

- » Understanding what politics and political science entail
- » Finding out about political power
- » Looking into sources of legitimacy

Chapter **1**

Discovering the Discipline of Political Science

Political science is the study of politics and more precisely power. *Politics* is the process by how government decisions are made. It involves some members of society making decisions for all of society because they hold political power over others. Politics, in turn, determines who gets what, where, when, and how. For this reason, politics is an ongoing competition between individuals, groups, or even nation-states. In the United States, politics can involve two interest groups competing for benefits from the government. At the international level, politics could be a competition for natural resources, such as oil, or new powerful allies.

A political scientist is interested in who holds political power in a society, what type of political institutions (forms of government) are best suited to bring about the least amount of conflict, and what form of government is best for its citizens. To be more precise, political scientists are interested in who gets elected to office, how elections are won, how policy is made, how leaders maintain themselves in power, and the all-important question, why does war occur and could it be prevented?

This chapter looks at the study of politics and political science, including the beginnings of political science.

Looking at Politics and Political Science

Many believe that political science is a way of training for future politicians. Although taking a political science class can be helpful if you want to venture into politics, this isn't what political science is all about. Political science is a method or a way to study politics.



REMEMBER

Political science is an academic discipline that studies the relationship between people and political institutions. A discipline is a field of study usually represented by an academic department at a college or university. Political science is a discipline, and so are history, sociology, and biology.

Politics impacts people daily, and most of the time they're not aware of it. Politics determines tax rates, the way businesses are run, the textbooks a child uses in high school, and even how much a person pays for a gallon of milk in the grocery store.

Going back to the history of political science

The founder of the discipline of political science is the famous Greek philosopher Aristotle (see Figure 1-1). He referred to political science as a master science, because everything in life can be political in nature. Aristotle was the first political scientist to collect data and then base his research on it.



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Aristotle and his teacher Plato were concerned with the decline of his home city-state Athens. He wanted to know what caused the decline of his beloved Athens and more important how to save Athens. So he sent his students to the other Greek city-states to gather data. He wanted to know why some city-states were doing well and why others weren't. Based on the data his students collected, Aristotle wrote his famous book *Politics*. In it, he describes the various forms of governments and institutions his students discovered in the Greek city-states. Then he discusses his own preferences. Political science and normative theory (see Chapter 2) were born.



REMEMBER

The term *politics* comes from the ancient Greek *polis*, which means city-state. The first person to use the term was Aristotle, who lived during the time of the Greek city-states dominating Greek politics. So politics for Aristotle referred to the interaction between the Greek city-states.

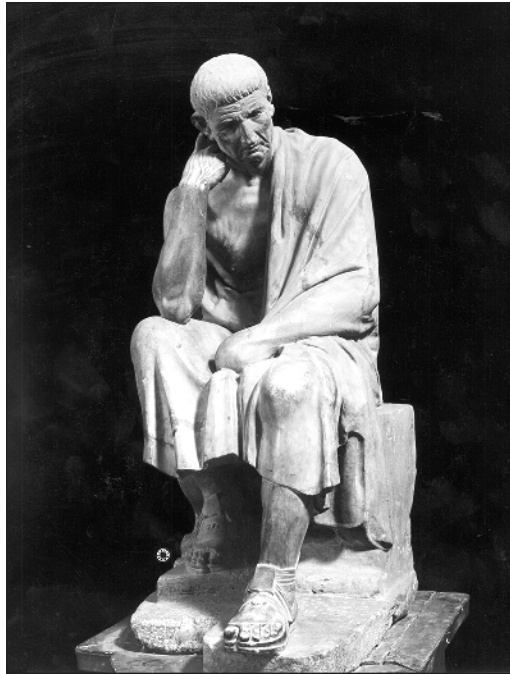


FIGURE 1-1:
Greek philosopher Aristotle is credited with founding political science.

Source: Bridgeman Images



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A *city-state*, or polis, was the dominant political structure of ancient Greece. Each city-state had an urban center, walls for protection, and controlled a piece of the surrounding countryside. There were over 1,000 city-states, and the largest ones were Athens, Sparta, Corinth, Thebes, Syracuse, and Rhodes. Each city-state ruled itself and had a different form of government. For example, Athens was a democracy while Sparta was ruled by two kings and a council of elders.

