CHAPTER ONE

What is Politics?

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

This initial chapter introduces and defines politics and applies it to America's government. The concepts of power, elites, legitimacy, and authority are discussed. Democratic politics chooses conciliation rather than violence to maintain order and adapt to change. The need for government as a means of controlling conflict, making rules determining who gets the valued things of society, and regulating the use of legitimate force is explored. Political science is then distinguished from the other social sciences, such as economics or history, by looking at studies of Microsoft as an arena for the different approaches.

The FAA's failure to regulate a door problem on the DC-10 illustrates how politics can be a life and death matter. The chapter concludes with the author explaining the organization of subsequent chapters and the reasons why we should all 'give a damn' about the political "game."

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading chapter 1, the student should be able to:

1. Define "politics" and explain why it is so important in American society.
2. Explain the significance of power, authority, and political elites. Also, explain why U.S. power was limited regarding Saddam Hussein.

3. Summarize the reasons why government is necessary and what functions it performs.

4. Understand how democratic politics differs from rival approaches.

5. Distinguish what political science studies compared to other disciplines—history, economics, or psychology.

6. Appreciate the serious and complex nature of the "political game."

OUTLINE

I. What is Politics? -- The First Day of Class
   A. Classroom example. A very familiar illustration of how people get and use influence.

II. Politics and Power
   A. Power Defined. Power is the ability to influence another's behavior. A distinction is made between the capacity for power (e.g., a large military) and the ability to apply it (e.g., the American problem with Saddam Hussein in Iraq). Power is generally a means to other ends; a method to acquire values, such as wealth.

   B. Elites—Groups that wield power. The elite is defined as those who have most of the resources (both material and nonmaterial) society values. The unequal distribution of wealth in America is used as an example and is supported with statistics. Elites may differ according to the value considered (wealth, respect), but generally possession of one value leads to control of others.
C. Authority: Legitimate Power. Authority is defined as legitimate power—it is not only legal, but also produces psychological and moral obligations. People feel they should obey an authority, thereby minimizing the need for force and making authority an efficient form of power. See “Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner.”

III. The Need for Government

A. Why Government? Government is necessary to settle inevitable conflicts over the distribution of valued things. Government itself becomes a potential threat, and its enormous power must be controlled. The American system of constitutional government recognizes this need to limit government.

B. What is Government? Government does three things:
   1. It makes the rules determining who gets the things valued by society. This may mean: the theoretical noninterference of the Constitution in the private economy; or the actual use of government power to limit the private distribution of wealth by such devices as income taxes and welfare; or the direct intervention in disputes among citizens.
   2. Representative democracy allows people to effectively participate in governing through elected representatives. An essential part of democracy is a tolerance of differing opinions and interests, and seeking compromises among competing demands.
   3. Government alone regulates the use of legitimate force, by employing, allowing, or preventing it. Government does not monopolize the use of legitimate force, but it alone sets limits to its use.

IV. The Study of Politics

A. Political Science as a Discipline. Politics is grouped with the other social sciences as the study of interactions among people,
but it is distinguished by its primary interest in the concepts of power and authority. A case study of the "society" of Microsoft is used to illustrate these differences.

B. Political Science and Microsoft. An economist, psychologist, and historian would all ask different questions about the giant computer software giant Microsoft (questions could overlap). The political scientist would focus on the central question--who is getting what, when, and how?

C. Why Give a Damn About Politics? Apathy is also a political position because it affects who gets what, and when and how. A tragic air accident with personal consequences, attributed to the negligence of a government agency, illustrates the effects of political decisions. Also, see “Who Needs Government.”

V. What is This Book About?

A brief outline of the chapters is given and the analogy with a game is discussed. Politics is a game in form, but not in intent. It is deadly serious, played for high and varied stakes, and is highly complex, involving several overlapping games in which various groups contend for power to gain their values and protect their interests.

KEY CHAPTER TERMS AND IDENTIFICATIONS

- politics
- "who gets what, when, and how"
- power
- authority as "legitimate power"
- a "capacity for power"
- political elites
- anarchy
- political conflict
- democracy
representative democracy
government
values
legitimate force
social sciences
Microsoft
Iraq’s Saddam Hussein
The U.S. Supreme Court and the 2000 election
The FAA, McDonnell Douglas, and the DC-10
income distribution in America

TEACHING SUGGESTIONS

1. Discuss how a political scientist might outline a study of the operations of a large university. What decisions would he/she examine? What would be some of the objectives of the study? How would it differ from other disciplines’ approaches?

2. Ask the class to speculate on whether "pure democracy" would work in America. Imagine if Americans had a device attached to their TV sets and could key in a "Yes" or "No" response to polls on an issue posed by local or national leaders. Would this be a good idea or not? Discuss.

SUGGESTED RESEARCH ASSIGNMENTS

1. Which elites in your community wield the greatest power? Looking at a recent local decision--zoning, education, or regulation--examine who contacted local decision makers and what influenced the policy outcome.

2. It may be interesting to have students write a short paper explaining how they and/or their families have been affected by government agencies at the local, state, or federal levels. How did they react?
Include whether these "government contacts" were positive or negative.

