1.1 What is political science?

In the third century bce, the Greek philosopher Aristotle was perhaps the first scholar to think systematically about how different forms of government led to different political outcomes: such as stability or rebellion in the city states in Ancient Greece. In fact, if science is the systematic building and organisation of knowledge with the aim of understanding and explaining how the world works, then Aristotle was probably the first ‘political scientist’.

Since Aristotle, many political philosophers have sought to understand and explain how politics works and think about how societies should be governed, and any course on the history of political thought will introduce students to many of these thinkers, such as Plato, Cicero, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke, Montesquieu and Madison.

The modern discipline of ‘political science’, however, as practised in teaching and research in universities, is little more than a century old. The first Chair in History and Political Science was at Columbia University in New York in 1857. The first institutions and departments with the name ‘political science’ in their titles were the Ecole Libre des Sciences Politiques in Paris in 1871, the School of Political Science at Columbia University in 1880, and the London School of Economics and Political Science in 1895. And the first professional association of political scientists was the American Political Science Association in 1903.

The first modern political scientists in the first few decades of the twentieth century included, among others, Max Weber in Germany, Robert Michels in Italy, Lord Bryce in Britain, and Woodrow Wilson in the USA. These scholars, and most of their contemporaries, thought of themselves primarily as sociologists, historians, lawyers, or scholars of public administration. But what they sought to understand and explain, among other things, was politics, and one aspect of politics in particular: political institutions. The foci of these early ‘institutionalists’, in the spirit of Aristotle, were the institutions of government and politics in different countries: such as executives, parliaments, constitutions, and political parties. And the questions these first political scientists tried to answer include things like: is the German system of government better than the British? Are political parties good or bad for government? What is the best electoral system for a democracy?

After this early focus on describing and explaining political institutions, in the mid-twentieth century political science shifted its focus to ‘political behaviour’. There were several reasons for this change. Faith in the power of political institutions was challenged by the collapse of democracy in much of Europe in the 1920s and 1930s. The Weimar Republic, in Germany, was a supposedly ideal democratic constitution, so many contemporary scholars thought. To understand the collapse of Weimar, and the rise of Fascism and Communism, it was clear that the attitudes and behaviour of citizens and elites were perhaps more important than the institutions of government.

Political scientists also developed some new methods to study political behaviour. One such method was the ‘representative opinion poll’. Until the 1930s, elections were usually predicted by newspapers or magazines who polled the opinions of their readers. For example, just before the 1936 Presidential election in the USA, the *Literary Digest* surveyed its 2.3 million readers, and confidently predicted that Alf Landon would defeat Franklin D. Roosevelt. The problem with this prediction was that the readers of the *Literary Digest* were mostly from higher income groups and hence were more likely to support the Republican candidate (Landon) than the average US citizen in the midst of the Great Depression.

At the same time, George Gallup conducted a smaller survey among a representative sample of US citizens, based on various demographic characteristics, such as income, age and gender. Using this method, Gallup correctly predicted a landslide for Roosevelt. Gallup became famous, as the pioneer of opinion polls. He later set up a subsidiary in London and correctly predicted a Labour victory in the 1945 election, while most other commentators assumed that the Conservatives would win, led by Winston Churchill.

Between the 1940s and the 1960s, armed with new methods for studying politics, new data from opinion polls and other data collection exercises, and new ideas about how to explain political behaviour, political science went through what we now think of as a ‘behavioural revolution’.

However, for most of the second half of the twentieth century the discipline of political science remained divided between a variety of different theoretical and methodological approaches, which operated largely in isolation from each other (Almond, 1988). For example, one group of scholars adapted some of the new theoretical ideas about actors’ behaviour in economics to try to explain the behaviour of voters, parties, interest groups, legislators or bureaucrats. Since these scholars assumed that these political actors were driven by self-interest and strategic calculations, this approach became known as the ‘rational choice approach’ in political science. Some of the leading scholars in this approach were

Kenneth Arrow, Anthony Downs, William Riker, Mancur Olson, William Niskanen and Kenneth Shepsle.

Another group of scholars adapted some of the new theoretical ideas in sociology about the social and cultural determinants of behaviour to try to explain the formation of states, the behaviour and organization of political parties, how citizens voted, and why some countries became stable democracies while others did not. Some of the leading scholars in this more sociological approach to behaviour were Seymour Martin Lipset, Gabriel Almond, Philip Converse, Stein Rokkan, Samuel Huntington and Arend Lijphart. To find out more about the ideas and works of these great political scientists of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s simply enter their names into any internet search engine.

