideological assumptions. First, the notion of accumulation of knowledge has always been problematic for behaviorists. Probably the main attack on this behaviorist argument came from Thomas Kuhn (1970). Kuhn argued that science does not progress by the piecemeal accumulation of knowledge. Instead, scientific development and change occurs through scientific revolutions. Thus, according to Kuhn, during scientific revolutions, scientists perceive the world of their research-engagement differently. As a consequence, after a revolution, scientists are responding to a totally

different world based on their new perceptions.

Kuhn's perspective clearly undermined the behaviorist notion of scientific development, which claims that science is built by a slow and piecemeal accumulation of relevant theories and data. Therefore, the cumulative theory of the behaviorists was certainly subject to Kuhn's critique, but so was the idea of a social science itself, since Kuhn indicated that social science does not yet appear to have developed any paradigms at all (15). Political science, then, is pre-scientific by Kuhn's account.

Clearly, Kuhn supported his theory by using the notion of *perceptions*, which determines a "scientific revolution". The same concept has inspired many other scholars and traditions to threaten the behaviorist dominance within American political science academia. These approaches, which have usually been grouped under the label of "postmodernism", are highly diverse in their epistemologies and subject matters (Coles, 2002). What they all have in common is their rejection and criticism of scientific and objectivist trends in behavioral political science (Reid & Yanarella, 1974). Another possible way to establish a common feature among these approaches is through a notion they all share: the concept of critique. For postmodernists, to get involved in "critique" means to search and expose the internal, marginalized, contradictory, and hidden tensions in social, political, and economic phenomena.ⁱⁱⁱ Following this exercise of "critique", postmodernists have criticized many of the postulates and assumptions of behavioralism. These critiques have been focused on epistemological, methodological, and ideological aspects of behavioralism.

First, related to epistemology, behaviorist scholars defend the idea of neutrality and objectivity in order to produce knowledge. However, achieving a complete separation between subject and object (the dichotomy subject-object)

has been an unattainable task, and consequently, it has become a sensitive dilemma for behavioralists. On the other hand, postmodernists not only eliminate the dichotomy subject-object, but also state that “reality” is endogenously defined by the perceptions of the subject, unlike behavioralists who consider preferences and perceptions as exogenously given variables (“structure of preferences”).

These different definitions of “reality” have led to different epistemological conceptions of knowledge. Thus, while behavioralist scholars have pursued objective knowledge, postmodernists conceive a body of knowledge (of multiple “realities”) that depends on the multiple perceptions and interpretations of the subjects. Thus, postmodernists have released us from the behaviorist rigidity to interpret or analyze political phenomena. This postmodernist’s refusal to erect any criteria for analyzing theories implies a relativism that offers limitless interpretations of the polity (Rosenau, 1990).

Second, ideologically, behavioralists are heirs of the English school of liberalism. Since their beginnings, liberals have considered democracy as the most compatible regime type with their ideology and normative assumptions. However, this normative presupposition often has generated conflicts with the notions of objectivity and neutrality when “scientific findings” oppose democratic values (Ricci, 1984). Thus, the behaviorist research agenda and its findings have been conditioned and influenced by the ideological framework of liberalism.^{iv} Because these normative assumptions are not present in the postmodernist literature, this approach has allowed its scholars to work without this constraint.

Relevant differences between behavioralism and postmodernism are not only connected to epistemological and ideological aspects, but also to methodological features. Postmodernists assume that the world does not exist in an objective suspension but enjoys a property of “meaningfulness” which human

beings assign to its manifestations as they see fit. Under this concept, meaning can only be understood when the world is evaluated as the sum of its related parts (Ricci, 1984). Thus, the behaviorist methodology of decomposing the world into workable chunks was challenged by the postmodernist paradigm.

