

## Causation, Not Correlation, in Interpretive Political Science

Using David Easton's theory of the political system as my interpretive framework, I will offer a non-mechanistic theory of how human political behavior can be "caused." I will argue that, for Interpretive Political Science, *reasons* can be *causes* of political behavior. Indeed, respect for the subject matter – human political behavior – requires this causal theory. After all, people are not machines. "Reasons" will be understood as units of meaning in the minds of people. I will offer examples of such causal relations in the operations of two political systems, China and Peru.

### Hypothesis:

The operation of a political system will tend to provide reasons which explain the political sentence of the public. A well-functioning political system will probably be the reason for high approval ratings among its membership. Likewise, a poorly functioning system will probably be the reason for low approval ratings.

### China

In the past 40 years the Chinese political system helped lift nearly 800M people out of extreme poverty and into a new middle class. [1] These people are as well off as any middle class in the Western world, and if they stay on the path they have been following their quality of life may soon exceed that of all Western nations.

Of course, the genius, energy, and industry of the Chinese people, along with their belief in the beneficent intentions of their political leaders, was an indispensable element of the achievement. Leaders and people seem to have worked as a team. Even though the CCP and PRC are currently secretive about the input/output policy making process, the results achieved by the political system, suggest that it has been functioning well. Assuming the Chinese people demanded improvement in the conditions Mao's policies left them in, the political system achieved such growth in national wealth that it is regularly referred to as a "miracle." This was the system's response to public input. The material success of this political system is probably the reason why pre-COVID approval ratings of the Chinese people have been in the 90s. This phenomenal number has been found by scholarly studies, operating independently of each other. [2]

The Chinese political system started on its path towards achieving its developmental successes after Mao's death in 1976. Particularly with the leadership of Deng Xiaoping the regime threw off the constraints of Mao's policies. One set of Mao's developmental policies, the so-called "Great Leap Forward," actually resulted in a national famine in which as many as 50M people starved to death. The new self-liberating system enacted novel laws and policies intended to open up the economy to foreign investment and to release the entrepreneurial spirit of the Chinese people.

At first, special economic zones were established. As these local economies boomed, policies well calculated to grow the national economy were enacted. For example, laws requiring foreign corporations to share information about their operations with government officials resulted in more Chinese learning Western business practices. Laws requiring foreign enterprises to hire and to train Chinese personnel in both management and production techniques provided further education. Other policies encouraged both state owned and private banks to lend to local

entrepreneurs. The construction permit process was sped up to facilitate building the needed infrastructure and housing. The diplomatic corps energetically solicited foreign businesses to build branches in China. These were just some of the ways by which the regime contributed to the growth of the Chinese economy. [3]

In the terms of Easton's systems theory, these law and policy decisions were the outputs of the conversion process, which had received the demands inputted into the system by the people.

While mistakes may have been made, such as an excess of high rise apartment buildings, insufficient bank regulation, or lax efforts at combating corruption (at least prior to Xi Jinping taking office), the regime – consisting of the CCP and the PRC – succeeded at improving the material conditions of the Chinese people far beyond what anyone could have predicted at the outset of the new development policies.

The extraordinarily successful operation of the Chinese political system is reflected in the pre-COVID approval ratings, which as we have said were in the 90s for the national government. In other words, the exceptional performance of the political system was most probably the *cause* of the incredibly high approval ratings of the people.

These two key variables – system performance and public ratings – are not in a relationship of concurrency, but more likely have a causal link. That is, the experience the people have had with the performance of the system is their primary *reason* for giving the system high approval ratings. In other words, a well operating political system can be the cause of high approval ratings among its membership.

Therefore, a causal *principle* (less absolute than a “law”) can be stated in the alternative as, “Successful governing in a political system can *cause* corresponding high approval ratings,” or “Successful governing in a political system can be the *reason* why the people have given high approval ratings.”

## Peru

Recently there have been mass demonstrations and political violence in Peru. This case can be interpreted to lend credence to the second causal principle; namely, poor governing in a political system can cause corresponding low approval (and high disapproval) ratings.