Being a part of the social sciences

Political science is a part of the social sciences. Social sciences study how people interact with each other, how they behave toward others, and how power is distributed and used within societies. Social sciences include anthropology, economics, criminology, political science, sociology, and psychology. The social sciences that political science heavily draws on contribute to political science in the following manner:

- » **Sociology:** The discipline of sociology studies human beings and how they interact. Sociology focuses on how small and large groups form and become large organizations, even nation-states. Political scientists use sociology to

explain the behavior of small groups, such as members of a parliament, and the creation of large groups, such as nation-states. In addition, studies are conducted on how people acquire and maintain power within groups.

- » **Economics:** The discipline of economics is important for the political scientist. Economics and politics often intersect. The political scientist uses economics to examine government programs such as social security or to discuss international trade agreements or even punitive sanctions.
- » **Anthropology:** Anthropology is the study of ancient and modern-day cultures. The discipline is useful for political scientists when conducting culture studies (see Chapter 3). Anthropology allows the political scientist to compare processes, norms, and institutions in different societies. For example, political scientists for decades have studied cultural aspects that maintain or destroy democracy in a nation-state. Also, as Chapter 12 shows, certain cultural traits can make societies more aggressive and warlike in the international arena. Anthropology helps find these cultures and hopefully change them to prevent global conflict.
- » **Psychology:** Psychology studies the way human beings think and behave within the national or international system. The political scientist can use psychology to analyze people, studying voting behavior in countries or examining the leading politicians in different countries to see how and why they make certain decisions.

All social sciences have impacted and still impact the discipline of political science. It's impossible to be a political scientist without having knowledge of the other social sciences.

Being fragmented

The discipline of political science itself isn't a cohesive discipline but actually is made up of various subfields, which in turn are broken down into more subfields. They are

- » **American politics:** The study of American politics involves studying American political institutions such as Congress or the presidency, as well as local or state governments. For example, the study of Texas politics falls into this category. Further, it includes the role of political parties and interest groups as well as the American electorate. Today, subfields within American politics have developed. They include public administration, which studies bureaucracies; public policy making; and the role of courts, which looks on the evolution of the constitution.

- » **Comparative politics:** Comparative politics studies other nations and cultures. It creates theories and frameworks that explain why and what happens and then identifies similar patterns and differences between political systems. Comparative Politics compares, for example, American culture to Swedish culture or looks at the voting behavior of Australians and compares it to U.S. voters. In addition, comparative politics studies various forms of governments (authoritarian, totalitarian, or democratic) and creates theories or concepts on the foundations for democracy (see Chapter 3).
- » **International relations:** International relations studies relationships between nation-states. It looks at international conflict, diplomacy, and international organizations and discusses issues such as human rights and terrorism. It also has two subfields: international political economy, which analyzes how economics and politics impact each other, and foreign policy studies, which looks at the interaction of countries with foreign nations.
- » **Political theory:** Political theory studies the great thinkers of the past and present. Most political scientists believe that the great Greek philosophers Aristotle and Plato set the foundation for political science. Political theory studies how and why people behave in a certain way politically and develops theories about the nature of people, the nature of liberty and freedom, ethics, and the role of the individual within a political system. It further includes studies on political ideologies, such as fascism, communism, and the various types of democracies.

Studying Political Power

Political science is the study of power. The discipline is enamored with the concept of power, namely how A gets B to do what A wants. Therefore, political science studies who holds power and how it's being used.



REMEMBER

Political power is the ability to get others to do what you want. It can take force or peaceful means, such as persuasion, to achieve this. Political power is exercised over people in many ways. In the U.S., for example, the federal government exercises political power over its population by forcing its citizens to pay taxes. Who would volunteer to pay taxes once a year unless the federal government had the power to force someone to pay up! Most important, this use of power of the U.S. government is considered rightful by its population. Therefore, the federal government possesses the legitimate use of power over its population.



REMEMBER

The term government describes the people and institutions that are responsible for making laws and policies in a country.

Exercising political power

In the U.S. and other federal societies, such as Germany, states or regions also exercise political power over their population. In the U.S., the states set speed limits on their roads, and in Germany, states have the power to set tax rates.

Finally, specific people, such as teachers, can also exercise political power. Whenever teachers assign homework, they're exercising political power over students. Students consider teachers to have authority and their use of power legitimate and therefore will do something, such as homework, they wouldn't normally do for fun. Authority refers to a general agreement that a person has the right to make certain decisions and that these decisions should be complied with.

Different thoughts on political power



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Both ancient and modern political scientists were concerned with how power is used in societies. The famous Greek philosophers Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle believed that political power should be held by the best educated in society and should be used for the good of society (for more on the ancient Greek philosophers, see Chapter 14).

