



INTRODUCTION

What Is Politics and How Should We Analyze It?

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

Let's begin this introduction by considering what politics is and by asking whether it is an unavoidable part of all human societies. On the surface it certainly seems to be. Two important questions often come up whenever we try

to establish the boundaries of what is political and what is not. First of all, should politics be defined narrowly, so that it excludes everything but the institutions of the state (such as the House of Commons, the Senate, Indigenous

▲ The Knowledge Totem, erected in 1990, stands in front of the British Columbia Parliament Buildings (©Andre Jenny/Alamy Stock Photo).

and Northern Affairs Canada, and so on), or should the definition be broad enough to include other social institutions and relationships, such as the Canadian Wheat Board, the local school board, or the family? Second, is politics by definition a matter of co-operation and

consensus seeking, or is there always going to be conflict? Moving on to the study of politics, we distinguish between three forms of political analysis: empirical, normative, and semantic. Finally, we ask whether politics is a science in the sense that the natural sciences are.

Why Is Politics So Hard to Define?

Politics is an exciting and dynamic area of study, but it is so vast and many-sided that it is difficult to define precisely. At the very least we can say that politics is a social activity, that in any group of people there will be discussions and even conflict over what the group should be doing and how it should achieve its goals. There may also be disagreements as to who is or is not a member of the group. Whether the study of politics should be confined to large entities like the state or also include an examination of power dynamics within the family is open to discussion. Coming up with a clear definition can be difficult, especially when we recognize that politics is often seen in a negative light, associated with conflict and corruption of the sort typified in Canada by the “sponsorship scandal” that helped to bring down the Liberal government of Paul Martin in 2006, or the more recent saga of Senator Mike Duffy’s inexplicable expenses. However, politics can also be seen positively, as a calling to improve the lives of the people that politicians represent. There was widespread hope when the American public voted Barack Obama into the White House, and also when Justin Trudeau and the Liberals were voted into power in October 2015. Some European political thinkers, including Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) and John Stuart Mill (1806–1873), have considered participation in political life to be a noble calling. Indeed, many politicians like to talk about “public service” and “giving back to the community” when they describe their decision to run for office.

We might argue that politics is associated with conflict precisely because all complex societies contain many different interests and values. In fact, one popular definition of politics sees it as the process by which groups representing divergent interests and values make collective decisions. There are two assumptions here. The first is that all complex societies will always need ways of sorting out those different interests and values and trying to reconcile them; the second is that economic scarcity is an inevitable part of all societies. If there are not enough goods to go around, a society needs some mechanism to determine how those limited goods will be distributed.

Political decisions about how economic goods will be distributed—what the American political scientist Harold Lasswell (1936) called “Who Gets What, When, How”—help to determine both the nature of society and the well-being of those who live in it. As we will see in Chapter 4, competing theories of justice focus on a particular ordering of economic goods. However, these are not the only goods that humans value.

The study of politics before the nineteenth century was focused on the study of values. What is the good life? What is the best kind of society for us to live in? Political philosophers have offered many conflicting answers. For the last two centuries, however, as Stoker points out, one “central divide . . . has been between those who prefer liberty over equality and those who prefer equality over liberty” (2006, p. 6). An example might

See Chapter 3, pp. 62–3 for a discussion of the classical theory of democracy.

See Chapter 4, pp. 79–84 for a discussion of theories of justice.

be: “Is it better to have the choice of healthcare provider and medical procedure as in the American system, even if you can’t pay for it, or is it better to have much less choice but state-funded healthcare as in Canada?” Most Canadians prefer equal access and low cost over the sort of freedom to choose that exists south of the border. However, many Americans resent the imposition on their freedom that this would represent. In the twenty-first century, the conflict between liberty and security is of growing importance; we will revisit this theme in the chapters that follow.

Is Politics Unavoidable?

If we define politics in terms of differences, conflicts, and scarcity, then we might say that it is an unavoidable aspect of all societies. It’s unavoidable because if no one agrees on either goals for a society or the means of achieving them, systems need to be developed so that society can function in the absence of consensus. Not everyone will agree, of course. For some, such a claim underestimates the possibility of achieving greater social cohesion based on agreement around core values. Marxists, for example, argue that differences of interests in society centre on conflicts between competing social classes, and hence that the elimination of class distinctions would offer the prospect of a society based on consensus and co-operation, one in which there would be no need for either politics or the state.

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels famously argued in the *Communist Manifesto* (1848/1976, p. 105) that politics is “merely the organized power of one class for oppressing another.” The idea here was that if the capitalist system was overthrown, there would be no competing classes and therefore, by definition, no politics. Everyone would agree on the way forward and would simply go about implementing decisions that everyone knew were correct. Critics, however, charged that Marxism was idealistic and foolish because it failed to take into account human difference, ambition, and competition. Indeed, history has shown that no communist state has ever been free of intrigue, corruption, and politicking.

