

1. Chimpanzee Politics and Legitimate Violence: A Brief Introduction to Politics and States

The American federal government is merely one government out of a vast number of governments at national, local, and intermediate levels, a single case study rather than a model of what government in general looks like. And governments in general are just case studies in politics, which is a more extensive concept than government, and encompasses behavior that is older than humanity. So to properly understand the American federal government (and the overall American political system) we need to start with some understanding of politics and government, along with some related political concepts.

1. POLITICS: WHO GETS WHAT, WHEN, AND HOW

Political Scientists have given us numerous definitions of politics, which may indicate that we're not exactly sure what it is we're studying. These three are, I believe, the most well-known.

1. Politics is "the authoritative allocation of values for the society" (David Easton).¹
2. "[T]he essence of politics lies in power. . . of relationships of superordination, or dominance and submission, of the governors and the governed" (V.O. Key).²
3. "The study of politics is the study of influence and the influential. . . Politics [is] who gets what, when, and, how" (Harold Lasswell)."³

Although they use different words, these definitions all have a common focal point: politics is about who determines the outcomes: who allocates values; who governs; who dominates whom; who gets what, when, and how.

For the purposes of this book, Lasswell's definition – "politics is who gets what, when, and how" – will be the dominant theme. The value of this definition is that it is broad. It covers both the authority and domination suggested by Easton and Key as well as voluntary collaborative efforts, where some individuals may have more influence in directing a group's combined efforts but do not force others to submit. In short, Lasswell's definition covers both political coercion and political cooperation. Just as

importantly, it is not limited to activity in what we normally call politics; i.e., voting and government, but covers the broad range of political behavior of which voting and government are just a subset.

Although our case study in this book is the American federal government, a good foundation in political science requires understanding that politics is not just about government, but applies to the whole range of human

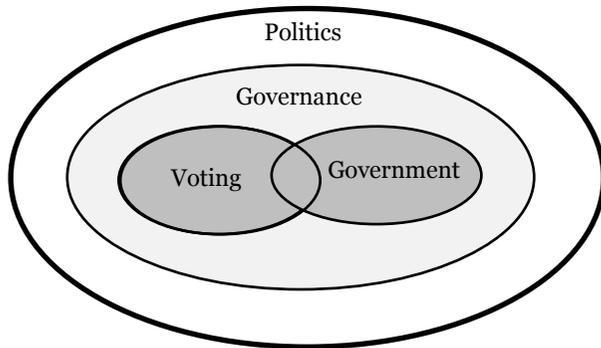


Figure 1: Politics, Governance, Government, and Voting

activities that determine who gets what, when they get it, and how they get it. Politics is far older than government. Humans (*homo sapiens*) appeared about 200,000 years ago, and modern humans (*homo sapiens sapiens*, the only remaining subspecies of *homo sapiens*) developed about 10,000 years ago, while formal governments did not develop until around 5,000 years ago. From their first origin humans were social animals, who “worked to shape and direct collective affairs independent of formal government,⁴ and we still do today, in office politics, dorm room politics, the politics of influence within social groups, and so on. Students even play political games with their professor, trying to influence them to change the rules or make exemptions, for later due dates, to get more information about what will be on tests, and so on. Professors play politics in choosing how to respond to these efforts, and some are good at getting what they want while others are less effective politicians and let the students get what they want. Professors complain about it, but students are just doing what comes naturally to humans – politics is in our nature.

Conflict

Cynics may focus on politics as a winner-take-all game, a situation of irreconcilable conflict where anything goes and nobody can be trusted. Optimists may focus on politics as a collaborative effort by which we make mutual gains, shared among us all. Both are half right, but deeply wrong because focusing on just one aspect of politics causes us to badly misunderstand it.

Conflict occurs when two or more people or groups have incompatible wants. They could each desire the same thing (two children who want the same toy; two countries that want the same territory), or they could desire different things that can't both be achieved at the same time (one spouse wants to go to the mountains for vacation while the other wants to go on a cruise; Congress wants to cut defense spending while the President wants to increase it).