Other sources for critiques on methodology are related to the nature of the subject of study of the discipline, the degree of recurrence of scientific experiments in the discipline, and the amount of empirical data. First, because of the lack of predictable and systematic behavior of human beings, to draw generalizations from the world of politics becomes a hard task (Isaak, 1985). Second, some critics claim that most of the behaviorist propositions are rarely checked by rigorous and scientific experiments. Instead, they are analyzed on the basis of logical and terminological arguments (Ricci, 1984).

Third, in certain areas with a great diversity of types of actors, constraints, and incentives, the rational choice approach has failed to make relevant generalizations in applying the assumption of *ceteris paribus*. Under these scenarios, rational analysis sometimes cannot explain more than one case without the necessity of changing assumptions or adapting the model to a new case.

Finally, data becomes scarce for testing models if researchers cannot have access to it or when certain political phenomena have not been recurring. All these behaviorist weaknesses and rigidities have been capitalized on by postmodernist approaches in order to find a visible position in the discipline.

Behavioralists have counter-attacked these arguments. They contend that critical theorists deal with “black boxes,” where there is no way to clearly identify causal relationships among a small set of variables or political actors. This postmodernist vision of addressing reality has led behaviorist scholars to consider this approach useless and lacking of practical applications for

policymakers, or simply to ignore the postmodernist claims. Behavioralists argue that postmodernist theories do not serve as inputs for policy makers and politicians to implement policies. In fact, because of this argument, behavioralists usually argue that the postmodernist schools have not contributed to either building a solid body of cumulative knowledge or understanding the simplest practical relationships of causality among a few actors or variables in the polity.

These simple facts could explain why post-modernists have been unsuccessful in securing research funds. The financial constraints also suggest some uncertainty over postmodernism's future. Finally, behavioralists argue that the complicated postmodernist philosophical language, the extensive use of jargons, and the relatively limited diffusion of postmodernist theories in courses or journals have also constrained its diffusion and practice (Ricci, 1984).

Although the postmodernist schools have attempted to fill the behavioralist voids with diverse and attractive epistemological and methodological approaches, they have not been able to expand and find a solid position within American political science academia. Thus, the absence of a cumulative body of knowledge, their lack of practical applications, their financial constraints, their excessive use of professional jargon, and their limited diffusion can explain why postmodernism has not been able to displace behavioralism as the dominant paradigm in the discipline.

The *Perestroika* movement

The third main expression of dissatisfaction comes from a recent and spontaneous movement of scholars within the political science community. This group of scholars, called "Perestroika-Glasnost", has challenged many APSA's policies and practices. These scholars argue that APSA and its main journal

APSR had become dominated with a very narrow vision of science, which is destructive to the profession as a whole.^v The behaviorist vision of the discipline has been tied with near-obsession with statistical methods and the rational choice approach. Related to the consequences of this near-obsession with methodology, Gregory Kasza (2000) states, “this over preoccupation with method and research design has taken precedence over contributions to knowledge about politics.” Thus, for Kasza and other supporters of this movement, the over interest for methods caused that many of the studies were both uninteresting and futile.

In response, the APSA central administration has been quite sympathetic to the concerns of the narrowness of the APSR. The Association is worried that disaffection with the APSR is undermining APSA as an institution (Steinmo, 2000). Through multiple channels, APSA has attempted to provide information to justify its actions. For example, Ada Finifter (2000), the former editor of APSR, argued that most of the critiques that the journal has received are unjustified. Finifter pointed out that each manuscript is put through the same rigorous evaluation conducted by a group of scholars who do analogous research. According to her, the number of reviewers is very large, and consequently, APSA authorities could hardly favor one particular academic orientation in the journal. Finally, Finifter argued that the protesters usually submit relatively few manuscripts and there is no evidence that their acceptance rate is lower than those of other authors.

