

[Excerpt from Cox and Hendricks, *Governing: A Conceptual Approach* (Wadsworth Publishing, 2004), Ch.1. Copyrighted material: do not copy.]

## I. Governing and Political Science's Three Basic Concepts

Political life thrives all around us. The media are saturated with stories about how we are being governed. The World Wide Web gives us search access to information from around the country and around the world. As individuals and in our private interest organizations, we try to influence the governing process, especially policy decisions that affect us. And our political leaders are busy making decisions at all levels of government virtually every hour of the day. That is why Plutarch would reaffirm today that governing is “a way of life” for many people.

But how do we distinguish *political life* from other aspects of personal and societal life? By the same token, human society has many social institutions. But which ones of them are public, or *government institutions*, and which are private associations? Finally, social policy is crafted to solve the collective problems of human communities. Yet only some group decisions are officially sanctioned government policy. What decisions are official *public policies* and which are private, involving voluntary action? There are boundary issues in all three of these concepts that help define the scope of our political science study.

## A. Politics - the Games that Powerful People Play

Politics can have many definitions, and each can reveal a facet of its complex nature. Examples of useful definitions illustrate the wide range of scholarly insights into the notion of politics, one focus of our study of governing. For our purposes, we do not seek a single, ultimate or all-inclusive definition. Instead, we benefit from the varying perspectives of different creative minds.

The widely read political scientist Susan Welch (2001) sees politics as the art or craft of using *power* in human relations. Some people gain control over the behavior of others. This control can be physical or psychological or both. In the case of several contemporary Middle Eastern countries, national governments use police and the military to enforce law and order. These same governments try to win the hearts of their peoples through worthy projects, prestigious monuments, and political propaganda. There is a mix of coercion and cooperation. In political science, we are concerned with how power works, what uses are legitimate, and who the power brokers are in society.

Political scientist David Easton (1959) defines politics as “the authoritative allocation of values.” His definition is quite useful because government policy often has to deal with people’s heartfelt *values*. You may favor a woman’s right to choose when it comes to abortion. I may favor the right to life of the fetus. But the law states what is a legal and what is an illegal abortion under today’s statutes and court decisions. The decision has been made by the authorities with the constitutional and statutory powers to do so. Of course, the law may change

tomorrow. But for today, the law is definitive. Physicians would defy the law only at the peril of losing their professional licenses or even going to jail. No human social process can make authoritative decisions for us all without the deliberations of politics.

Harold Lasswell (1951) defines politics as “who gets what, when, and how.” His definition draws our attention to the allocation of *public resources*: government taxes, budgets and the programs that they fund. We all have a stake in government’s distribution of benefits. You may have a student loan. I may have an income tax deduction for my home mortgage interest. Someone else may be receiving a disability check. In other words, the distributive decisions that government makes are important. Deciding who benefits from a decision is political. Some people such as homeowners are favored in the process, and other people such as renters are not. The timing of the decision is political. Giving a tax cut now or phasing it in over the next several years may affect how much political support it enjoys. And how one receives the benefit is political. The Medicare and Medicaid Programs in the United States are insurance styled operations; we do not fund government clinics for sick people. Lasswell’s focus on resources and benefits is a useful perspective, albeit a different one from Easton’s pinpointing of value questions or Welch’s focus on power.

James Q. Wilson (1995) sees politics as how elites define the *public interest*. Most of us will have a small say in political decision-making at the polls and perhaps through a local government study commission. We will not hold public

office. We will not debate and compromise and ultimately decide questions of public policy. Political elites play that role in modern societies. Some members of the political elite such as members of congress are elected; others such as high court justices hold appointive office. And yet other influential people such as lobbyists, campaign contributors, media representatives, and party officials work to affect policy from behind the scenes. Nevertheless, they are a small elite relative to the entire population. The public officials such as elected representatives believe that it is their duty to divine the public interest and make decisions accordingly. In fact, they claim that we have delegated authority to them to do just that. The private players such as campaign contributors believe that free speech affords them an opportunity for influence in causes that may also serve the public interest. All elites profess the public's interest.

None of these definitions of politics is superior to the others, and there are many others. Power, values, money and the public interest are all important. We are fortunate to have these and other distinctive definitions of politics because they reveal different facets of political phenomena. Note that all of our definitions in political science are *instrumental*. They are kept and used so long as they are helpful. When new ones come along, we use them as well. We do not seek the ultimate and final definition of politics. We search for the truth with a small case "t", not a capital "T". Truth with a capital "T" is more properly the province of religion and philosophy.