A more modern version of the Marxist end-of-conflict thesis is the “end of history” thesis proposed by the American conservative thinker Francis Fukuyama (1992). The argument here was that since 1945 liberal democratic ideology had proven its superiority over all rivals, and though it might still be challenged it would ultimately prevail around the world. By “the end of history” Fukuyama meant the end point of ideological evolution—the period in which everyone agrees that there is one desirable way to run a state: democratic government and free enterprise. It is true that when he was writing the Cold War had just come to an end, communism in Eastern Europe was being dismantled, and the growing affluence of the West was making it difficult for left-of-centre parties to attract political support.

However, Fukuyama’s thesis proved to be problematic, and there is no agreement about one system of government being superior to all others, nor is there likely ever to be. The ideal of spreading democracy to Iraq and Afghanistan has not worked out as planned; for many people, their ethnic or religious identities are more important than being citizens in a common democratic state. What’s also become obvious is that democratic institutions can be tools for one country to dominate another, in addition to their more straightforward goal of representing the interests of voters.

As this book will reveal, a number of alternatives to the liberal democratic model are in use in various parts of the world (Heywood, 2004, pp. 71–2). Some of these alternatives have similarities with Western liberal democracy but also significant differences.



See Chapter 1, pp. 32–4
for a discussion of human
nature.

KEY QUOTE BOX 0.1

Defining Politics: A Few Opinions

A political system is “any persistent pattern of human relationships that involves, to a significant extent, control, influence, power or authority” (Dahl, 1991, p. 4).

Politics is the “the art of governing mankind by deceiving them” (Isaac D’Israeli, quoted in Crick 1962, p. 16).

“Politics, in its broadest sense, is the activity through which people make, preserve, and amend the general rules under which they live. Although politics is also an academic subject (sometimes indicated by the use of ‘Politics’ with a capital P), it is then clearly the study of this activity. Politics is thus inextricably linked to the phenomena of conflict and cooperation. On the one hand, the existence of rival opinions, different wants, competing needs and opposing interests guarantees disagreement about the rules under which people live. On the other hand, people recognize that, in order to influence these rules or ensure that they are upheld, they must work with others” (Heywood, 2013, p. 2).

“Politics is a phenomenon found in and between all groups, institutions (formal and informal) and societies, cutting across public and private life. It is involved in all the relations, institutions and structures which are implicated in the activities of production and reproduction in the life of societies. . . . Thus, politics is about power; about the forces which influence and reflect its distribution and use; and about the effect of this on resource use and distribution . . . it is not about Government or government alone” (Held & Leftwich, 1984, p. 144).

“Politics is designed to disappoint—that is the way that the process of compromise and reconciliation works. Its outcomes are often messy, ambiguous and never final” (Stoker, 2006, p. 10).

For example, many East Asian governments (such as China, Malaysia, and Singapore) emphasize economic development over democracy, sometimes at the expense of civil liberties and democratic procedures. The fragmentation of Syria and the rise of Daesh, or the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), presents a new and extremely threatening type of governance structure for Western countries. Finally, some alternatives have little in common with the Western liberal democratic model. The military regimes of some African countries fall into the latter category, as do fundamentalist Islamic regimes, like the Saudi Arabian monarchy, that put religious norms before liberty and democracy.

See Chapter 6, pp. 122–7
for a discussion of
multiculturalism.

Political Questions

If we all had the same interests and values, and if there were enough of everything to go around, there would be no need for a mechanism to make decisions about “who gets what, when, and how.” We could have everything we wanted without conflict. But politics is based on the assumption that this is not the case. As a result, students of politics ask a number of questions about the decisions that are taken.

In the first place, they ask what values such decisions serve. Do they serve the values of justice or liberty? If so, what do we mean by justice and liberty? Is a just decision one that is made in the interests of the few, the many, or all? The second basic set of questions concerns who makes the decisions and who should make them. Does one person do the

decision making, or a few, or many, or all? Is there anything special about democratic forms of government? Are we under a greater obligation to obey decisions made in a democratic way than in other ways? These are the kinds of questions that formed the basis of Aristotle’s famous six-fold classification of **political systems**; see Box 0.2.

The third basic question that students of politics often ask is how those who make the decisions are able to enforce them. Here we need to distinguish between **power** and **authority**, two concepts that are central to politics. We could say that rulers are able to enforce their decisions either because they have the power to do so or because they have the authority to do so. The former implies some form of coercion: Those with power are able to force those without power to behave in ways they would not choose. As historical examples have shown, governments that rely exclusively on the exercise of power in that sense are likely to be inefficient and unstable. Such regimes will survive only if they are able to impose coercion continually—a difficult exercise. As Libya’s former dictator Muammar Gadhafi found out in 2011, even the most coercive regime cannot hold on to power once the people decide to revolt.