In early December 2022, hundreds of “campesinos,” that is the rural peasantry and indigenous people of Peru, flooded the capital, Lima, and other urban areas, in bus loads. Along with likeminded urban dwellers, they protested during the day and into the night. Their protests soon resulted in fatalities. Just in the first few days, over 50 Peruvian demonstrators were killed, most in violent clashes with the police. At least one police officer was also killed. [4]

Could the poor performance of the political system in Peru have been the cause of the rage which drove this rebellious action and the consequent tragic deaths? If so, how?

First, consider the environment in which the political system was operating. Nearly one in three citizens were then living in poverty; and that is still the case. While this includes millions of urban

residents, “it is at its most intense in rural areas, where many still live without potable water, electricity, or access to public health care.” [5]

Unfortunately, health care is so unavailable to so many Peruvians that, according to the Johns Hopkins University, Peru has the highest COVID-19 case-fatality ratio in the world, 4.9% as of February 4, 2023. [6] Also, the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization finds that half of all Peruvians are food insecure. [7]

According to a report in Foreign Policy magazine, resentment over these conditions is exacerbated by the corruption that “pervades the state, from local bureaucrats, [to] traffic police soliciting bribes, to high-level corruption.” [8] A 2021 study by AmericasBarometer found that Peru had the highest level of perceived political corruption in the Americas, with “88 percent of Peruvians believing that ‘more than half’ of politicians are crooked.” [9] Peru’s parliament has an approval rating of only 11%, with a nearly 90% disapproval rating. (Quite a contrast with China!) 60% of Peruvians see their legislature as self-serving and corrupt. [10]

Further evidence of the political system’s dysfunctionality is that, although the president is elected for a five year term, Peru “has seen six presidents in five years.” [11] Some of them are in prison after having been removed or resigning.

### **Pedro Castillo**

The sixth president was Pedro Castillo. He was elected in July of 2021, about a year and a half before the demonstrations. He was very popular among the impoverished electorate in part because, as an indigenous person, he made them feel understood, and he promised to work to alleviate the suffering of the poor, reduce inequality, eliminate the corruption, and reform the constitution. However, his time in office was quite turbulent due to descension in the ranks. He “went through five Cabinets and over 80 ministers in just 17 months.” [12]

The parliament was loaded with members of the opposition. They impeached him three times. After the second time, he tried to dissolve that branch of government, but without legal justification. This provided the impetus for the third impeachment, and a vote for removal from office. He was then charged with corruption and jailed pending trial. [13] His supporters saw this removal as an unacceptable attack by the detested Congress on their chosen leader. Indeed, “44% of Peruvians said they supported Castillo's attempt to dissolve the legislature, even though he tried to do it outside constitutional bounds.” [14]

The removal and jailing of Castillo was the last straw for his supporters, and they filled the streets.

His Vice President, Dina Boluarte, succeeded him as president. However, she was not trusted by Castillo’s supporters. Because they saw her as too cozy with the legislature, they demanded her resignation. They also demanded that Castillo be reinstated, so that his promises could be fulfilled. [15] The onset of the rainy season vitiated the momentum that had been building.

### **The Causal Effect of Poor Performance**

This account of the current events in Peru illustrates how political system dysfunction can be the probable cause of extreme political unhappiness, and even hostile political action. Clearly, the political system's dysfunction and the deadly protests are not merely concurrent events. The prior poor governing of the system is most probably responsible for the violent conflict in the streets.

This is not to say that the cause was automatic, or mechanical. The people who protested could have done otherwise. For example, they could have peacefully called their representatives, or written letters, or even lobbied in person. Their decisions to act as they did were the ultimate cause of their behavior, but the long prior history of system dysfunction and abuse, culminating in Castillo's removal and jailing, ignited such resentment and outrage that hundreds of individuals decided to rebel. A chain of system dysfunctions were the *reasons* the people had for acting as they did.

### **Thomas Jefferson's Support and Further Research**

These examples of the causal connection between system function and public attitudes and actions suggest several questions for further research. For example, how much political unhappiness can people tolerate before they protest, rebel, or even revolt? Is there an identifiable tipping point?

In general, people tend to have some degree of expectation for the proper performance of their political system. Finding out what those expectations are in particular cases will require research using interpretive methods. These expectations will likely vary from time to time, and from place to place. People also have some degree of tolerance for regimes that fall short of their expectations. What and how much they can tolerate is also a matter for further research.

