J. Johnson, “Conceptual Problems as Obstacles to Progress in Political Science: Four Decades in Political Culture Research,” *Journal of Theoretical Politics* 15:1

**Overview**

Paper uses four decades of political culture research as a vehicle for demonstrating how conceptual problems pose obstacles for progress in political science. Johnson argues that advocates of Political Culture Research (PCR) have been frustrated in advancing an empirically successful, methodologically sophisticated, comparative analysis of the relations between culture and politics by their inattention to conceptual problems.

**Background**

* Important to note that the flaws noted re: PCR are not unique to it, and other research traditions are susceptible to them
* A research tradition at any given point in time, will encompass several competing and possibly outright inconsistent theories
* Conceptual problems: are higher-order questions about the well-foundedness of the conceptual structures (i.e. theories) which have been devised to answer first-order questions (something in need of an explanation)
  + A theory encounters internal conceptual problems to the extent that it is self-contradictory or that it invokes implausible, unclear, or vague mechanisms. It encounters external conceptual problems, for instance, to the extent it makes assumptions about the world
* We make progress in political science when we resolve empirical *and* conceptual problems

Problems of PCR

* Not plausible to see PCR as theory-driven – PCR is not a theory, but a set of variables which may be used in the construction of theories
* PCR is driven primarily by neither theory nor data – it is driven by technique, and by allowing method to drive research, PCR generates implicit but disquieting conceptual problems
* Early practitioners defined political culture in terms that render it unobservable, and susceptible to analysis via survey methods
* Proponents of PCR offer no plausible account – causal, functional, or otherwise – of how political culture “works” – how it motivates individual action or generates persistence of change in aggregate political or economic behaviour