Conflict can involve dominance and submission, as suggested by Key's definition of politics, but nicer ways of resolving conflict are possible. The married couple could flip a coin to see where they go for vacation, or agree that each gets to choose a destination in alternating years. There have even been elections decided by a coin toss, after voters cast an equal number of votes for the top two candidates, a fairer and more peaceful way of determining the winner than resorting to murder, which is another way electoral conflicts are sometimes resolved. As Nobel prize winning political scientist Elinor Ostrom said, "Conflict isn't necessarily bad; it's just how we articulate our differences."⁵ It is the *means* by which we resolve conflict that may be bad, not the mere existence of conflicting interests. We can resolve conflict conflictually, or we can choose to resolve conflict cooperatively. The choice of means by which we resolve conflict is, of course, also political, as that choice is the "how" in determining who gets what, when, and how.

Application

Two students sharing a dorm room have different preferences about warmth. Abbie likes to keep the room cool and have a window open for fresh air, but Brittany likes to close the window and turn up the heat.

1. How is this a political problem?
2. Think of at least three solutions, choosing a combination of solutions involving cooperative efforts and solutions involving dominance.

Collective Action

Collective action occurs when we work together to achieve a common goal. But collective action is often difficult, and the difficulties are of two general types: 1) coordination problems, and 2) what political scientists specifically call collective action problems.

Coordination Problems

Coordination problems occur when we want something that we can't achieve on our own, so we have to get help from others to achieve it. This could involve searching for others who share our goal, which will be easy in some cases, but difficult in others. Or it could involve persuading others that they ought to share the same goal, which, again, will be easy in some cases, but in others impossible. Whatever it is we're trying to do, the more people we need to get involved, the harder it is to organize them.

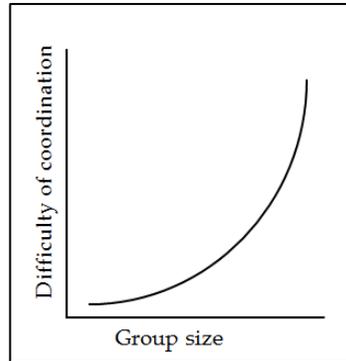


Figure 2: Group Size and Coordination Difficulty

Imagine a person living on a dirt road, who wants to have the road paved. It could be too expensive to do on her own, so she wants others to help pay for it. First she has to find out if any of her neighbors also want the road to be paved. They may have been thinking about it, too, but never said anything, or they may never have thought about it but are persuaded that it's a good idea. She doesn't have to persuade everyone, just enough to get the job done.

Most likely, she will not be able to persuade all her neighbors, at least if there are very many of them. Often people simply don't want the same thing. Some of her neighbors may prefer a dirt road because they think that a paved road will be more costly to maintain, or might draw more through-traffic through their neighborhood. But also just having a large number of people who have a stake in the project (*stakeholders*) can make the job of coordinating more difficult. As a general rule, the larger the number of people, the greater the difficulties in coordination, a point made by Scottish philosopher David Hume almost three hundred years ago;

Two neighbours may agree to drain a meadow, which they possess in common; because 'tis easy for them to know each other's mind; and each must perceive, that the immediate

consequence of his failing in his part, is, the abandoning the whole project. But 'tis very difficult, and indeed impossible, that a thousand persons shou'd agree in any such action; it being difficult for them to concert so complicated a design, and still more difficult for them to execute it;⁶

Coordination problems are political problems, as the success or failure to solve them affects who gets what and when, but they can be solved in a variety of ways. As Hume's example indicates, in small enough groups they may be solved by bringing everyone affected to an understanding of what they need to do, an approach we can call self-governance (as distinguished from government). Markets also can resolve some coordination problems. For example, simply to make a pencil requires the coordination of timber cutters, miners of metal, lead, and clay, paint makers, equipment manufacturers, and people to transport all those raw materials and the finished product.⁷ Here we have far more than Hume's "thousand persons," but the market coordinates their efforts so successfully that pencils are both plentiful and inexpensive. In those situations the coordination problem is resolved voluntarily, without coercing anyone. In other situations they may require the coercive power of government that we discuss later in this chapter.