By contrast, a regime with authority hypothetically has no need of force, because the people recognize that the ruler has a legitimate right to exercise power and therefore they consent to be ruled. In other words, authority is defined in terms of legitimacy. Converting power into authority is the goal of most regimes, because it makes ruling far easier and less costly. It also makes leadership more stable. In practice, no government enjoys full authority, even in a democracy, because there are always those who disagree with the policies the government is trying to promote. It’s also clear, as we shall see, that democratic systems are not perfect, especially when a government is elected that only represents the minority of voters.



See Chapter 2, pp. 41–3 for an exploration of the concepts of power and authority.

KEY CONCEPT BOX 0.2

Aristotle’s Classification of Governments

The Greek philosopher Aristotle (384–322 BCE) argued that a government could be judged by the degree to which it ruled in the interests of all, as opposed to serving the interests of some small section of the population. Accordingly, he developed a six-part classification, containing three “proper” forms of government and three “deviant” forms. His preferred form was a monarchy. He classified democracy as a deviant form on the grounds that the rule of the many in their own interests would be little better than mob rule. However, he also considered democracy to be (as British Prime Minister Winston Churchill put it many centuries later) the least bad form of government (Cunningham, 2002, p. 7).

TABLE 0.1 | Aristotle’s Classificatory Schema

Number ruling	Rulers rule in the interest of . . .	
	. . . all	. . . themselves
One	Monarchy	Tyranny
Few	Aristocracy	Oligarchy
Many	Polity	Democracy

Source: Dahl, Robert A. (1991). *Modern political analysis*, 5th edition. ©1991. Printed and electronically reproduced by permission of Pearson Education, Inc., New York, New York.

KEY POINTS

- In societies of any complexity, politics is usually predicated on the existence of competing interests and values.
- Most commentators believe that politics is unavoidable because all societies contain differences that have to be managed in some way.
- The “end of history” thesis suggests that liberal democratic values are the only legitimate values left in the modern world after the defeat of fascism and communism, but this view is mistaken. Ideological conflicts persist throughout the world, and liberalism itself has faced challenges to its legitimacy.
- Given competing values and interests, the study of politics becomes the study of which values and interests dominate, who is responsible for the decisions that are made, and on what grounds they can or cannot be justified.

Boundaries of the Political: State, Society, and the International Community

Where does politics begin and end? Those who prefer a narrow definition would exclude all institutions other than those of the state. Others believe that to draw the boundaries so narrowly is to miss much of importance that is political. This narrow definition sets politics apart, however artificially, from other social sciences that we believe it is intimately connected with. In this book, therefore, we will refer to subfields of politics such as political sociology and political economy, which focus on the relationships between the state and society and the economy, respectively.

Why has political analysis traditionally centred on the state? Because, in the words of the German sociologist Max Weber, the state has a “monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force in enforcing its order within a given territorial area” (Gerth & Mills, 1946, pp. 77–8). In other words, the state is seen to be the highest authority in a society, and as such is **sovereign**; it has no legitimate competitors for authority either inside the state in the domestic realm or outside in the international system. As the supreme law-making body within a particular territory, the state ultimately has the power of life and death over individuals. It can put people to death for crimes they have committed, and it can demand that its citizens fight for their country in wars with other sovereign states. Defined in this way, the state can be distinguished from the government in the sense that it is a much larger entity, containing not just political offices but also bureaucratic, judicial, military, police, and security institutions.

The state can also be distinguished from **civil society**: the body of nongovernmental institutions that link the individual and the state (see Box 0.3). This is not to say that state legitimacy is not contested, because it often is. This might come from outside by other countries contesting its borders, or from inside by internal nations seeking independence (such as the Catalans, Basques, Scottish, Québécois) or by Indigenous peoples seeking to have their own rights to self-determination affirmed. The development of nation-to-nation relationships, as promised in the treaties between First Nations and the Crown, and reaffirmed in the Liberal Party’s 2015 electoral platform, may lead to new and different ideas about sovereignty as something shared between different groups of people who possess rights that predate the Western settler state.



See Chapter 12, pp. 238–45, for a discussion of civil society.

KEY CONCEPT BOX 0.3

Civil Society

The term *civil society* usually refers to the many private groups and institutions that operate between the individual and the state, from business organizations and trade unions (like the Canadian Union of Public Employees) to religious institutions, voluntary organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and interest groups of all kinds, such as the Council of Canadians and the Manning Centre. The German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel (1770–1831) distinguished between the family and civil society, but other theorists include the family as an institution within civil society.

Discussions of political power usually focus on the state. However, some scholars argue that politics operates at many levels, and therefore they extend the boundaries of the political realm to include everything from the family to the international community. For theorists like Michel Foucault (1926–1984), politics is the use of power and can thus be found everywhere that people interact. He promoted a “micropolitical” analysis in his work, focusing on how power dynamics operate on a small scale (Thomas & Davies, 2005). Today, many are particularly interested in the study of politics at the supranational level. Arguably, too, the focus of politics has begun to shift as national economies become increasingly interdependent and the forces of globalization place increasing constraints on what individual “sovereign” states can do on their own.