Niccolo Machiavelli (see Chapter 15) disagreed in his seminal work *The Prince*. He argues that power is needed to maintain the security of the state both at home and internationally. His work focuses on how to acquire power and then use it for the good of the state. Fellow political philosopher Thomas Hobbes not only agrees but also claims that political power shouldn't be used for ethical governance but to prevent conflict both domestically and internationally.

The more modern theorists such as John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (see Chapter 15) argue differently. They believe that the people should exercise political power in a nation-state and need to be able to hold their leader accountable. For Locke, whose work became the foundation for the American political system, a contract exists between leaders and citizens on how to exercise political power. If leaders violate the contract, the people can remove them from their positions.

More recent thinkers such as John Rawls (see Chapter 19) have added the components of social justice and economic equality to their theories.

Views on who holds the power

One of the ongoing questions in political science is how can the researcher determine who holds power in a society. Over time, six different explanations were developed.

- » **Bureaucratic theory:** Bureaucratic theory assumes that bureaucracies in countries hold power and make the most important decisions for society. It's therefore not politicians nor other leaders but top-level bureaucrats who run a country. They work for the good of the country, not to amass wealth, and their policies are based on what's best for a country. When studying France or Japan, two countries with powerful bureaucracies, bureaucratic theory can be used to study political power.
- » **Pluralism:** Pluralism, as developed by James Madison (see Figure 1-2) in Federalist Paper Number 10, believes interest groups will be created as societies become more economically and socially complex. People will join together to push for their own interests and for government benefits. These interests can be economic, professional, ideological, environmental, or even religious. All these diverse groups will now compete for public benefits, ensuring that public policy will benefit not only a few people but a majority in the country. Political power is therefore held by interest groups, representing the people.



As soon as one group of citizens feel disadvantaged, they'll begin to organize and compete for benefits. Suddenly, many interest groups are competing for political benefits and hopefully balancing each other out overall. Pluralism assumes that everybody will get a little bit from policymakers, but nobody will get everything he asks for. This balance makes every interest group accept lawmakers' policy decisions without complaining or, more importantly, without taking action against policymakers.

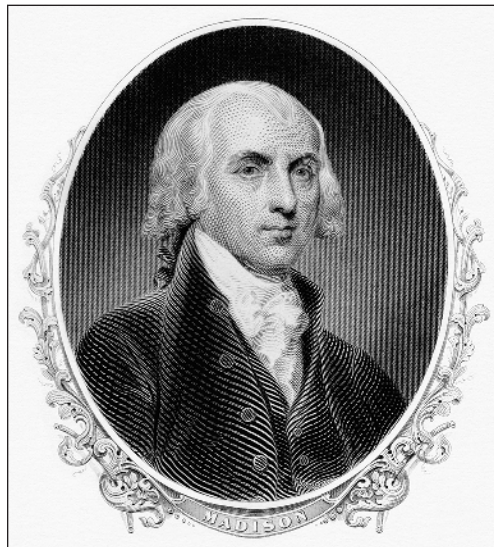


FIGURE 1-2: James Madison is the developer of pluralism.

Source: James Madison/Alamy Stock Photo

- » **Corporatism:** Corporatism also deals with interest groups. However, there are not tens of thousands as in the U.S., but a lot less. There may be only three. These groups are large and powerful and directly deal with the government when it comes to policy making. Therefore, a few but very powerful interest groups hold power in a society. The political scientist needs to study these to find out who holds power in a society. Examples of corporatist countries include Germany, Austria, and most of Scandinavia.
- » **Elite theory:** Elite theory, as created by the great Italian social scientists Vilfredo Pareto and Gaetano Mosca, states that every society has an elite that holds political power. That elite differs from society to society. In some societies, it's blood based, meaning you have to be born into it. A monarch with a ruling aristocracy comes to mind. In other places, wealth puts you into the elite. The more money you have, the more influential you'll be. This is often the case in capitalist countries like the U.S. or Great Britain. Another determinant of power is religion; Iran is governed by a religious elite. Membership in organizations such as an elite political party, for example, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, or the military can put someone in the elite. A military dictatorship such as found in Chile from 1973 until 1990 under General Pinochet is an example. In a nutshell, elite theory states that in every society an elite holds political power.
- » **Marxism:** A Marxist believes that whoever holds economic power also holds political power. In other words, control of the economy equals control of government. In a capitalist society, the economy is controlled by the upper and middle classes, and therefore they control government. In a feudal society, the king and his aristocracy control the economy and therefore government (for a detailed discussion of Marxism, see Chapter 17).