Collective Action Problems

Collective action problems are a special subset of coordination problems, and they exist because people like to get things for free, or more precisely (because everything has a cost, to somebody) they like to have others pay for what they get. It's not enough just to get everyone to agree that paving the road, or draining the meadow, or fighting a revolutionary war are things they want; we also have to get enough people to actually contribute the money or effort it takes to accomplish our goal.

Two conditions create collective action problems. 1) There is a *collective benefit*, one that everyone in the group will share if it is achieved; and 2) it doesn't take everyone's effort to achieve that benefit. This means that even those who don't participate in the effort still get the benefit. Political scientists call these people *free riders*. But the collective action problem is not just that some people get the benefit without paying for it. The real problem is that if we have too many people trying to free ride on each other's' efforts then we don't have enough people contributing to the effort and nobody gets the benefit. The desire to get something at everyone else's expense

doesn't work if too many people are trying to do it.

Some people find free riding morally outrageous, but even so it is a very rational behavior. This rationality works in two ways. 1) When enough other people are contributing then our effort is not needed. Each of us is better off getting something at no cost to ourselves. For example, an American economist told the story of a guy knocking on his door and offering to repaint the faded street address on the curb. The economist looked out, saw that the neighbors on each side were having theirs repainted, and said, "No, thank you." If enough other people painted their numbers on the curb, people could find his house whether or not his house number was visible. 2) When too few other people are contributing then our effort would be wasted; we would have contributed something and gained nothing. The World War II novel, *Catch-22*, provides a classic example of this. The main character, an American pilot, doesn't want to risk his life by flying any more missions, and when his commander asks, "What if everyone thought that way?" he replies, "Then I'd certainly be a damn fool to feel any other way, wouldn't I?"⁸

Collective action problems are endemic in collaborative efforts among humans, so common and problematic that Elinor Ostrom suggested that "the theory of collective action is *the* central subject of political science."⁹ Any student who has been forced to participate in a group project where every member of the group receives the same grade is intuitively familiar with the problem. Most group projects have at least one free rider who tries to do as little work as they can get away with, hoping others will pick up their slack. Leaders of student organizations will also recognize their frustrations at getting enough members to participate as an example of a collective action problem. Efforts to reduce global carbon emissions are a bigger example — even if every country agreed on the necessity, each would prefer that the others make the effort. In fact most environmental problems are a form of collective action problem: we don't need to have absolutely no effect on the environment, and in fact could not achieve that, but it's often costly to avoid environmental degradation and often we prefer that others bear the cost.

As with the basic coordination problem, there are a variety of ways to resolve collective action problems. Small, tight-knit, communities can often resolve them through self-governance, by carefully monitoring and publicly criticizing those who don't take on their share of the cost or workload. Markets can sometimes resolve them, by privatizing the resource and

internalizing the costs and benefits to a single owner. And of course governments can use their power to coerce people into contributing their share of the effort, whether that means digging a ditch, fighting in war, or refraining from polluting.

Politics in the Animal Kingdom: We Are Not Alone

Political scientists don't think of themselves as biologists, even though we are studying an animal species, so we don't study other species often enough. But we should, because when we look at our closest living relatives, the other great apes, we find behaviors that match our definitions of politics. Chimpanzees provide an instructive example. They share over 98% of their DNA with humans and we share a common ancestor, great-great grandparents from about six to seven million years ago, and like us they are social animals who live in groups. Biologist Frans de Waal tells an epic story of a battle for dominance and submission between three adult chimpanzees in his book *Chimpanzee Politics*. The main characters are Yeroen (the dominant male and the oldest), Nikkie (younger and stronger than Yeroen), and Luit (also younger, and the strongest of the three).