## **B. Government - Institutionalized and Legitimated Power**

Human societies create social institutions to stabilize their relations and make them permanent. The formal and official nature of social institutions makes groups of people feel more secure and confident. Of course, it is usually the powerful elites who create and sustain social institutions. And as we have discovered, their power may come from values, resources, or privilege. Yet the institutions themselves survive after their creators have passed away. Political institutions embody the traditional meanings that their founders intended, and then they evolve new capacities through the interpretations of future generations.

a. Legislating. Elected or officially selected bodies of the people's representatives are called *legislative institutions*. The United States Congress, the Georgia General Assembly, the Atlanta City Council, the United Kingdom's Parliament (Great Britain), the Scottish Parliament (Pàrlamaid na h-Alba), and the City of Edinburgh Council are all legislative institutions. Their function is to constitute the government and to make law in the name of the people. Political scientist Theodore Lowi has observed that we sometimes expect elected representatives to act quite literally, as they believe we would act on an issue (source). That is because we have delegated authority to them as expect them to behave as our *delegates*. At other times, we want to defer to the consideration and experience of elected officials. This is because we trust them to use their best judgment in areas that we know little about. We want them to behave as the

public's *trustees*. Both of these ideas have merit, and we may have differing expectations depending on the issue, the particular legislative body, or the politicians who are involved. The point is that societies commonly view the institution of the legislature as a formal context within which special decision-making duties are to be carried out. The decisions are binding on us all because people to whom we have entrusted public office make them.

b. Leading. *Executive institutions* are created to implement our collective decisions and oversee that administration of government. The President of the United States, the Governor of Georgia, and the Mayor of Atlanta, the Queen of England, the British Prime Minister, the Scottish Executive, and the Mayor of Edinburgh are all political executives. Again, elected or officially selected individuals are charged to conduct the public's business. The *chief executives* may be referred to as presidents, governors, mayors, commissioners, or other titles depending on the level of government and the country in question. They are distinguishable from figureheads or symbolic leaders such as *monarchs* who conduct more purely ceremonial functions. Together with their advisors, political executives may be collectively referred to as "the government" (in parliamentary systems) or "the administration" (in congressional systems). Political scientists refer to the people in office as the *regime* to distinguish the incumbents from the offices that they hold.

Political executives are chosen based on their political aptitudes. Hopefully, they exhibit good decision-making abilities and are responsive to

public opinion. In practical terms, they also should be capable of navigating the many crosscurrents of political party and interest group demands. They should be able to choose effective executive branch officials for cabinet posts and diplomatic missions. They should have an aptitude for learning about new issues and an ability to size up new political players. In other words, today's chief executive needs to be an intelligent student of public affairs and a talented people person.

c. Administering. *Administrative institutions* are sometimes called bureaucracies. *Bureaucracies* are charged with the daily administration of government operations. These agencies, offices, or bureaus of government are staffed with political appointees in the executive management positions and career civil servants in the managerial, technical, and service levels of the organizations. The administration of government is conducted under official policies and procedures that either passed by legislative bodies or issued by executive orders. By far the largest sector of government, the administrative institutions do most of the heavy lifting of delivering government programs to the public.

d. Adjudicating. Courts form another branch of government institutions. *Judicial institutions* have their own structures and functions. Judicial institutions resolve conflicts between individuals (civil law) and between the government and individuals (criminal law). Judges are both elected and appointed, depending on the level of government and the country involved. In either case,

they are charged with determining the truth, justly resolving conflicts, and thereby maintaining the peace. Some judges hear cases; others rule on appeals. A select few – commonly called justices -- are chosen to interpret constitutional law. Some countries use adversarial procedures, while others have inquisitorial courts. Some countries specially train their judges; others recruit from the ranks of practicing attorneys. In all cases, specialized training in the law is required. The body of decisions handed down by courts becomes case law that enables consistency as judges use precedents to support their own decisions.

e. Regulating. *Regulatory institutions* supervise the conduct of businesses and professions in order to protect consumer and worker rights. The oversight of very specialized corporate and professional practices is legislatively delegated to independent agencies. These agencies in turn make rules that have the force of law. In addition to rule making, regulatory institutions investigate complaints, hear cases in administrative law proceedings, and fine industries that violate the rules. Specialized regulatory boards license professionals and enforce standards of professional conduct. Not all private enterprises and professional practices are subject to regulatory oversight. However, the public interest cannot allow private behavior of just any kind to endanger consumers.