Certainly, the academic study of international relations has expanded enormously in the last few years. The fact that a third of this book is devoted to relations between states is a reflection of the growing importance of this field. However, we also need to recognize that the traditional “realist” approach to international relations still sees the state as the only actor with any real power, since **realism** is largely focused on issues of war and peace. In this model, the difficulty of securing agreement between states can be a significant barrier to the successful resolution of international problems. Other theories of international relations, such as liberalism, constructivism, poststructuralism, and feminism, are much less focused on the state as the dominant actor. They privilege international institutions, other actors within the state and outside, the role of ideas, group identities, and gender.

There are many who argue that politics exists in the institutions of society below the state level. Colin Hay (2002, p. 3), for instance, insists that “the political should be defined in such a way as to encompass the entire sphere of the social.” Leftwich (1984) substantially agrees, arguing that “politics is at the heart of *all* collective social activity, formal and informal, public and private, in all human groups, institutions and societies.” The term **governance**, which is increasingly preferred to *government*, draws the boundaries of the governmental process much wider. It includes not only the traditional institutions of government, such as Parliament, the courts, and the bureaucracies, but all the other inputs that may influence decisions affecting society, such as the market, interest groups, business organizations, universities, churches, sport, and the family.

Some ideological traditions promote this wider view of politics. Many feminists, for example, believe the personal realm to be political as a result of the continued dominance of men in personal relationships and the family—hence the slogan “the personal is the political.” The idea is that every family is the site of politics: about who is in control, and



See Chapter 3, p. 66, for a discussion of political obligation.



See Chapter 15, pages 308–12, for a discussion of realism.



See Chapter 6, pp. 112–17, for a discussion of feminism.

who gets what. As well, classical Marxists insist that political power comes from bourgeois dominance over the working classes in the economic realm. Similarly, despite the many divisions that have developed over the centuries, Islam's scripture-based tradition can theoretically govern all aspects of Muslim life, including relations within the family.

We can even ask whether the boundaries of the political should stop at our species. There might be a strong case for recognizing at least some nonhuman animals as beings whose interests should be taken into account in the political process (Garner, 2005). In general, according to Jamieson (2002, pp. 149–51), proponents of animal rights have advanced three main arguments:

1. Animals and humans are similar in ways that count. They are conscious beings capable of enjoying life or experiencing pain and suffering.
2. Animals are innocent. They have done nothing to deserve human mistreatment or cruelty.
3. Treating animals well helps create a more benevolent society, whereas cruelty and abuse leads to moral bankruptcy.

See Chapter 6, pp. 118–22,
for a discussion of
environmentalism.



Going further, the “deep” ecological school of thought seeks to extend the boundaries of the political to the whole of the natural world. This view bears some similarities to some Indigenous forms of knowledge. As Leroy Little Bear explains, “Aboriginal paradigms include ideas of constant flux, all existence consisting of energy waves/spirit, all things being animate, all existence being interrelated, creation/existence having to be renewed, space/place as an important referent, and language, songs, stories, and ceremonies as repositories for the knowledge that arise out of these paradigms” (Little Bear, 2009, p. 8). In an era of reconciliation, the interconnectedness of human with nonhuman animals and our interdependence with the natural world may take on a more important priority.

As problems of climate change become more acute, some traditional religious leaders have echoed similar perspectives. In 2015, Pope Francis, in his encyclical letter, called for an “integral ecology” and protection of what he called “our common home.” He promotes the value of approaching “nature and the environment” with “openness to awe and wonder,” moving beyond the old attitude of being “masters, consumers, ruthless exploiters, unable to set limits on their immediate needs.” He notes that “The poverty and austerity of Saint Francis were no mere veneer of asceticism, but something much more radical: a refusal to turn reality into an object simply to be used and controlled” (Pope Francis, 2015, pp. 9–12).

KEY POINTS

- Defining politics is complicated by questions about where the boundaries should be drawn.
- Some argue that the boundaries of the political should be drawn narrowly, recognizing the state as the key political institution.
- Others argue that politics needs to be defined far more broadly, to include power relations in social institutions such as the family or political institutions at the supranational level.
- We can go even further to see our role as being part of the larger world that includes animals and the natural environment of which we are an interdependent part.

The Study of Politics

The study of politics in the Western world dates back to at least the fifth century BCE to the Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle, who are considered the “founding fathers” of the discipline. Yet politics was not an independent discipline in university before the beginning of the twentieth century; until then it had been studied only in the context of law, philosophy, and history (Stoker & Marsh, 2002, p. 2). The American Political Science Association, the body of academics specializing in political studies, was formed in 1903, and the Canadian Political Science Association (CPSA) was formed in 1930. Today, 45 universities in Canada and numerous colleges offer courses in political science as well as undergraduate degree programs. Members of the CPSA meet yearly to present their work on various aspects of political science, and the CPSA publishes several issues annually of the *Canadian Journal of Political Science* (Whitaker, 2013).

