Politics: Basic Concepts

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Synonyms

Conflict; Political science; Power; Preferences; Rationality

Definition

Politics is the "intersection of power and conflict"

Introduction

People disagree. At an individual level, people might disagree over how best to allocate limited resources in a state, or which candidate would be best for a government. In the aggregate, people might disagree over the appropriate amount of social welfare spending and assistance by a government, or whether to go to war with an enemy state.

Understanding the nature of these conflicts is the essence of politics and political science. Given the importance of conflict and the implications any single resolution to the above situations might have on an individual (or a larger society), society ought to have a deeply developed understanding of how individuals come into conflict with one another and how that conflict gets resolved. This nuanced understanding requires, at its core, a precise set of definitions. These definitions should allow individuals not only to identify the âĂIJpoliticalâĂİ or "politics"; they should also inform the study of the concept. Offered here are some precise definitions: first of politics, then of its key concepts, as well as those parts of society that are *not* political.

A Definition of Politics

The lineage of political science is sufficiently developed so as to make offering another original definition an unwarranted exercise. Instead, previous work should guide definitions. Warren (1999, 208) defines politics as the âĂIJintersection of power and conflict.âĂİ This definition is useful in that it provides two key monikers to identify the political.

The first moniker of the political is that some sort of power relationship must exist between two or more individuals, groups, or objects. This power dynamic is exactly what motivates individuals to make political decisions: either to exert power over another for an advantage, or to subvert an existing relationship to achieve an established goal.

The exercise of power can be obvious. For instance, parties in the House of Representatives often use their control of the Rules Committee to control the flow of debate and amendment on a bill as to push the policy content towards a certain outcome. But the power need not be so formal. Informal power relationships, like the importance informal knowledge about Congressional procedures often called "folkways" leads to senior members of Congress becoming more powerful than their junior counterparts. Both exercises of power, though, lead to political interactions.

The second moniker of the political is that two or more individuals, groups, or objects must be in conflict with one another. Politics almost never exists when individuals work towards shared goals, which is why scholars of Congress routinely exclude votes concerning post offices or Flag Day. But even the tinge of conflictâĂŤlike when individuals cannot agree on who will bear the burden of organization towards achieving a shared preference—induces political behavior.

These situations—politics even with shared preferences—arise far more often than one might imagine: so much so that academics have formally defined two especially important situations. The first is a *coordination problem*. Coordination problems occur when individuals in some group (both formal, like a legislature, or informal, like a group of friends) all have similar preferences but are unwilling to make the commitment to incur the costs of organizing or to spend the time coordinating their preferences. So even in the rare situation where individuals all want the same (or very similar) outcomes, these outcomes might not be achieved because they cannot (or will not) properly coordinate.

Perhaps the best example of a coordination problem is the problem of parties in legislatures. Most members that share a party identification who have been elected to a legislature share some basic level of preferences. For instance, in the United States context, most Democrats want liberal policy, while most Republicans want conservative policy. But even though legislators share these basic preferences, they are unwilling to spend the time and energy required to coordinate their efforts together for the purpose of creating legislating. Other considerations, like district concerns or time pressures, might keep them from acting in a unified way. The party as an overall institution can help to solve this problem, doing the legwork of gathering information about different pieces of legislation or informing the members of the party about upcoming votes. In this way, the more desirable outcome—party-favored legislation—is achieved because another institution helps to fill the gap.

The second is a *collective action problem*. These are a bit more realistic: individuals all want to benefit from the access to some resource without having to pay for the resource. These problems often occur when examining the provision of government services. Almost no one on a survey would be for lower education standards or more roads with potholes. But individuals diverge dramatically on their willingness to pay for those services. Although they themselves want to benefit, they want only others to incur the cost, often leading to situations where individuals want for tax rates to be increased on others' income and others' resources (like capital gains or cigarettes), but decreased on their own! Here too some sort of mutually preferred outcome might not be achieved, but this time much more directly because of an individual's own self-interest.

The last sentence points towards another key concept from politics: *rationality*. Rationality can be defined as a situation in which an individual has well-defined preferences regarding some outcome and then act in a way to maximize those preferences, or get an outcome as close as possible to his or her preferred one. Calling preferences "utility"—how much an individual "gets" from an outcome—political scientists formally say that rationality is when individuals are *utility maximizers*. An entire branch of the study of politics is devoted to analyzing what happens in political situations when each individual acts rationally, given his or her own preferences and the preferences of the other individuals in his or her situation. This branch of politics is *formal theory*.