MULTIPLE-CHOICE QUESTIONS

1. The author defines politics as
   a. relationships among people involving power and authority.
   b. a process of who gets what, when and how.
   c. the distribution of a society’s wealth.
   d. all of the above

2. Power involves __________ between people.
   a. friendship
   b. shared property
   c. government
   d. a relationship

3. The elites in a society
   a. are the people who get a large part of the society’s valued resources.
   b. comprise the majority of the population.
   c. are all college educated.
   d. occupy government positions.

4. Why does the author assert that authority is "an efficient form of power"?
   a. authority is distributed equally among political elites
   b. authority is backed by legal norms
   c. authority, once accepted, is less costly than force
   d. none of the above is correct
5. Anarchy is best defined as
   a. unlimited democracy.
   b. elected representatives run the government.
   c. rule by an elite.
   d. lack of government.

6. A government
   a. makes rules to determine who will get the valued things in society.
   b. is always democratic.
   c. is rarely coercive.
   d. protects the wealthy.

7. The study of “influence and the influential” most clearly falls under the social science of
   a. history.
   b. economics.
   c. sociology.
   d. political science.

8. Welfare programs are an example of
   a. unlimited government spending.
   b. the way government regulates the distribution of wealth.
   c. the system of checks and balances.
   d. all of the above

9. A historian would study Microsoft primarily to determine
   a. who makes the important corporate decisions.
   b. the origins and development of the company.
   c. the cost-effectiveness of software production.
   d. the anti-trust demands of government against management.
10. A person who studies an organization’s decision-making procedures is probably
   a. an economist.
   b. a political scientist.
   c. a psychologist.
   d. a historian.

11. In theory, the policy of the Constitution of the United States toward the distribution of wealth is
   a. to elevate state over federal control.
   b. to establish itself as the supreme and sole authority.
   c. to institute a central planning agency.
   d. noninterference.

12. Which is not an example of government intervention?
   a. providing a sound currency
   b. protection from domestic unrest
   c. safeguarding private property
   d. none of these

13. The opening dialogue of the book illustrates that
   a. students have no power.
   b. politics occurs in the classroom.
   c. students are apathetic about national politics.
   d. teachers seldom exercise their authority.

14. The top 1 percent of the American population possesses what percentage of the nation's wealth?
   a. 20
   b. 27
   c. 33
   d. 39
15. The statement that the "United States is the most powerful nation in the world" actually means that America
   a. can force any nation to heed its wishes.
   b. has the will to dominate the globe but lacks resources.
   c. has a capacity for power that automatically translates into actual influence.
   d. none of the above.

16. The author defines power as the
   a. victory of the strong over the weak.
   b. ability to influence another's behavior.
   c. strength and size of a nation's armed forces.
   d. use of force and coercion to achieve one's goals.

17. Authority is
   a. the use of force over a weak opponent.
   b. legitimate power.
   c. coercive power.
   d. personified in the commander in chief.

18. When political conflict occurs
   a. government is usually formed as a result.
   b. government channels the conflict.
   c. government forbids the conflict from taking place.
   d. both a and b are correct.

19. The tolerance of different opinions and interests is
   a. an essential part of democracy.
   b. needed in any corporation.
   c. essential to all ideologies.
   d. allows some people great power over others.
20. According to the author, the best word to describe the "political game" in America is
   a. simple.
   b. stable.
   c. serious.
   d. peripheral.

21. In the FAA-McDonnell Douglas DC-10 case, the author implies or asserts which of the following?
   a. The FAA immediately fixed the cargo door.
   b. The FAA told McDonnell Douglas to strengthen the cargo door and cabin floor, but McDonnell Douglas did nothing.
   c. The FAA was guilty of political favoritism and weak supervision toward McDonnell Douglas.
   d. none of the above

22. One common aspect of the various social sciences--history, economics, sociology, and political science--is that they all study
   a. relations among people.
   b. questions of power and authority.
   c. income disparities among social groups.
   d. all of the above

23. If American government approaches the economy with policies of noninterference, that implies
   a. an economic depression.
   b. radical change and upheaval.
   c. support for society's existing values.
   d. dissent from existing welfare programs.

24. A democracy where people rule indirectly is best described as
   a. representative.
   b. inclusive of all people.
   c. anarchic.
   d. conflict-free.
25. Checks and balances in the U.S. Constitution were needed to
   a. place limits on the power of future leaders.
   b. preserve federal power.
   c. allow the president unlimited power in foreign policy
   d. legitimize government power.

TRUE-FALSE QUESTIONS

1. Power involves a relationship between people and groups.
2. Authority is an efficient form of power.
4. Government is the only group in society that can legitimately use force.
5. Government places no limits on the private distribution of values.
6. Activism and apathy are both "political positions."
7. Politics is a "spectator sport" for most people in America.
9. Federal regulatory commissions have traditionally not been closely tied to the economic interests they supervise.
10. The genocide of Tutsis in Rwanda illustrates the limits placed on government leaders.

11. Bill Gates is the founder of Microsoft.

ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. How is Harold Lasswell’s definition of politics demonstrated by the "First Day of Class" story that begins the chapter?

2. Are political authorities necessary? Why or why not?

3. List and explain the basic functions of government in American society. Also, why is the game of American politics not like Monday Night Football?

4. How would the questions of an economist, historian, and psychologist differ from those of a political scientist in their studies of Microsoft?

5. How do governments affect the distribution of wealth in a society? Are certain methods considered more legitimate than others? Why?

6. What is the significance of Senator Hollings’ story regarding his constituent in the text excerpt entitled “Who Needs Government”? 

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