In order to balance and evaluate the accuracy of these two antagonistic positions, I have selected two volumes of APSR as a representative sample.^{vi} The total number of articles in these volumes is 78. After evaluating the contents of these articles carefully, I present this chart, which summarizes my findings:

Chart 1. Number of articles per field and methodology

Field / Methodology	Quantitative		Qualitative	Total
	Statistical Methods	Rational choice		
American Politics	14	2	7	23
Methodology as a separate field	1	1	2	4
International Relations	2	5	3	10
Political Theory	0	0	7	7
Comparative Politics	20	7	7	34
Total	37	15	26	78
	52			

Source: American Political Science Association Review. Volume 96, numbers 1, 2, 3, and 4; and Volume 97, numbers 1,2, 3 and 4

From this chart, I can draw some conclusions. First, the dominant methodology is quantitative (around 66.6% of the total sample). This category includes both empirical methodologies: the use of econometrics and the applications of the rational choice principles. The use of rational choice only represents 19.2% of the total sample.^{vii} Only in twenty six articles (33.3% of the sample), a qualitative method is clearly dominant. This fact confirms the main claim of the Perestroika protestors who argue that the dominant methodology is predominantly quantitative in the top journal of the discipline. Moreover, all the articles are positivist in essence. Therefore, there is no single article derived from the postmodernist perspective. Based on this fact and this sample, one of the

disaffections with APSA might be connected to the marginal position of the position of the postmodernist paradigm in its most important journal.

Conclusions: comparing outcomes

It is undeniable the great dissatisfaction that exists due to the behaviorist dominance over American political science academia. This dissatisfaction has also been produced by the limitations of the behaviorist analysis in providing accurate generalizations and predictions for all the kinds of political phenomena. The basic Popperian assumptions of neutrality, testability, falsifiability, and tentativity have created rigidities that encouraged scholars to avoid any kind of intervention in politics and employ an extensive use of quantitative methods and rational choice models, which sometimes cannot either entirely explain political phenomena or generalize to all settings.

Thus, each of these epistemological, methodological, and ideological drawbacks or limitations of behavioralism or the combination of some of them can explain the emergence of a competing paradigm, approach, or academic movement attempting to displace behavioralism as the dominant paradigm. Thus, as long as behavioralism and its scientific methodologies, like econometrics and rational choice, cannot account for all flaws and methodological limitations in explaining political phenomena, these alternative perspectives will remain alive in the discipline.

Nevertheless, all these competing approaches have failed in successfully challenging the dominant behaviorist position. Like the flaws and limitations of behavioralism, the factors that explain these failures are also diverse. They include a lack of a clear alternative methodology, absence of organizational cohesion in the case of post-behavioralism and the Perestroika movement, failure

in fulfilling the demands of the market and the American government, financial constraints, excessive use of professional jargon, “barriers of entrance” for diffusion, and the absence of a cohesive and cumulative body of knowledge. Each of these flaws or some combinations of them can explain the unsuccessful attempts of these different perspectives to displace behavioralism as the dominant paradigm.

However, how can we explain why behavioralism was more successful than the other perspectives within American academia? To answer this question, a comparative analysis could offer interesting results. After determining all the flaws in each perspective from behavioralism to the Perestroika movement, the next relevant question under a comparative framework is which characteristics are present in behavioralism and not in the other perspectives or movements?

The combined occurrence of two factors can answer this last question. First, behavioralists employ a set of methods designed to respond to the necessities of the market and the government. Through the use of econometric tools, the concept of rationality, and parsimonious models, behavioralists have been able to predict and explain political phenomena more successfully than the other paradigms. Then, this comparative advantage has allowed them to secure grants and research funds, which then, create additional incentives for more scholarship. The second factor rests on a cohesive and well-organized organization. The behavioralist network is well connected and all its parts speak the same Popperian language. The maximum expression of this unity is the total control of the most important academic organization in the discipline: the American Political Science Association. Thus, as long as another perspective cannot be more successful than behavioralism in fulfilling these two

requirements, behavioralism will continue being the hegemonic empire within American political science academia.

