

CHAPTER 1. UNDERSTANDING POLITICS

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

After reading this chapter you should be able to:

1. discuss the importance of politics
2. define the concepts of power, authority, and legitimacy
3. discuss whether seeking the common good is a meaningful goal of political life
4. explain the difference between the empirical and normative analysis of politics

MAJOR THEMES

This chapter provides a basic introduction to politics by discussing the importance and characteristics of politics and by explaining some key political concepts. As well, the chapter briefly discusses the discipline of political science and suggests that understanding politics is important and useful.

Politics is not only about government and politicians, but about the problems facing a community that may require controversial collective decisions. Analyzing what collective decisions are taken (or not taken) involves examining who has power and how power is distributed. There are, however, some quite different perspectives concerning the analysis and depiction of political power and its distribution.

Politics does not only involve the struggle for power, but also the search for the common good. Related to this, it is suggested that politics has a positive as well as a negative side, and that a key political problem is how to ensure that power and authority are used for the common good.

OUTLINE

WHY IS POLITICS IMPORTANT

BASIC CONCEPTS

Common Vocabulary of the Discipline

Politics

Power

Political Power

Authority and Legitimacy

The Common Good

WHAT IS POLITICAL SCIENCE?

Why Study Politics?

SAMPLE LECTURE OUTLINES

Lecture 1. Introduction and Basic Concepts

Why is politics important?

Politics

Power

Is power concentrated or widely dispersed in a democracy?

What are the three faces of power?

What are the pluralist and elitist perspectives on the distribution of power?

What are the positive and negative sides of power (i.e. free rider)?

Authority and Legitimacy

How is the legitimacy of governing authorities established and maintained?

What is the significance of legitimacy?

The common good

The meaning of the common good.

The individualist perspective and the common good.

How can the common good best be achieved?

What is a pluralist system?

What does “common good” mean/”

Whose “common good” (local, national, global)?

Lecture 2. Political Science

What is Political Science and how has it developed?

Empirical, normative, and policy analysis

Why study politics?

The importance of understanding politics

Usefulness in achieving one's career objectives

KEY TERMS

Authority (10)

Charismatic authority (11)

Common good (13)

Empirical analysis (17)

Legal–rational authority (11)

Legitimacy (10)

Normative analysis (17)

Political science (17)

Politics (3)

Power (4)

Traditional authority (11)

BOXES

Box 1-1. A Broader View of Politics

Box 1-2. People Power

Box 1-3. The Tragedy of the Commons

Box 1-4. The Development of Political Science

CONFUSING TERMS AND IDEAS

Many of the terms used in political science are contested and used in different ways by different people.

Politics should be thought of as broader than government. Often politics is defined in terms of activity related to the making of authoritative decisions. However, while this can be useful in distinguishing politics from other areas of social activity, it may be too limiting to think of politics only in terms of authoritative decisions. On the other hand, defining politics in terms of any relationship of power or any relationship involving conflict may be viewed as too broad. The authors suggest that politics be thought of in terms of influencing, making, or implementing collective decisions. However this should be qualified by noting that there is often considerable controversy concerning the matters on which there should be collective decisions, particularly if these are binding decisions that all are required to follow.

The term **power** can be confusing as the term **influence** is sometimes used as the general term covering situations where one actor is able to affect the actions of others, with the term power reserved particularly for those situations in which coercion is used to affect actions. This text treats power as the general term in which the behaviour of others is influenced, particularly to get them to do what they would not otherwise do. In this usage coercion, inducements, and persuasion are particular ways in which power is exerted. The discussion of the **three faces of power** indicates that there are very different views about how to observe and analyze power. In addition, while power is often thought of in terms of having power over others and thus associated with domination and exploitation, it is suggested that power can also have a more positive use in terms of achieving collective goals.

A careful distinction needs to be made between **authority** and **authoritarian political systems**. Students sometimes are also confused about **charismatic authority**, thinking that about charisma simply in terms of the physical attributes or popularity of a political figure.

Empirical analysis should not be thought of only in terms of the collection of facts or observations, but also the development and use of testable theories. **Political science** includes not only efforts to be "scientific" in the manner of chemistry or physics, but also includes important normative analyses.