For much of this period these two approaches to political science largely ignored each other, even when they researched and wrote about similar topics! But, in the 1980s and early 1990s these two schools of thought started to communicate more with each other. From one side, rational choice theorists had realised that their formal models of political behaviour were not very effective at explaining real-world outcomes unless they included a more nuanced understanding of how institutional rules and procedures shape how actors interact. From the other side, scholars from the more sociological tradition realised that while culture and society shape political institutions, political institutions also shape culture and society. So, from different starting points, political scientists began to focus again on the role of political institutions, under the rubric of what became known as ‘new institutionalism’ (compare Hall and Taylor, 1996).

So, by the end of the 1990s, political science had come full circle. Having started with political institutions, we are now back to political institutions. The difference between modern political scientists and the scholars of politics a century ago, however, is that the development of the discipline in the intervening years has led to the accumulation of a solid body of theoretical ideas, research methods, and empirical observations, which together make up the toolkit of the contemporary scientist of politics.

As an introduction to this toolkit, we can start by introducing some of the topics political science focuses on: the ‘empirical regularities’ that political scientists try to understand and explain. One way to organise these topics is to distinguish between political behaviour, political institutions and political outcomes.

Here, political behaviour refers to the beliefs and actions of political actors, be they citizens, voters, party leaders, members of parliaments, government ministers, judges, civil servants, or members of interest groups. These actors have ‘political preferences’: their political interests, values and goals. For example, some citizens would like the government to spend more money on education and healthcare while others would like the government to reduce taxes. Then, how do these preferences translate into actions? For example, when voting in elections, do most citizens vote expressively, for the party whose policies most closely match their political preferences; or do they vote strategically, for a party which they prefer less but which has a higher chance of winning? And, how do parties respond to voters? Do they stick with their policies and try to persuade the voters to support them or do they adapt their policies to try to win as many votes as possible? And, if parties do the latter, does this lead to parties converging on the average (median) voter or moving to the extremes? Interest groups are another important set of political actors. Why are some interest groups more able to organise and influence politics than others? Clearly some interest groups have more financial resources, but money does not always guarantee influence. Why is that?

Political behaviour takes place within a set of political institutions.

Some countries have presidential systems, where there is a separation of powers between the executive and the legislature (as in the USA and throughout Latin America), while others have parliamentary systems, where the government relies on the support of the parliament and the government can dissolve the parliament and call an election (as in most countries in Europe). Within both of these regime types, some governments are composed of a single political party (as is usually the case in the United Kingdom), while other governments are coalitions between several political parties (as is usually the case in the Netherlands). In addition, in some countries power is centralised at the national level (as in France); while in others power is divided between several levels of government (as in federal systems, such as Canada or India). And, in some countries, elected politicians are relatively free from external institutional constraints; whereas in other countries a supreme court and/or an independent central bank restrict the policy choices of elected politicians.

A common set of issues cuts across these political institutions topics, which relates to the political and policy consequences of concentrating power in the hands of a single political actor – such as a single political party in government in a parliamentary system – compared to dividing power between several ‘veto players’ – either several parties in a coalition government, or the executive and the legislature in a presidential system, or different levels of government in a federal system, or between the legislature and powerful courts.

Finally, political outcomes covers a broad range of issues, from specific policy outcomes such as economic growth or higher public spending or better protection of the environment, to broader political phenomena, such as political and economic equality, social and ethnic harmony, or satisfaction with democracy and government. For example, some countries have generous welfare states whereas others have less generous welfare regimes. Some countries are better at protecting the environment than others, and some countries are more welcoming to immigrants than others. And, in some countries citizens are generally satisfied with how their countries are governed, while in others citizens are far less satisfied.

Across all these topics, a common working assumption in modern political science is that political behaviour and political institutions interact to produce political outcomes. For example, on the issue of support for democracy, in the 1960s many political scientists assumed that a ‘civic culture’ was essential for a successful democracy. These days, in contrast, we recognise a mutually reinforcing relationship between attitudes towards democracy (political behaviour) and democratic government (political institutions): where support for democracy helps democratic stability, and stable and successful democratic government leads to stronger democratic values in society.

As in other fields of scientific enquiry, political scientists try to understand these phenomena by developing theoretical explanations and testing these explanations using a variety of empirical methods. We first discuss two main theoretical explanations in political science before turning to the use of qualitative and quantitative methods in political science.