The teaching of politics has traditionally been divided into three streams: the study of political ideas (political theory or philosophy), the study of political institutions and processes within states (comparative politics), and the study of relations between states (global politics or international relations). This book is structured around these distinctions, but we also need to be clear that these three areas of study overlap regularly because, of course, they all involve the interactions of human social groups in a variety of settings. As Part 1 of this book will show, the study of political ideas combines conceptual analysis, coverage of key figures in the history of political thought, and ideologies. The study of institutions and processes, covered in Part 2, can take a number of forms, including examination of the institutions of a single state, comparison of institutions and processes in various states, political history, electoral politics, and public administration. Finally, students of international politics, the subject of Part 3, often examine the role of states as well as supranational actors and institutions, either historically or contemporaneously.

The Rise and Fall of Normative Analysis

In all three branches of political science, at least three major kinds of political analysis are undertaken: normative, empirical, and semantic. The first one, **normative analysis**, asks questions about values: whether, when, and why we ought to value freedom, or democracy, or equality, for example, or under what circumstances we should or should not obey the laws of the state. The goal is to identify what is good, what we ought to want, or which alternative is better. For millennia, normative analysis was the core of Western political philosophy, and many of the “classics” in the history of political thought, from Plato’s *Republic* through Thomas Hobbes’s *Leviathan* to major twentieth-century works such as John Rawls’s *Theory of Justice*, have been devoted to determining what constitutes the “good life,” the kind of society and polity within which it would be desirable for us to live. Normative theory is meant to have a practical side—a guide to what sort of actions one should pursue in a range of different situations. Andrea Sangiovanni gives us a taste of what normative theory can help us do through an examination of actors and the sorts of decisions they need help making:

- (a) a citizen contemplating which party to vote for or whether to vote at all;
- (b) a legislator contemplating how to vote on a bill;
- (c) a judge deciding a hard case;

- (d) a civil servant facing a discretionary decision on whether to deport an illegal immigrant and his family;
- (e) someone contemplating violent forms of political resistance in a democracy;
- (f) someone contemplating violent forms of political resistance in a non-democracy;
- (g) a subject of a non-democracy contemplating various ways to organize resistance to the current leader, without toppling the state;
- (h) a teacher contemplating her curriculum and her general approach to marking;
- (i) a novelist deciding whether to publish her (politically controversial) book;
- (j) a development economist contemplating what advice to give to a state of which he or she knows little;
- (k) a citizen contemplating how much time to spend on various forms of political action;
- (l) a couple deciding how to divide resources between their daughter and their son. (Sangiovanni, 2008, pp. 220–1)

For much of the twentieth century, however, normative analysis was pushed into the background by two newer types of analysis: empirical and semantic (see the next section). Both arose during the “behavioural revolution” of the 1950s, a time when number crunching, particularly in relation to the study of electoral behaviour, was highly valued (see Box 0.5 on page 12). In this period, philosophizing about what kind of society and polity we ought to have—the basis of normative analysis—was regarded as unnecessary in part because it was difficult to prove. In the academic world, the decline of normative analysis was partly due to the rise of positivism, where political scientists applied the scientific methodology of the natural sciences to social phenomena (see Box 0.4). Positivism was associated in particular with the French social scientist Auguste Comte (1798–1857), who argued that the development of the scientific method represented the culmination of human evolution. It promised to uncover truths about the nature of political life that had not been understood or seen before.

Normative political philosophy began to make a comeback in the second half of the twentieth century, partly in response to new and innovative political philosophy, notably John Rawls’s (1971) book *A Theory of Justice*. Nevertheless, a great deal of contemporary political philosophy is much more cautious and tentative than the grand narratives of the past. This has to do with the reality that many normative statements or questions are impossible to prove with empirical evidence. Normative statements have much more to do with intuitive reactions and perceptions than logic. The focus here is on values and a political theorist’s perception of how the world ought to be rather than how it is. While there

KEY CONCEPT BOX 0.4

Positivism

Positivism is a philosophical system that sees the scientific or “positive” stage of human intellectual evolution as the last of three major stages in our history. It holds that science must limit itself to what is observable and insists on a clear separation between fact and value. At the extreme, the doctrine known as *logical positivism* holds that normative claims are meaningless: The only meaningful statements are those that can be either investigated empirically, by observation, or examined semantically.

is, of course, a lot of debate over what the world should look like, some political theorists, such as Jeremy Waldron, argue that there *are* some conceptions of the good—health, bodily integrity, wealth, even liberty—to which everyone might aspire (Waldron, 1989, pp. 74–5), as well as “conceptions of the good which are manifestly unreasonable” (Arneson, 2000, p. 71). Normative theory is one of the oldest branches of political theory and continues to play an important role in the discipline, often as a guide to action.