Checking on sources of political power

Two models explain where political power comes from. First is the percolation-up model. It assumes that power rests with the citizens of a country. The citizens in turn elect leaders and give them political power to run the country on their behalf. If the citizens are satisfied with their leaders, they can reelect them. On the other hand, if they're dissatisfied, they can replace them. An example is a representative democracy.

The second model assumes the exact opposite. It's called a drip-down model. Here, ultimate power doesn't rest with the citizens but with the leadership of a country. For example, in authoritarian and totalitarian systems, the leader has ultimate power and makes policy for the country. The citizens have no input and can't hold the leadership accountable. Historically, this type of power model was

the most widespread of the two. Examples include the monarchies of the past, totalitarian systems such as the Soviet Union, and more modern dictatorships such as Belarus or Iran.

Searching for Sources of Legitimacy

A successful government has to have its population recognize its legitimacy. If the population recognizes its government as legitimate, it will follow its leaders' decisions, and no force needs to be used when implementing policies. For example, if a police officer pulls you over for speeding, you recognize his powers of doing so. In other words, you see his use of power as legitimate and will abide by it. Governments can acquire legitimacy in various ways, as I discuss in the following sections.



REMEMBER

Legitimacy is the belief that the government's power over its population is rightful. This results in the exercise of power by a government without having to resort to force. A government that has a high level of legitimacy also has a high level of authority. Its citizens obey laws without having to be forced to.

Political structures

Certain political structures such as democracy can be helpful when it comes to legitimacy. If a government is chosen through democratic elections, it acquires legitimacy. The voters perceive this government to be based on popular will, and they're more likely to follow its lead.

Results

A second source of legitimacy are results. If a government is successfully providing its population with what it needs and desires, its legitimacy increases. For example, if a government is successful with its economic policies, providing its people with economic security, its legitimacy increases. The same will happen if a successful war is fought or the country is able to maintain security for its population. However, if a government fails to provide what people need or want, the population will turn against it. It will then lose legitimacy.

History

History matters when it comes to legitimacy. For example, if a regime has lasted for centuries, as the U.S. or the British governments have, the population is used to it, has a lot of pride in the system, and is more likely to find it legitimate.

Habit

Habit can make a difference when it comes to legitimacy. In any society, people will become socialized to find a government legitimate. The acquisition of political beliefs and values is referred to as political socialization and is usually accomplished by the family and parts of government, such as the educational structures (political socialization is discussed in more detail in Chapter 3). If children have been successfully socialized, they will abide by government rules because they believe that their government is legitimate. Later in life, they pass this habit on to their children. Governments that have been around for a long time have citizens who habitually consider it legitimate.

International recognition

International recognition makes a difference. If a government is recognized by the rest of the world, especially great powers such as the United States and China, as legitimate, its population is less likely to turn against it. Furthermore, legitimate governments can expect international aid in times of an economic or political crisis, which in turn will help maintain legitimacy among its people. For example, a loan by the International Monetary Fund (see Chapter 13) can help governments continue providing basic economic need to their populations. Only countries considered legitimate by the United Nations or other international organizations qualify for this kind of aid. In a nutshell, international legitimacy provides domestic legitimacy.

Religion

Religion can be a powerful source of legitimacy. If a government can tie its rule to a predominate religion, it automatically receives legitimacy. During the middle ages, most kings were absolute rulers, holding all political power in their countries. They tied their rule to religion, claiming that they had received the divine right to rule from God. God had installed them onto their throne, and any kind of insubordination or worse move against their authoritarian rule would be a move against God. Today, these types of regimes are rare. Iran is a good example where religion provides the government with legitimacy.

Nationalism

Finally, nationalism, defined as pride in one's country, can be a source of legitimacy. Often newly created states can receive legitimacy from a person or an event that unified the nation and instilled national pride into a population. A good example is the U.S. after the War of Independence against Great Britain. The country had been split on whether to wage a war of independence against British rule, and many colonists didn't believe in independence. The new country needed to become legitimate. The first president was war hero George Washington, and his name provided legitimacy to the newly established republic. While colonists may not have liked the new constitution or the leaders of Congress, they wanted to support General Washington. Many other prominent leaders, such as Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, followed, providing the country and its newly created institutions with legitimacy.

