

1.2 What Is Politics?

What Am I Supposed to Get Out of Reading this Chapter?

Politics has multiple competing definitions. Here we use the broadest of those definitions to help us see three broad categories of political problems—conflict, coordination, and collective action problems—and to recognize that politics is an activity that is not solely confined to the human species.

1. WHAT IS POLITICS?

Political Scientists have given us numerous definitions of politics. which may suggest we're not exactly sure what it is we're studying. Below I present several definitions of politics, and argue for using the broadest, most far-reaching, of those definitions. The broader understanding of politics helps us recognize the two broad categories of political problems - conflict and collective action, to recognize that politics is an activity that is not solely confined to the human species.

Here are four definitions from eminent political scientists:

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. “[P]olitics is the process through which individuals and groups reach agreement on a course of common, or collective, action—even as they disagree on the intended goals of that action” (Samuel Kernell, et. al).³
4. “The study of politics is the study of influence and the influential” (or, as the title of the book has it, “Politics [is] who gets what, when, and, how” (Harold Lasswell).”⁴

Before continuing on, take some time to think about each of these definitions, compare them, and decide for yourself which one you think is best. I know you're not an expert, and that's ok; what matters is that you actually think, and try to decide why you like some definitions more than others.

Here is my brief analysis of the competing definitions.

1. Politics is “the authoritative allocation of values for a society” (Easton).

The problem here is that not all politics is about authoritative distribution of values. For political scientists, “authority” indicates being the legitimate decision-maker, and we distinguish “power” as being the effective decision-maker. Sometimes power and authority go together, but sometimes people have power without authority, and sometimes people have authority, at least on the organizational chart, but lack power. So I would argue that politics is about power more than authority.

2. “[T]he essence of politics lies in power...of relationships of superordination, or dominance and submission, of the governors and the governed” (Key).

Now we're talking about power, but not all politics is about government, or about those in charge and those who must follow. This definition emphasizes control over people, which is certainly an important part of politics, but it seems to exclude more collaborative efforts between people.

3. “[P]olitics is the process through which individuals and groups reach agreement on a course of common, or collective, action—even as they disagree on the intended goals of that action” (Kernell, et. al).

This definition seems to have the opposite problem from Key's definition. Now collaborative efforts are included, but power relationships of dominance and submission are excluded. They don't appear to be looking at the same types of activities, even though they really are.

4. “The study of politics is the study of influence and the influential” (or, as the title of the book has it, “Politics [is] who gets what, when, and, how” (Lasswell).”

The strength of this definition is that in its vagueness it is inclusive of all the others. It does not limit politics to having power over others, nor does it romanticize politics by focusing on how we work together collaboratively. It accounts both for formal authority and for power exercised effectively even by those who do not have formal (official) authority. It encompasses power relationships between the dominant and the submissive and between the governing and the governed, as well as incorporating collaborative efforts that do not involve domination of one person by another.

Most importantly, Lasswell's definition reminds us that politics is not the same as government, elections, legislation, or law. Those are political things, but politics as a whole is much larger than them.

A particular strength of Lasswell's definition is that (like Kernell's) it does not emphasize

government, because politics is a broader category than government. All government involves politics, but not all politics involves government.

Since the dawn of social life, humans beings have worked to shape and direct collective affairs independent of formal government...[P]olitics takes place in the home, office, and marketplace, as well as in the halls of Congress and parliaments. Politics, in this sense, is much more subtle to notice than the conduct of governments, but...no less significant for political affairs⁵

When you and a roommate coordinate to resolve problems, or directly conflict about them, you are practicing politics. When you and a sibling are arguing over the rules of a game you are involved in a political activity. When employees try to impress the boss and outperform their colleagues so they can get the corner office, they're playing office politics. When members of a church vote on who will be members of the church board, and delegate certain authorities to them, they are engaging in politics.

But here is the most important point to consider when thinking about my argument for using Lasswell's definition: You don't have to agree with me! All you have to do is think enough about the different definitions that you can discuss them intelligently.

2. CONFLICT AND COLLECTIVE ACTION

Cynics may focus on politics as a winner-take-all game, irreconcilable conflict where anything goes and no-one 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.

2a. Conflict:

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; two wolves both want to eat from the same carcass) or they could desire different things that can't both be achieved at the same time (one roommate wants to keep the room warm and the other likes it cool; multiple states that each want to have their presidential primary election before the other states do; a Congress that wants to increase defense spending while the President wants to decrease it).

Conflict can involve dominance and submission, as suggested by Key's definition of politics, but nicer ways of resolving conflict are possible. The roommate who likes it warm could wait for the cold-loving roommate to open the window again and then throw him out of it, or he could suggest they play rock-paper-scissors, or agree to a schedule of alternating open-

window and closed-window days. There have even been elections decided by a coin toss, after voters cast an equal number of votes for the top two candidates, a more fair 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.”⁶ It is the *means* by which we resolve conflict that may be bad, not the mere existence of conflicting interests.

2b. Collective Action

Collective action occurs when we work together, as emphasized by Kernell’s definition. But collective action is often difficult, and the difficulties are of two general types: coordination problems and 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.

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 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;⁷

This is one of the reasons hunter-gatherers live in small groups. Larger groups are more difficult to coordinate, and generally the means to coordinate large groups were not developed until the development of agriculture, which produced larger and more settled populations, leading to the development of governments.