Empirical and Semantic Analysis

The second type of analysis common to politics, and to most other academic disciplines as well, is empirical. **Empirical analysis** seeks to identify observable phenomena in the real world with a view to establishing what is as opposed to what ought to be. Empirical analysis is the basis of the natural sciences, and many *positivist* political analysts seek to bring what they see as the impartial and value-free methods of the natural sciences to the study of political phenomena.

The third type of analysis commonly used in politics is semantic. **Semantic analysis** is concerned with the meaning of the concepts we use, where these concepts came from, and why and how we use them. Semantics has an important function in political studies, given that so many of the concepts used in politics have no commonly accepted definition and are, as Gallie (1955–6) put it, “essentially contested.” Defining what we mean by terms such as *democracy* and *freedom* is a crucial starting point.

In reality, none of the three forms of political analysis are practised in isolation. As Wolff (1996, p. 3) points out, “studying how things are helps to explain how things can be, and studying how they can be is indispensable for assessing how they ought to be.” Thus normative claims are based largely on empirical knowledge. Conversely, a great deal of empirical analysis presupposes some normative assumptions. This can be seen in the topics that students of politics choose to explore. Thus we might choose to investigate the causes of war because we assume that war is undesirable and therefore that we should try to eliminate it. For the early theorists of international relations, in the years just after World War I, researching past wars with a view to ending future ones was a priority.

It may be useful at this point to consider the differences between what we might call empirical and normative political theory. For positivists, creating theory involves generating testable hypotheses about political phenomena; for example, journalist Thomas Friedman’s “McDonald’s peace theory,” which states that “Countries with McDonald’s within their borders do not go to war with other countries with McDonald’s within their borders.” Note that Friedman was making the case for trade as a means of promoting interstate peace, with McDonald’s being a result of trade, not the causal factor preventing war. At any rate, the theory seems to have been disproved in 2008 when Russia and Georgia went to war (Fray, 2013) and again in 2014 when Russia annexed a portion of Ukraine. By contrast, normative theory involves judgments about our political goals: for example, whether a democratic political framework (or a capitalist economic framework, as another example) is desirable in the first place.

We noted earlier that the study of political “theory” has traditionally been separated from the study of political institutions and processes. To those who would maintain this separation there are two responses. First, those who study government without recognizing the key normative questions raised by political philosophers will receive only a partial picture of their discipline. Systems of government created by human beings reflect normative



See Chapter 1, pp. 32–4
for a discussion of human
nature.

beliefs. The US Constitution, for example, is a product of the Founding Fathers' vision of what a modern state ought to be like, and amendments made since their time—for example, extending the right to vote to women in 1920—reflect more recent normative thinking.

Alongside normative theorizing, theorizing of an empirical kind is also a central part of the study of political institutions and processes. Theories are used in empirical work to organize and make sense of the masses of information that political researchers unearth and to identify and explain relationships between observable phenomena. A key element of the empirical approach is the comparative method, in which political analysts develop testable generalizations by comparing political phenomena across different political systems or historically within the same system. To test the hypothesis posed above—that countries with McDonald's don't fight each other—would require a comparative examination of different regimes to understand the relationship between political and economic variables. It would also require semantic analysis of the concept of war—a concept that is subject to many different interpretations. Some might argue, for example, that the conflict between Russia and Georgia was not technically a “war.” To take another example, the proposition that countries with electoral systems that use a form of proportional representation tend to experience more political and economic instability than those that use the first-past-the-post system could be tested by undertaking an empirical comparison of countries that use one or the other.

Deductive and Inductive Theories of Politics

Stoker and Marsh (2002, p. 3) point out that there are “many distinct approaches and ways of undertaking political science.” Arguably, however, the most important approaches to the empirical study of politics can be divided into two groups: those using deductive reasoning and those using inductive reasoning. The deductive method is associated with rational choice theories of politics, and the inductive approach with behaviouralism (see Box 0.5). Together, these newer approaches moved politics away from the formal, legalistic study of institutions and, in particular, constitutions, which had been more prevalent in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Rational choice analysis was first developed in the field of economics and has become an important tool of political science since the 1970s. In general, rational choice analysis starts with certain fundamental assumptions about human behaviour from which

KEY CONCEPT BOX 0.5

Behaviouralism

This approach was developed, particularly in the United States, in the post-1945 period. It stressed the importance of the scientific method in the study of social phenomena. Objective measurement of the social world was the goal, and values were to be completely eliminated from social inquiry. Behaviouralism assumed that human behaviour is capable of being measured in a precise way and that generalizations can be derived from it. This school of thought reached the height of its influence in political studies in the 1960s. Since then it has been increasingly challenged by those who question the idea that political science and social inquiry in general are value-free.

hypotheses or theories are deduced before being tested against facts in the “real world”: Specifically, it is assumed that humans are essentially rational beings, “utility maximizers” who will follow the path of action most likely to benefit them. This approach has been used in game theory, where individual behaviour is applied to particular situations. Game scenarios reveal how difficult it can be for rational individuals to reach optimal outcomes. This is in part because “free riders” (those who benefit from collective gains yet do no work to help the group achieve its goals) reap the benefits of collective action without paying any of the costs. In political science, the best-known applications of **rational choice theory** can be found in the fields of voting and party competition, and in interest group politics.

