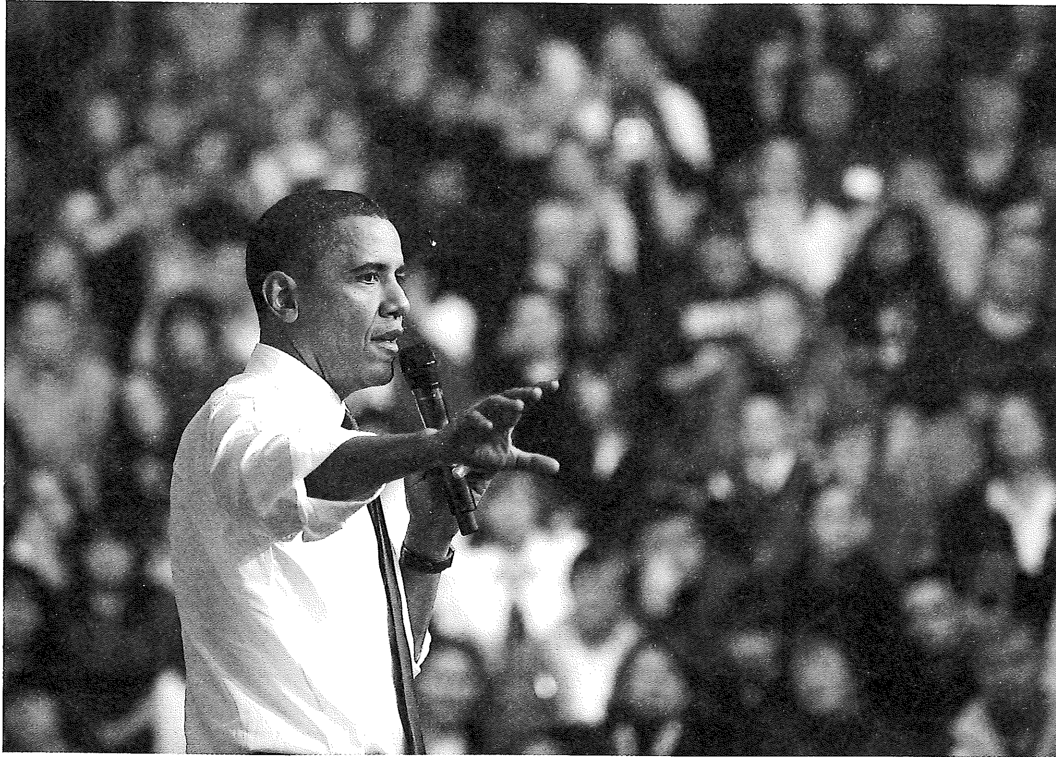
Politics and Political Science



President Barack Obama speaks to a New Hampshire town hall meeting in 2010. (Rick Friedman/Corbis)

Questions to Consider

1. Why did politics fall out of favor? Is it now back?
2. What does it mean to "never get angry at a fact"?
3. Why did Aristotle call politics "the master science"?
4. What did Machiavelli bring to the study of politics?
5. How are legitimacy, sovereignty, and authority different but similar?
6. Is the Iraqi government now legitimate? How can you tell?
7. Is politics largely biological, psychological, cultural, rational, or irrational?
8. How can something as messy as politics be a science?

A major healthcare reform, bailouts of big corporations, and massive federal deficits have revived interest in politics in the United States. Students and attentive citizens who a few years ago turned away from politics are paying attention again. U.S. electoral turnout, with aroused voters, is up several percentage points from a low of 50 percent in presidential elections. For political scientists, the uptick in interest is welcome, but many still worry that Americans (and many other nationalities) are becoming depoliticized. Why did interest in politics decline for many years? Is it disgust at politicians and their constant, empty struggle for partisan advantage? Is it a feeling of helplessness, a sense that individual citizens do not matter? Is it the perception that the nation's capital is the playground of rich and powerful interest groups who simply buy whatever they want, including politicians? Or is it a healthy sign that, in relatively good times, people naturally turn to other concerns? If the economy is not bad and world problems seem distant, why follow politics? A bad economy and a long war renew interest in politics.

It is the thesis of this book that politics matters. If you do not take an interest and participate, others will, and they will influence the decisions that govern your life. Will they take us to war in a foreign land? Who might have to fight in that war? You. Will they alter the tax code to favor certain citizens and corporations? Who will have to pay in taxes what others avoid paying? You. Will they set up government programs whose costs escalate far beyond what anyone had foreseen? Who then will have to pay these costs? You. One of the tasks of this book is to make you aware of what politics is and how it works so that you can look after yourself and prevent others from using you. The ignorant are manipulated.

discipline A field of study, often represented by an academic department or major.