References

- Cohn, Jonathan. (1999). Irrational exuberance. When did political science forget about politics? *New Republic*, 17: 25-31.
- Coles, Romand. (2002). Pluralization and radical democracy: recent developments in Critical Theory and post-modernism. In Ira Katznelson & Helner Milner, eds., *The State of the Discipline III* (pp. 286-312), New York: Norton.
- Easton, David. (1969). The new revolution in political science. *The American Political Science Review*, 4: 1051-1061.
- Finifter, Ada, (ed). (1993). *Political Science: The state of the discipline II*. Washington DC: APSA.
- Finifter, Ada. (2000). Editor's notes. *American Political Science Review*, 94, 4, viii-xi.
- Graham, George J. and George W. Carey. (1972). *The post-behavioral era: perspectives on political science*. New York: David McKay Company, Inc.
- Isaak, Alan. (1985). *Scope and methods of political science: an introduction to the methodology of political inquiry*. Homewood, Ill.: Dorsey Press, 1985.
- Katznelson, Ira and Helner Milner, (eds). (2002). *The State of the Discipline III*, New York: Norton.
- Kasza, Gregory. (2000). "Technicism" supplanting disciplinarity among political scientists. *Political Science and Politics*, 4: 737-738.

- Kuhn, Thomas S. (1970). *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Lalman, David., Joe Oppenheimer, and Piotr Swistak. (1993). Formal rational choice theory: A cumulative science of politics. In Ada Finifter, (ed), *Political Science: The state of the discipline II* (pp. 77-100). Washington DC: APSA.
- Levi, Margaret. (1997). A model, a method, and a map: rational choice in comparative and historical analysis. In Mark Lichbach and Alan Zuckerman, (eds), *Comparative politics. Rationality, culture, and structure*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lichbach, Mark & Alan Zuckerman, (eds). (1997). *Comparative politics. Rationality, culture, and structure*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Reid, Herbert G. and Ernest Yanarella. (1974). Towards a Post-Modern Theory of American Political Science and Culture: Perspectives from Critical Marxism and Phenomenology. *Cultural Hermeneutics*, 2, 91-166.
- Ricci, David. (1984). *The tragedy of political science: politics, scholarship, and democracy*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Rosenau Pauline. (1990). Once again into the fray: International relations confronts the humanities. *Millenium*, 19, 83-110.
- Steinmo, Sven. (2000). Perestroika/Glasnost and "Taking Back the APSR". *The New York Times*, November 4, 2000.

ⁱ Testability is the extent to which an objective and feasible test can be designed to determine whether a requirement is met. Under this definition, hypothesis can be tested against empirical data. Falsifiability implies that scientific knowledge is invariably vulnerable and may be false. Under the concept of neutrality, the subject should not become involved in the study of the object. Finally, tentativity assumes that any theory is an imperfect and changing tool, and consequently, it can be replaced by another theory.

ⁱⁱ APSA is the American Political Science Association.

ⁱⁱⁱ At the same time, it is possible to differentiate postmodernists by types of critique. While the disciples of Marx identify tensions in societies, post-structuralists, like Derrida, performed this exercise in texts, books, symbols, languages with a technique called “deconstruction”. Through this practice, structuralists seek to expand the conceptual limits of the meaning of the text, preferring to explore meaning in the margins through unrestricted semantic play and limitless interpretation (Reid & Yanarella, 1974; Rosenau, 1990).

^{iv} Other liberal normative values are related to the concepts of individual sovereignty, competition and individual freedom.

^v American Political Science Review (APSR) is the main journal of APSA.

^{vi} Volume 96, numbers 1, 2, 3, and 4; and Volume 97, numbers 1, 2, 3 and 4. I assume that these volumes are representative of the academic orientation of the journal.

^{vii} This fact contradicts Cohen’s findings which put the percentage of rational choice articles at about 40 percent (Cohn, 1999).