One well-known meditation on how much dysfunction and abuse a people can tolerate is found in the Declaration of Independence. Its author, Thomas Jefferson wrote,

Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly all experience hath shewn, that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed. But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security. Such has been the patient sufferance of these Colonies; and such is now the necessity which constrains them to alter their former Systems of Government ... and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness. [16]

Jefferson, then, seems to acknowledge that a causal relationship exists between the performance of a political system and the sentience, or political "Happiness," of the people who live within it. What that relationship is will depend on the cases under study. The degree of political frustration a people feel will depend on several factors. The meanings for them that the acts of public officials take is a key factor to consider when assessing their degree of support or hostility towards their system. Their shared meanings are the basis for the decision to act that each individual makes. As mentioned, these decisions are the final cause of public attitude and action.

## Conclusion

The examples of China and Peru illustrate some of the ways by which the performance of a political system will be reflected in the political sentiment and behavior of the people who live within the system. The example of China demonstrates that a well-functioning political system will probably engender high approval ratings among its membership. The Peru example shows how a poorly functioning system will probably produce low approval ratings.

The methodology of Interpretive Political Science rises to the level of a “science,” in large part, because it has a theory of causal relations, as shown here. That is, *reasons*, empathically interpreted, can serve as a *causal explanation* for political attitudes and behavior. [17]

Not pining for the fantasy ideal of “objectivity,” this causal theory only requires the intersubjective agreement of other political scientists to rank claims of causation as “highly probable” (or “highly likely”), or a moderate “possible,” or “improbable” (or “unlikely”), or “impossible,” etc. The unattainable ideal of “objective” political science knowledge plagues positivist political scientists, and causes them to deny the validity of interpretive methods as ways of research in the field. The dogma that “correlation is not causation” blinds positivists to the rich subtlety of “meaning-links” between political system performance and the attitudes and actions of the people who live in the system.

But Interpretive Political Science can produce claims to knowledge with degrees of certainty that are appropriate to the subject matter – the political behavior of creative human beings who act according to the meanings they currently share within the context of their political system.

In short, discovering all the elements of the causal relations between the performance of a political system and the feelings and actions of the people who live in that system is a rich area for further interpretive research. The USA and other nations are ripe for such research.

Hopefully, the political science profession will do all it can to facilitate the growth of political science knowledge based on the methods of research indicated here.

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## ENDNOTES

[1] “The World Bank in China.” The World Bank Report. April 2022.

<https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/china/overview>

[2] For further discussion on how the Chinese rate their political system see the subsection “The Political Happiness in China,” and the notes, in my post, Re-Interpreting the Meaning of China for the USA,

<https://interpretat.blogspot.com/2022/02/re-interpreting-meaning-of-china-for-usa.html>

[3] The accounts of China's "economic miracle" are summarized well, with bibliography, at "Economic history of China (1949–present)," [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Economic\\_history\\_of\\_China\\_\(1949%E2%80%93present\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Economic_history_of_China_(1949%E2%80%93present)) ; and, "Chinese Economic Reform," [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinese\\_economic\\_reform](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinese_economic_reform)

[4] With 50 Dead in Peru, a Referendum on Democracy.  
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<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/17/world/americas/peru-protests-democracy.html?searchResultPosition=2>

[5] The Real Reason Behind Peru's Political Crisis. By Simeon Tegel. **Foreign Policy Magazine**. January 25, 2023  
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[7] Reported in Foreign Policy, note 5.

[8] *ibid.*

[9] *ibid.*

[10] xxx <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/peru-president-says-she-will-replace-prime-minister-2022-12-19/>

[11] Why are Peruvian politics such a mess? Inside the halls of its Congress. By Alexander Villegas and Brendan O'Boyle. February 4, 2023.  
<https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/why-are-peruvian-politics-such-mess-inside-halls-its-congress-2023-02-04/>

[12] *ibid.*

[13] *ibid.*

[14] *ibid.*

[15] Peru's 'forgotten people' rage against political elite after Castillo arrest.  
By Alexander Villegas and Marco Aquino. December 18, 2022

<https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/perus-forgotten-people-rage-against-political-elite-after-castillo-arrest-2022-12-18/>

[16] [<https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript>]

[17] A compelling argument for using reasons in a non-mechanistic theory of causation can be found in Michael Polanyi, *The Study of Man* (1958), The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, Ill.