Many find politics distasteful, and perhaps they are right. Politics may be inherently immoral or, at any rate, amoral. Misuse of power, influence peddling, and outright corruption are prominent features of politics. But you need not like the thing you study. Biologists may behold a disease-causing bacterium under a microscope. They do not "like" the bacterium but are interested in how it grows, how it does its damage, and how it may be eradicated. Neither do they get angry at the bacterium and smash the glass slide with a hammer. Biologists first understand the forces of nature and then work with them to improve humankind's existence. Political scientists try to do the same with politics.

THE MASTER SCIENCE

Aristotle, the founder of the **discipline**, called politics "the master science." He meant that almost everything happens in a political context, that the decisions of the *polis* (the Greek city-state) governed most other things. Politics, in the words of Yale's Harold Lasswell (1902–1978), is the study of "who gets what." But, some object, the economic system determines who gets what in countries with free markets. True, but should we have a totally free-market system with no government involved? A decision to bail out shaky banks sparks angry controversy over this

Oil from the BP spill in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010 raised political questions about deep-sea drilling. Should U.S. need for oil override environmental concerns? (Julie Dermansky/Corbis)

point. Few love the bankers, but economists say it had to be done to save the economy from collapse. Politics is intimately connected to economics.

Suppose something utterly natural strikes, like a hurricane. It is the political system that decides whether and where to build dikes and whether and which of the victims to aid. The disaster is natural, but its impact on society is controlled in large part by politics. How about science, our bacteriologists squinting through microscopes? That is not political. But who funds the scientists' education and their research institutes? It could be private charity (the donors of which get tax breaks), but the government plays a major role. When the U.S. government decided that AIDS research deserved top priority, funding for other programs was cut. Bacteria and viruses may be natural, but studying them is often quite political. In this case, it pitted gays against women concerned with breast cancer. Who gets what: Funding to find a cure for AIDS or for breast cancer? The choice is political.

Because almost everything is political, studying politics means studying nearly everything. Some students select "interdisciplinary majors." Political science already is one, borrowing from and overlapping with all of the other social sciences. At times, it is hard to tell where history, human geography, economics, sociology, anthropology, and psychology leave off and political science begins. Here, briefly, is how political science relates to the other social sciences.

History

History is one of the chief sources of data for political scientists. When we discuss the politics of the Third French Republic (1871–1940), the growth of presidential power under Franklin Roosevelt (1933–1945), and even something as recent as the Cold War (1946–1989), we are studying history. But historians and political scientists

KEY CONCEPTS ■ "NEVER GET ANGRY AT A FACT"

This basic point of all serious study sounds commonsensical but is often ignored, even in college courses. It traces back to the extremely complex thought of the German philosopher Hegel, who argued that things happen not by caprice or accident but for good and sufficient reasons: "Whatever is real is rational." That means that nothing is completely accidental and that if we apply reason, we will understand why something happens. We study politics in a "naturalistic" mode, not getting angry at what we see but trying to understand how it came to be.

For example, we hear of a politician who took money from a businessperson. As political scientists, we push our anger to the side and ask questions like: Do most politicians in that country take money? Is it an old tradition, and does the culture of this country accept it? Do the people even expect politicians to take money? How big are campaign expenses? Can the politician possibly run for office without taking money? In short, we see if extralegal exchanges of cash are part of the political system. If they are, it makes no sense to get angry at an individual politician. If we dislike it, we may then consider how the system might be reformed to discourage the taking of money on the side. And reforms may not work. Japan reformed its electoral laws in an attempt to stamp out its traditional "money politics," but little changed. Like bacteria, some things in politics have lives of their own.

look for different things and handle data differently. Typically, historians study one episode in detail, digging up documents, archives, and memoirs on the topic. They have masses of data focused on one point but are reluctant to generalize. Political scientists, on the other hand, begin by looking for generalizations. They might take the findings of historians and compare and contrast them. A historian might do a detailed study of Weimar Germany (1919–1933); a political scientist might put that study alongside studies of France, Italy, and Russia of the same period to see what similarities and dissimilarities can be found. To be sure, some historians do comparative studies; they become de facto political scientists.