One problem with the deductive method is that its fundamental assumptions remain just that: assumptions. Many regard those assumptions as simplifications at best, and at worst as entirely inaccurate descriptions of human behaviour. Moreover, rational choice theory has generated a large number of hypotheses about various aspects of the political process, but it is short on empirical tests of those hypotheses (Hay, 2002, pp. 39–40). Rational choice theory is better at predicting outcomes on the basis of certain stated premises than it is at developing accurate empirical theories of the real world.

Inductive approaches to politics, by contrast, start with empirical observations and draw explanatory generalizations from them. Whereas in deductive approaches, theory is deduced from first principles before being tested, in inductive approaches theory follows observation and generalization. This is the classic method of scientific inquiry. A classic example of inductivism is behaviouralism. The topics that behaviouralists focused on were quantifiable (for example, voting behaviour). Thus empirical data on British voting behaviour during the 1960s gave rise to the generalization that voting is class-based (the working class tended to vote Labour and the middle and upper classes tended to vote Conservative).

The weaknesses of the inductive method mirror those of the deductive method. Whereas the latter is strong on theory but weak on empirical testing, the reverse is true of the former. The inductive approach focuses more on gathering empirical data than it does on the generation of theory. This traditional positivist approach was famously critiqued by the philosopher of science Karl Popper (1902–1994). Popper argued that instead of generating empirical data from which a hypothesis can be derived, theorists should seek to falsify existing hypotheses—that is, they should focus on testing earlier studies to see if they are correct or incorrect. “Falsification” is simply the process of testing a hypothesis, and its results may either disprove or support the existing theory. If the previous theory can’t be disproved, the earlier conclusion stands until such time as another study proves it wrong; then political science moves on to a new theory. For example, if I hypothesize that *I only like chocolate ice cream*, the only way to sustain this hypothesis is to try other flavours and reject them. Falsification occurs if I sample another flavour—say, bubblegum—to see if my original hypothesis holds. If I find that I also like bubblegum ice cream, then I have just disproved my theory and need to generate a new one: *I only like chocolate and bubblegum ice cream*. We see another example in the “McDonald’s peace theory,” where the conflict between Russia and Georgia seems to disprove the theory.

In this way truth claims became temporary—only as good as the next successful attempt to refute them. Verification can never be conclusive, but falsification can be. More to the point, positivists have tended, since Popper, to show less interest in the inductive method and more in the generation of hypotheses to be refuted.

Another weakness of the inductive method is that the hypotheses it generates tend not to be explanatory; that is, they don’t identify a causal link between generalizations. Rather,



See Chapter 1, pp. 23–4, and Chapter 12, pp. 245–7, for more on interest groups.

they tend to involve patterns of statistical correlation (Hay, 2002, p. 79). Finding correlations between phenomena is not the same as finding that one explains the other. For example, the fact that a statistical correlation is found between social class and voting behaviour does not, in itself, explain why the correlation exists. In Britain, perhaps working-class people feel a greater ideological affinity with the Labour Party, or think that Labour MPs, many of whom come from working-class backgrounds, will be better able to represent their interests in Parliament. Alternatively, working-class people might be just as likely to vote Conservative as Labour if each party advertises to the same extent in all neighbourhoods, but Labour puts more money and effort into working-class neighbourhoods while the Conservatives focus their campaigns on middle- and upper-class neighbourhoods.

KEY POINTS

- Political analysis involves three main approaches: empirical, normative, and semantic.
- Theorizing normatively about politics is difficult and often contentious. On the other hand, the difficulties should not be exaggerated. Moral relativism is not the inevitable consequence of political philosophy.
- In practice, these three forms of political analysis are not mutually exclusive. We need to know what *is* before we can talk sensibly about what *ought to be*. Similarly, empirical analysis presupposes some normative assumptions.
- Empirical political analysis tends to use either inductive or deductive reasoning. Behaviouralism uses the former; rational choice theory the latter.

Can Politics Be a Science?