Formal theory is useful in the study of politics for a multitude of reasons. The first is that it is one of the true *deductive* theories of politics. A deductive theory of politics starts from a central assumption at the "top-level" and works to explain lower levels of behavior. The central assumption of formal theory is that individuals are utility maximizers. In making this assumption, political scientists say nothing of *individual politicians* or particular contexts. Instead, formal theorists can simply observe what behavior in the political world can be explained or predicted by rationality. Formal theory produces interesting predictions, like candidates converging to a moderate ideology. If individuals vote simply for the candidate in an election who is the most proximate to their own ideology, and abstention is not permitted, formal theory predicts that candidates will converge to the median voter. Formal theory also helps explain the importance of "veto players" in Congressional chambers. If two-thirds of each chamber of Congress are required to override a presidential veto, and an individual member recognizes that he or she is the "two-thirds" member (the so-called "veto-pivot"), he or she might be able to extract concessions from other lawmakers or otherwise control that outcome of legislation.

Both of these above predictions, though, rely on core assumptions that may not accurately model particular situations. For instance, the median voter theorem does not allow for abstention. It also fails to recognize the relative importance of each individual vote (like whether individuals at the extreme are more or less likely to contribute to campaigns in other ways) or the likelihood of each individual actually voting, regardless of his or her ideology (although political scientists know that moderates participate less often than ideological extremists). Some political scientists argue that this points to the importance of *inductive* theory: making scientifically useful observations about the social world and using those observations to build a theory of political behavior. The importance of both the inductive and deductive approaches, though, illustrates a broader point: politics can be studied in a variety of ways, a point elaborated below.

Approaches to Studying Politics

So when looking for politics, political scientists can look for instances of preferences in conflict. What remains, then, is a closer look at the individual concepts that help *organize* the study of politics. The first two concepts are relatively zero-sum dichotomies in which the researcher must make an *a priori* decision.

The first requires a decision about the types of *questions* a researcher wishes to ask. There are two basic approaches. The first considers a question about how politics is organized. A researcher can choose to ask either a *scientific* question or a *normative* ques-

tion. The scientific question would include elements such as "how is a government organized? If X is a part of a government's organization, how does Y change?" Such questions have, at their core, a targeted goal of understanding the mechanics of preferences in conflict. Scientific questions are common in political science. One example is a set of research that seeks to understand how "clarity of responsibility" in government influences voter behavior. This research argues that governments in which responsibility is more transparent (like when a single party maintains a majority, rather than a coalition of parties), it is easier for individual voters to trace policies back to specific politicians. In these cases, voters are more proactive at the polls, replacing those politicians whose policy actions they disagree with. This leads to more accountable government and better policy representation. The cause-and-effect story of how clarity of responsibility influences voter behavior is a scientific question.

Normative questions are much different. Normative questions are essentially concerned with how things *ought* to be. These would turn the previous examples on their head, instead asking "how *should* government be organized?" often with the goal of serving some population or group. Using the previous example, normative research might ask "which system of government is best for the voters?" It might conclude that governments *should* increase clarity of responsibility so that voters can make better decisions and representation can improve. Here, regardless of the causal story, the normative researcher is interested in a particular answer.

Presuming the researcher knows the kinds of questions he or she wants to ask (*scientific* or *normative*), the second dichotomy involves the researcher's own perspective when providing an *answer* to these questions. Fundamentally, an answer might involve a description of how the world works—simply describing the causal relationship of some concepts to others. This perspective is called *objectivity*: devoting less attention to the content of an answer to a question as much as the "correctness" of the answer, with a special attention to the accurate description of the causal relationships between concepts. Objective answers are unconcerned if they find that politicians purposefully use obscure policymaking methods (like complex procedural rules) to hide the responsibility for policy. Such answers are only concerned with accurately identifying the relationship.

The opposite of this objective perspective is a *critical* one. A critical perspective is concerned with illuminating the especially human aspects of the exercise of power in conflict, rather than merely describing it. Only with a critical perspective do researchers arrive at explications of the political focused on resolving alleged systematic wrongs, like Marxism. Marx was especially concerned with elaborating the relationship between capital and labor, but to simply understand the cause-and-effect. Instead, Marx wanted to inform common laborers of the way in which they were being abused and incite them to take control of the production of capital for their own benefit. Such a critical answer to this relationship between two concepts—capital and labor—is clearly meant to illuminate the power dynamic between groups.