Human Geography

Human geography (as distinct from physical geography) has in recent decades been neglected by political scientists, although it influences politics more than many realize. The territorial components of human behavior—borders, regions, ethnic areas, trade flows, and centralization of power—have great political ramifications. Strife in Afghanistan, Iraq, India, and Turkey are heavily geographical problems, as is Canada's unsettled federalism, from which some Quebeckers wish to depart. French political scientist André Siegfried (1875–1959) pioneered the use of maps to explain regional political variations, a technique of today's electoral studies. The "red" and "blue" states in U.S. presidential elections show the relevance of political geography.

Economics

Economics, proclaim some economists, is the subject matter of politics. (Political scientists are apt to claim the opposite.) True, many political quarrels are economic: As Lasswell asked, "Who gets what?" Sufficient economic development may be the basis for democracy; few poor countries are democratic. A declining economy may doom democracy, as was the fate of Germany's Weimar Republic and recently of Russia. What policies promote economic development? How big a role should government have? Is the euro currency making Europe more united or ready to fall apart? When economists get into questions of policy, they become "political economists." A relatively new school of political science, "rational-choice theory," shares the economic perspective that humans pursue their self-interests.

Sociology

Sociology and political science overlap. Sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset (1922–2006) was equally renowned as a political scientist. He was among the first to demonstrate the close connection between democracy and level of wealth. As we shall consider in the next chapter, political science conventionally starts by looking at society to see "who thinks what" about politics. In demonstrating how political views vary among social classes, regions, religions, genders, and age groups, sociology gives an empirical basis to political-culture, public-opinion, and electoral studies.

Anthropology

Anthropology, which traditionally focused on preliterate societies, may seem of little relevance to political science. But the descriptive and interviewing techniques of anthropology have been heavily adopted by political scientists. The subfield of political culture can be viewed as a branch of anthropology. Japanese deference patterns, which we still see today, were laid down more than a millennium ago. Some current political systems are still run by traditionally influential families or clans. In Central Asia, the families of emirs who ruled under the Persians did so under the Russian tsars, the Communists, and now the newly independent states. In Africa, voting and violence follow tribal lines.

methodology The techniques for studying questions objectively.

political power Ability of one person to get another to do something.

Psychology

Psychology, particularly social psychology, contributes much to political science's understanding of which personalities are attracted to politics, why and under what circumstances people obey authority figures, and how people form national, group, and voting attachments. Studies of Hitler, Stalin, and Mao Zedong are often based on psychological theories. Psychologists are especially good with **methodology**; they devise ways to study things objectively and teach us to doubt claims that have holes in them. Asking questions in a "blind" manner and "controlling" for certain factors are techniques developed from psychology.

POLITICAL POWER

Political science often uses the findings of other social sciences, but one feature distinguishes it from the others—its focus on power: A gets B to do what A wants. Our second founding father (after Aristotle) is the Renaissance Florentine philosopher Niccolò Machiavelli, who emphasized the role of power in politics. You can take all the factors and approaches mentioned previously, but if you are not using them to study power—a very broad subject—you are probably not doing political science.

Some people dislike the concept of **political power**. It smacks of coercion, inequality, and occasionally of brutality. Some speakers denounce "power politics," suggesting governance without power, a happy band of brothers and sisters regulating themselves through love and sharing. Communities formed on such a basis do not last, or if they do last it is only by transforming themselves into conventional structures of leaders and followers, buttressed by obedience patterns that look suspiciously like power. Political power seems to be built into the human condition. But why do some people hold political power over others? There is no definitive explanation of political power. Biological, psychological, cultural, rational, and irrational explanations have been put forward.

legitimacy Mass feeling that the government's rule is rightful and should be obeyed.

sovereignty A national government's being boss on its own turf, the last word in law in that country.

Biological

Aristotle said it first and perhaps best: "Man is by nature a political animal." (Aristotle's words were *zoon politikon*, which can be translated as either "political animal" or "social animal." The Greeks lived in city-states in which the polis was the same as society.) Aristotle meant that humans live naturally in herds, like elephants or deer. Biologically, they need each other for sustenance and survival. It is also natural that they array themselves into ranks of leaders and followers, like all herd animals. Taking a cue from Aristotle, a modern biological explanation would say that forming a political system and obeying its leaders is innate human behavior, passed on to future generations with

KEY CONCEPTS ■ LEGITIMACY, SOVEREIGNTY, AND AUTHORITY

These three related concepts—**legitimacy**, **sovereignty**, and **authority**—are basic to political science. Legitimacy originally meant that the rightful king or queen was on the throne by reason of "legitimate" birth. Since the Middle Ages, the term has broadened to mean not only the "legal right to govern" but also the "psychological right to govern." Legitimacy now refers to an attitude in people's minds—in some countries strong, in others weak—that the government's rule is rightful. Legitimacy in the United States is fairly high. Even Americans who do not particularly like the government generally obey it. We even pay taxes. One quick test of legitimacy: How many police are there? Few police, as in Sweden and Norway, indicates that little coercion is needed; legitimacy is high. Many police, as in North Korea or Iraq, indicates that much coercion is needed; legitimacy is low.