This brief structural overview shows how broad the notion of government is in today's societies. You will have noted that different parts of the government each have their own authority and responsibilities. Different types of officials serve in each branch, and their talents and training vary a great deal. To

generalize about the concept of government across such variation is to use the term quite broadly like we use the terms environment and biology. People who “are not interested in government” are making an extremely broad statement when they express their disinterest. On the other hand, we who *are* interested in public affairs must specialize our studies in order to discuss complex governments competently.

### **C. Public Policy - Powerful Decisions for Intractable Problems**

If politics is a process and government is institutions, then public policy is the product that they produce. We engage in politics because we want to influence decisions, and we create government so that there will be a structure for decision-making. *Public policy* is the body of decisions such as legislative acts, statutes, executive orders, policies, court decisions, court orders, and regulatory rulings. Policies are the work products of public officials.

Public policies are designed to have specific effects. *Distributive* policies give a benefit to a certain class of citizens, e.g., veterans’ benefits or milk producer subsidies. *Redistributive* policies take from one group and give to another, e.g., an earned income tax credit. Some policies are *symbolic* rather than substantive, e.g., flag burning laws. Different policies have different motivations and seek to accomplish different purposes.

Studying public policy is a very specialized activity. Political scientists specialize by type of policy and by type of government. For example, some

political scientists study crime control policy, while others study utility regulation. Within these areas, individuals may specialize in a specific country's felony crime trends, while another investigates the international drug trade.

1. Policy Development. Interest groups, political party activists, and the mass media largely determine the policy-making agenda. Organized interests such as business and labor organizations develop specific policy proposals as they advance their causes. The political parties and individual politicians articulate their respective visions of a good society, screen demands, and negotiate workable policy proposals. And the print and broadcast media investigate social problems and publicize proposals for dealing with them. We will have more to say about the advocacy of interest groups and political parties as well as the mass media in Chapter Four. But for now, suffice it to say, politics shapes public policy.

Government institutions are instrumental in developing specific policy proposals for addressing social concerns and private demands for public action. Political executives draft program and budget proposals; legislative bodies propose, debate and amend proposals; and courts and regulatory bodies interpret what new policy means. Policy can be developed as a bill, an executive order, a regulatory finding, or a court ruling. And political scientists study all types of developing policies at all stages of the political process.

2. Policy Implementation. Executives and their administrative bureaucracies implement the public policies that have become law. They utilize

the many knowledge and action resources at their disposal to turn policies into programs. Otherwise, policy would only be so many words on a piece of paper. Until public policies are implemented, nothing happens. Problems are not solved, and demands not answered.

Political scientists who are interested in policy implementation study everything from administrative procedures to budgets to personnel procedures. Indeed, the subfields of political executives and public administration are largely devoted to the study and teaching of policy implementation. Chapters Six and Seven are devoted to these areas of political science. For now, it will suffice to note that implementing public policy consumes the overwhelming majority of government budgets at every level.

3. Policy Evaluation. The social sciences are very active in helping decision-makers determine the effectiveness and efficiency of public policies. By *effectiveness*, we mean how well a policy achieves its goals and the degree to which it has an impact on the problem that led to its adoption. A policy -- or the program(s) that it generates -- can reasonably be expected to achieve measurable results for its beneficiaries and make a difference in the social problem that it supposedly addresses. *Efficiency* is the cost of a policy relative to other public and private options that might address the same problem. These options could include alternative policies in other countries, states, or cities. If public policies are effective and efficient, then they can be justified and continued. If they are not, then they need to be fine tuned, replaced, or eliminated.

Some problems are broad and societal in nature; they do not lend themselves to private solution. Once the decision has been made to address a public problem, we have every right to expect that public policies will be effective and that public programs will be operated efficiently. Government institutions like corporations, associations, and other human need to be competent, equal to the tasks for which they are designed.

#### **D. Three Basic Concepts Summary**

The subject matter of political science is obviously quite broad. Any group of students and scholars that sets out to study everything from conceptualizing political power to regulating power companies is ambitious. Yet political science as a field of study is not unbounded. We study the political dimension of life. Other social sciences such as economics, anthropology, and sociology specialize in other aspects of human society. We are quite interested in their work, but it usually is not ours to do. Only by limiting our focus can we hope to gain some command of our basic concepts and findings. Together, we pull research together in books like this one that synthesize our professional insights into politics, government, and public policy. By doing so, we build a knowledge base, a safe harbor from which to explore new vistas.