Whether a social science such as politics can be, or should be, scientific is an open question. To a certain extent, the answer depends on whether our definition of science is loose or strict. Politics is a science in the sense that it “offers ordered knowledge based on systematic enquiry” (Stoker & Marsh, 2002, p. 11). A more rigorous definition would require that the methodology of the natural sciences be applied to the political realm, as the behaviouralists tried to do. Here an appropriate definition of science might be “the ability to generate neutral, dispassionate and objective knowledge claims” (Hay, 2002, p. 87).

An objective, value-free account of politics would allow us to identify the “truth” about political phenomena. We could make predictions that have a good chance of being correct, and we could advise political leaders on the best and worst courses of action. However, there is reason to think that a truly scientific account of politics is unlikely. First, human beings are unpredictable, and their political behaviour is not consistent with unbending scientific laws in the way that, say, the workings of molecules are. As Hay (2002, p. 50) points out, the social sciences “deal with conscious and reflective subjects, capable of acting differently under the same stimuli.”

However, as we saw in the case of rational choice theory, it’s doubtful that assumptions about human behaviour can stand the test of empirical observation. Furthermore, the study of politics is not value-free, since we impose our own assumptions and norms on our work from the very start of a research project. The questions we ask and the ways in

which we frame them have a crucial bearing on the answers we get back. We might want to argue, too, that politics should be about values and norms. To attempt to exclude them is to miss much of what is valuable in the study of the political.

KEY POINTS

- Behaviouralists, in particular, suggest that the study of politics can have the scientific rigour of the natural sciences.
- Opponents of this view argue that political behaviour is inconsistent with scientific “laws,” and that the study of politics neither is nor should be “value-free” in the way that the natural sciences are.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have introduced you to some basic definitions and themes current within political analysis. We have also suggested keeping an open mind as to what is “political”; to define the boundaries too narrowly is to miss much that is important in the real world. The rest of this book will reflect that broad orientation.

In Part 1, Chapters 1–6, we continue the exploration of political ideas and ideologies, focusing on the state, power and democracy, freedom and justice, and traditional and new political ideologies. In Part 2, Chapters 7–13, we focus on political institutions and processes, and we feature chapters on all the main elements of the political system: constitutions, executives and legislatures, bureaucracies, parties and elections, the media, and political culture. Finally, in Part 3, Chapters 14–20, we examine relations between states, moving from a historical account of the development of the state system to discussions of international relations theory, international security, diplomacy and foreign policy, international organizations, and finally international political economy.

Key Questions

1. How can we define what politics is?
2. Does the study of the political always have to include the state?
3. Distinguish between normative and empirical analysis in political theory.
4. Can politics be a “science” like the natural sciences?
5. What is the case for defining politics narrowly to just focus on the state and its institutions?
6. How can we evaluate between competing normative claims?
7. “Politics is generally disparaged as an activity which is shrinking in importance and relevance” (Gamble, 2000). Discuss.

Further Reading

Ethridge, M.E. (Ed.). (2015). *The political research experience: Readings and analysis* (3rd ed.). New York: Routledge. A detailed account of the study of politics with readings and other material.

Gamble, A. (2000). *Politics and fate*. Cambridge: Polity Press. A spirited critique of the idea that impersonal forces such as globalization have destroyed our ability to control our own futures. Gamble argues that we are not prisoners of “fate” and in fact have considerable control over our political destinies.

Hay, C. (2002). *Political analysis*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. A comprehensive and accessible account of different approaches to political science.

Marsh, D., & Stoker, G. (Eds.). (2002). *Theory and methods in political science*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. An extremely useful collection of articles setting out the field.

Stoker, G. (2006). *Why politics matter*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. A justification of the study of politics that focuses on consensus and democracy.

Web Links

www.cpsa-acsp.ca

The Canadian Political Science Association is the major Canadian professional society for students of politics and government.

<http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayJournal?jid=CJP>

The *Canadian Journal of Political Science* is available here. Your library most likely has an online subscription.

www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/political-science

For an overview of the history of political science in Canada, see Reg Whitaker’s article “Political Science” in *The Canadian Encyclopedia*.

www.apsanet.org

The American Political Science Association performs the same role as the Canadian Political Science Association but in the United States.

www.apsanet.org/PUBLICATIONS/journals

APSA publishes three academic journals. The *American Political Science Review* (APSR) has been in continuous publication for over a century. *Perspectives on Politics* is a newer addition, while *PS: Political Science and Politics* has been a vehicle for new and innovative work since 1968.

www.psa.ac.uk

The Political Studies Association (PSA) of the United Kingdom, founded in 1950, is the British equivalent of the APSA.

www.politicsresources.net

Political Science Resources is a web gateway with more than 17,000 links to major politics and government sites around the world. The site was created by Richard Kimber.

www.library.vanderbilt.edu/govt/polsci.php

Vanderbilt University maintains this extensive web gateway, which offers hundreds of links, including overviews of the discipline of political science and its subfields.

www.hyperpolitics.net

An innovative online dictionary of political terms. The site is maintained by Mauro Calise and Theodore J. Lowi.