Luit decided to challenge Yeroen's dominance. In the popular conception of chimpanzees, this should have been just a *mano a mano* contest, where Luit's superior strength would make him victorious. But like humans, chimpanzees are not that simple. The other adult chimpanzees, all females, liked Yeroen and joined him when he was attacked, presenting Luit with a united front that was much stronger than he was. Thus Luit lost his initial bid for dominance. He responded by shifting tactics. Instead of attacking Yeroen directly, Luit attacked the females individually when they were friendly with Yeroen. Sometimes he would run by and slap them hard, and other times he would punish them afterwards when they were alone. Eventually he only needed to stand nearby and put on a threatening display to persuade them to get up and walk away from Yeroen. This classic divide-and-conquer strategy worked. The next time Luit attacked Yeroen, the females were afraid to support the older male, and Luit easily dominated him.

Yeroen had won the first round and lost the second, but the game wasn't over. In the third round he enlisted the support of Nikkie. Although neither Yeroen nor Nikkie was strong enough to take on Luit single-handedly, together they were more than a match from him. Nikkie's price for helping

to defeat Luit was to become the top chimp. Yeroen would have to subordinate himself. This would seem to still be a loss for Yeroen, so not worthwhile, but remember that both Nikkie and Luit were stronger than him. When Yeroen lost the top position to Luit he didn't fall to second place; he fell to third. By helping Nikkie he limited his losses by holding on to second place in the male power hierarchy. But even more, he had leverage because Nikkie needed his support to remain dominant (unlike Luit, who didn't need his help). Therefore Yeroen could demand concessions from Nikkie – tolerant treatment and reestablishment of his friendly relations with female chimps – as the price of that support. No longer able to be king, Yeroen became the king-maker.

De Waal compared Yeroen's behavior to the ancient Greeks.

Ever since Thucydides wrote about the Peloponnesian War...it has been known that nations tend to seek allies against nations perceived as a common threat.¹⁰

Yeroen's strategy is also suggested by Machiavelli, in *The Prince*, when he argues for the strategy of choosing a side in a closely contested fight, because if the victor could not have won without your help, he "remains at your discretion."¹¹

But politics is not just about conflict, nor is it just about dominance and submission. It is also about collective action, as emphasized by Elinor Ostrom, and working together collaboratively is a "how" in Lasswell's definition of politics as "who gets what, when, and how." De Waal demonstrated that chimpanzees also face and resolve that type of political problem, using an example of chimps sharing a desired food, tree leaves

The males use long branches to climb up into the live trees which are protected by electric fencing... the male carries the branch down to the ground and sets it up as a 'ladder,' usually in close cooperation with the other males and sometimes the females. The ape in the tree breaks off far more than he needs, and this falls down among the waiting group. Sometimes the process of sharing is selective. Once when Dandy held the branch steady so that Nikkie could climb into the tree he later received half the leaves Nikkie had collected. This appeared to be a direct payment for the services rendered.¹²

Additionally, even for the top male their position of authority is not

always just about dominance, but could also be about resolving conflicts and ensuring group stability. De Waal shows that dominant chimps played a crucial role in resolving conflicts among other members of the group, and often did so impartially, rather than playing favorites.¹³ Once when the zookeepers gave the chimpanzees a bundle of leaves Yeroen rushed to the prize, causing the others to hang back. But in a few minutes Yeroen had distributed the leaves among the whole group. This minimized the conflict between other group members and helped earn their continued support.¹⁴

Is the chimp's behavior really politics? De Waal thinks so, and notice which definition he uses.

If we follow Harold Lasswell's famous definition of politics as a social process determining "who gets what, when, and how," there can be little doubt that chimpanzees engage in it.¹⁵

So why talk about chimpanzees in a book about American government? Because the American government is just one case study in politics, and in addition to understanding it better the principles of politics that you learn in this book should enhance your ability to analyze any examples of politics.