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 building a public swimming pool 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. The second condition means we can achieve the benefit even if not everybody contributes (as long as enough of them contribute), while the first condition means that even those free loaders—or as political scientists call them, *free riders*, will still enjoy the benefit. But collective action problems are not problems just because 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—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 so that the benefit is achieved, and 2) when too few people contribute. For the first, each of us is better off getting something at no cost to ourselves than having to pay for it (which is why we like receiving gifts). 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.

From the second direction, if too few people are contributing, my contribution probably won't help achieve the benefit anyway, and I'll have paid a price for no gain. The World War

Il 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. 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. 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. The frequency of these problems led Elinor Ostrom to suggest that "the theory of collective action is *the* central subject of political science."⁹ Not surprisingly, then, the theory of collective action is one of the central issues in understanding American government and politics, as we will see throughout this text.

2c. Mixed Conflict and Cooperation

Although we can distinguish between conflict and collective action, many political situations involve a mixture of the two. As Kernell's definition of politics suggests, sometimes we work together on a course of action even when we disagree on just what goals we're seeking with that action. Legislators might work together on legislation, working hard to create a bill that will get enough votes to become law, but along the way they may be in conflict not only about specific details of the bill but also about exactly what they want the law to achieve. As well, sometimes we can collaborate for the purpose of being more effective in conflict, like the U.S, Britain and other allies in World War II. And coordination can be a means of resolving conflict, as when roommates negotiate a set of mutually agreeable rules to help them avoid fighting over issues.

3. POLITICS; IT'S NOT JUST FOR HUMANS

1(B): Politics Is Not Just about Government; It's Not Even Just about Humans.

Politics is much older than government. Homo sapiens came into being between 100,000 and 200,000 years ago, but formal governments appear to have arisen only after humans developed agriculture, sometime in the last ten thousand years. The American scientist Jared Diamond argues that agriculture may have been the direct cause of formal government, because agriculture created food surpluses, and government became a means of controlling the distribution of those surpluses. (Take a moment to think about how all the definitions of politics apply to that.) Before the development of agriculture, hunter-gathers lived in social groups of around 30-150 people,¹⁰ making it inevitable that they had to engage in defining

who could be members of their group and what rules members had to follow. It also means conflict was inevitable, whether within groups or between groups. Skeletons older than the earliest governments have been found with arrows lodged in them—the ultimate demonstration of dominance.

But political scientists aren't biologists, so we don't look at other species often enough. 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, because we have a common ancestor, great-great grandparents from about six to seven million years ago, and like us they are social animals, living 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).

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, and defeating his initial bid for dominance. Luit responded by not attacking Yeroen directly, but attacking females individually, punishing them when they would sit with Yeroen or groom him. Sometimes he would run by and slap them hard, and other times he would punish them afterwards when they were alone. Sometimes 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.

That is an interesting story, but it takes another twist because of the third contender for power, the other young male Nikkie. Nikkie was not as strong as Luit, so he couldn't attack him one one one. And Luit had repaired his relationships with the adult females, who disliked Nikkie, so Nikkie could not get support from them. But Nikkie and Yeroen together were superior to Luit, and the females still like Yeroen enough that they would not intervene between him and Luit.

But why should Yeroen help Nikkie? Because he had fallen from first to third (being weaker than either of the other males), and by supporting Nikkie, he moved back up to second. And because Nikkie required his support to remain dominant, Yeroen could demand tolerant treatment from Nikkie by threatening to throw his support to Luit instead. No longer able to be king, Yeroen became the king-maker.

De Waal explained the chimps' behavior in explicitly political terms.

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.¹¹

But politics is not just about conflict, not just about the dominance and submission indicated by V. O. Key's definition. It is also about "the process through which individuals and groups reach agreement on a course of common, or collective, action," as suggested by Kernell. De Waal gives an example that demonstrates collaborative effort and foresight among chimpanzees.

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 dominance is not just about dominance. De Waal notes that dominant chimps played a crucial role in resolving conflicts among other members of the group—the best were impartial.¹³ In another case he recounts a time when zookeepers gave the chimpanzees a bundle of tasty leaves. The dominant chimp (Yeroen) rush toward the leaves, causing the others to hang back. But in a few minutes Yeroen had distributed the leaves among the whole group, because his authority to be the distributor was more important to him than the snack—by demonstrating generosity he earned the continued support of the other chimps.¹⁴ Is this 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

Why talk about chimpanzees in a book about American Government? Because American Government is just one case study in politics. The principles of politics that you learn in this book should enhance your ability to analyze any other instances of political action, as well as teaching you how those principles function in the American political system. Also, the chimpanzees reveal the an important message in the "who gets what, when and how" definition of politics—politics involves both conflict and collective action.

Questions to Think About

1. Which of the definitions of politics do you find most useful to your thoughts about the subject? Is Lasswell's definition of politics too broad? Why or why not? Can you think of

examples of how the governments, including the American government, act in ways that fit Lasswell's definition? Can you think of examples of how they act that *do not* fit his definition?

2. What are some contemporary political issues that are conflict problems?
3. What are some contemporary political issues that are coordination problems?
4. Have you ever been involved with something that was a collective action problem (remember to review the two conditions that make a collective action problem)? If so was the problem ever resolved so that everyone received the benefit? If so, how?
5. In a subsequent chapter we will consider how the American Revolution involved conflict, coordination and collective action problems; can you figure out some of the ways in which that was the case?

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¹¹ de Waal, Frans. 2007. *Chimpanzee Politics: Power and Politics Among the Apes*, 25th Anniversary Edition. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press pp. 180-81.

¹² de Waal. p.198

¹³ de Waal. p.190

¹⁴ de Waal. p.197.

¹⁵ de Waal. p.ix.