An especially important word is in order at this point: politics and political science are sufficiently wide to permit a genuine diversity of perspectives among their practitioners. This diversity is known as *pluralism*, and usually it is recognized for its importance to the discipline. The mere definition of politics offered here—the intersection of power and conflict—points toward the importance of asking normative questions and crafting critical answers. Those individuals in which political power is often vested are interested in the furthering of their own interests, not some collective good. And the external challenges to this exercise of power offered by the study of politics are especially well positioned to engineer change for some normative "better." But without an objective, scientific understanding of the causal relationship between variables—what resources *objectively* empower a government to do, or what electoral systems *precisely* change about voting outcomes—providing the most empowering answer to a normative question might prove difficult.

Where Politics Often Occurs

Even understanding what constitutes the political, it is useful for the practitioner of political science to have a basic set of points of interests in which to look for the exercise of politics. Such points include when individuals engage in *voluntary* or *involuntary associations*. Voluntary associations might be much more centered around a shared set of defined preferences. Politics in voluntary associations might be a groups with a set of shared preferences working to use their common influence and pooled resources to exert power over other groups. A simple example of these voluntary associations are lobbying groups. Lobbying groups depend on voluntary members and contributions to influence the policy preferences and decisions of members of a legislature. Often, this results in some final policy outcome being skewed towards the lobby's preference, rather than some mutually preferred outcome.

Involuntary associations usually evoke much more of a dynamic of preferences in conflict with a stronger power relationship. The key part of the power relationship here is that an individual does not get to choose to be a part of the association, so those in charge might be tempted to take advantage of them. A simple example here is of a government. An individual might choose to live in a country, state, county, or town, but, after that choice, he or she does not get to choose to join its governments. And even without this choice, he or she is still expected to pay his or her taxes and follow the jurisdiction's rules. This might lead the politicians of those jurisdictions to take advantage of some individuals, knowing that it is extraordinarily difficult to uproot oneself and move to another place, especially for those with limited monetary resources. These involuntary associations evoke a much stronger sense of power in conflict. Both voluntary and involuntary associations are likely to induce political behavior as individuals negotiate their own preferences in competition with another.

Similarly, politics often occurs when distributing some finite amount of *resources*. Individuals might compete for the time and attention of one another, while governments might compete (often with each other) for physical or monetary resources. Given the power that resources often enable an individual to exert, and the finiteness of those resources, researchers are often drawn to situations in which resources are being distributed. In formal theory in particular, politics occurs when individuals often compete rationally to divide some finite resources or outcomes to maximize their own benefit.

The preceding paragraph alludes to one final point of interest. Politics can often occur among individuals—either single peoples or governments—or it can occur regarding the rules governing their interactions. When political science studies in the individuals themselves, it often ascribes a specific importance to *behavioralism*: why do actors make specific decisions? Returning a final time to Congress, a researcher might focus on the *individual* pressures a legislator feels when casting his or her vote—to vote in line with constituency, with party, and with expectations, to name a few.

But the larger environment in which individuals operate might also play a critical role. In this sense, researchers might also be interested in *institutions*: the "rules of the game" that limit the set of behaviors and responses available to some actor. In Congress this might include how the written rules themselves (the ability to offer amendments or the technicality of certain points of order when spending Congressional money) influence the policy outcomes and alternatives available to members. Both the study of individuals and their institutional environments enrich the understanding of politics and deserve attention.

Lastly, researchers ought to note that not all things are political. Not every societal interaction involves some sort of political process: otherwise, the fields and definitions of sociology and political science would be subsumed by one another. Not all power is contested, and political scientists ought to understand those situations in which it is deferred willingly. Similarly, not all conflict is political, as actors might not hold sincere preferences over some resource in question. Politics

certainly permeates the social world, but to see every societal interaction as political misses the nuance of politics: it is the union of *both* power *and* conflict. In those situations, political scientists should seek to understand what is driving that conflict and understand it.

Conclusion

Society is interesting and exciting to study because of the very nature of the many disagreements that occur within it. Politics and political science are equally valuable because of the many approaches that they permit. Researchers are free to ask objective or normative questions, to start their theories inductively or deductively, or to examine the political between individuals or through institutions.

When truly looking for politics, researchers can readily conclude that it exists with ubiquity in the social world. Moreover, even those social interactions that one might be tempted to conclude are negative—individual disagreements, electorally biased rules, conflict over policy preferences—are beneficial in that they create the very interactions that constitute the existence and study of politics. Rarely are preferences aligned, and when they are not, it allows for the study of those basic concepts and interactions that make up the political world. A researcher should choose an approach, and, with a recognition of some basic concepts in hand, enrich the study of the political world.

Cross-References

Bureaucracy and Politics
Political Parties
Political Power
Politics and Partisanship
Public Policy and Politics

References

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