2. STATES AND THE METHOD OF VIOLENCE

One way of describing political science is that it is the study of how we resolve political problems through governance. Governance does not always require formal institutions of government. Political Scientist Elinor Ostrom was awarded the Nobel Prize in Economics for her study of self-governance in communities that were managing common pool resources. Common pool resources are ones where one person's use diminishes another person's use, but it is hard to limit people's access to them. An example is a meadow where farmers can graze their cattle. The grass eaten by one cow is not available to any other cows. As long as we don't put too many cows in the meadow, they can all get fat and produce lots of milk and calves, a sustainable model generation after generation. If I put an extra cow on the meadow, it won't cause other cows to starve, even if they don't get quite as much grass, and the same if you put an extra one out there. But if everyone adds extra cows, then the meadow is overgrazed and our cattle starve. Ostrom and her colleagues demonstrated that small communities (remember what we learned about group size, earlier in this chapter) could successfully manage these commons across many generations without

formal government. In Switzerland, for example, there are communal grazing meadows that have been managed collectively by farmers for over four hundred years.¹⁶

But this type of self-governance is not easy, so humans often turn to formal institutions of government. By formal institutions we mean that certain people are given (or successfully claim) authority to make certain decisions, while other people are given authority to make people obey those decisions, using force if necessary. A key distinction of formal government is that these authorities are vested in “offices,” rather than directly in the individuals who wield these authorities. The person has the authority only as long as they hold the office.

This government is the operative element of what political scientists call “the state.” The classic definition of the state was proposed in the early 20th century by the German scholar Max Weber:

[A] state is a human community that (successfully) claims *the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force* within a given territory.¹⁷

Notice two elements of this definition. First, a state is a community of people located within a given territory (you can’t have a state without people or without territory). Second, the state has an “intimate” relationship with violence (as Weber describes it). Violence is the foundation and distinguishing characteristic of every state – even democracies – because states defined not by *what* they do, but *how* they do it. As Weber explains:

[T]he state cannot be defined in terms of its ends. . . . [T]here is no task that one could say has always been exclusive and peculiar to . . . the state. . . . Ultimately, one can define the modern state sociologically only in terms of the specific *means* peculiar to it, as to every political association, namely, the use of physical force.¹⁸

Violence is not the only means that states use, but behind every action of the state is the latent threat of violence to force compliance.

The violence of the state is of a special type: *legitimate* violence. Anyone can use violence, but the magical trick of the state is to make its violence legitimate in ways that individual violence presumably cannot be. This does not mean all violence by the state is legitimate. If the President of the United States was to order the police to round up and imprison citizens who voted

against him we would say that use of force was illegitimate. But under this theory *only* the state's use of force can be legitimate. So how do we distinguish between legitimate state violence and illegitimate state violence? The answer lies in the particular rules that constitute any particular state (its constitution, which may be written or unwritten). If the violence is exercised within the bounds of those rules, it is generally considered legitimate. But no state always confines itself only to legitimate violence. More precisely, the government of the state is made up of individuals, and inevitably some of those individuals, in seeking their political ends, will employ violence outside the bounds of the rules. As we will see later, this is the reason we have created judicial systems, to try to limit and constrain state actors who use violence illegitimately.

Factual Questions

1. According to Harold Laswell, what is politics?
2. Is politics just about voting, elections, and government?
3. According to this chapter, is politics just a human activity?
4. What makes coordination difficult?
5. What is a collective action problem?
6. What did Elinor Ostrom say is "the central subject of political science"?
7. According to Max Weber, what is the state?
8. According to Weber are states defined by what they do (their ends) or how they do it (their means)?
9. According to Weber, all states are based on what?
10. Do states limit their use of violence to legitimate purposes?

Conceptual Questions

- A. Consider the definitions of politics given in this chapter. Which do you think is the best definition and why?
- B. Are you persuaded that politics occurs among non-human animals, or do you think what they do is something different? What are the reasons you believe that?
- C. Do you agree that all states, even democratic ones, are ultimately based on the use or threat of violence? Why or why not?

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