Where legitimacy is weak, few people feel obliged to pay their taxes and obey the law because the government itself is perceived as dirty and dishonest. Eventually, massive civil disobedience can break out, as it did in Serbia in 2000. Citizens rallied against the criminal misrule of President Slobodan Milošević; police batons and electoral rigging could not prevent him from being voted out of office. The Iraqi Governing Council of 2003–2004 was composed of highly educated Iraqis representative of all Iraqi groups, but it had little legitimacy because it had been installed by the U.S. occupiers. Arguably, the Council was the best government Iraq will ever have, but few valued it. Without legitimacy, governments are ineffective.

A government achieves legitimacy several ways. At the most elemental level, it must provide security, so that people feel reasonably safe. Many Iraqis complained that, bad as Saddam was, under him they could walk down the street. As Hobbes (see Chapter 2) saw, no security means no legitimacy. Related to security is "rule of law." Regimes that provide it gain legitimacy. Just existing a long time fosters legitimacy. Citizens generally respect long-established governments. The fact that the U.S. Constitution is more than two centuries old confers great legitimacy on the U.S. government. New governments, on the other hand, have shaky legitimacy; their citizens have little or no respect for them.

A government gains legitimacy by governing well. Ensuring economic growth and jobs so that people can feed their families builds legitimacy. The government of West Germany, founded in 1949 after defeat in World War II, had little legitimacy at first, but level-headed political leadership with sound economic policies gradually earned the Bonn government legitimacy. On the other hand, the German Weimar Republic that followed World War I faced a series of economic and political catastrophes that undermined its legitimacy and let Hitler take power.

The structure of government contributes to its legitimacy. If people feel they are fairly represented and have a say in the selection of their officials, they are more likely to obey. Finally, governments shore up their legitimacy by national symbols. The flag, historic monuments, patriotic parades, and ringing speeches aim at convincing people that the government is legitimate and should be obeyed. Although they ended centuries of monarchy in 1975, in 2002 the Laotian Communist regime kneeled before a new bronze statue of the king who founded Laos's monarchy 650 years earlier. The Communists were trying to prop up their fraying legitimacy by tying themselves to the old kings, a symbol of legitimacy most Laotians could understand. When legitimacy has collapsed, however, the manipulation of national symbols may appear to be a hollow joke. A gigantic statue of dictator Marcos of the Philippines became an object of ridicule and a symbol of what was wrong with his regime. Symbols by themselves do not create legitimacy.

Sovereignty (from the Old French "to rule over") originally meant the power of a monarch over his or her kingdom. Later, the term broadened to mean national control over the country's territory, boss of one's own turf. Nations safeguard their sovereignty. They maintain armies to deter foreign invasion; they control their borders with passports and visas; and they hunt down terrorists. Disputes over sovereignty are among the nastiest: Palestine, Chechnya, and Iraq are examples.

Sovereignty is sometimes a legal fiction. Iraq regained nominal sovereignty in 2004 but was still under U.S. influence. Sovereignty and legitimacy are connected. Lebanese Muslims, for example, saw the Christian-dominated government as illegitimate. In 1975, civil strife broke out among a dozen politico-religious militias. Syria occupied eastern Lebanon from 1976 to 2005, and Israel occupied southern Lebanon from 1982 to 2000. Lebanon in effect lost its sovereignty, which it is now slowly regaining. For decades, it could neither control its own territory nor repel foreign invaders. A loss of legitimacy led to a loss of sovereignty.

Authority is the psychological ability of leaders to get others to obey them. It relies on a sense of obligation based on the legitimate power of office. A private obeys a captain; a motorist obeys a state trooper; a student obeys a professor. But not all people obey authority. Some privates are insubordinate, some motorists are speeders, and some students neglect the assigned reading. Still, most people obey what they perceive as legitimate authority most of the time.

Some authority comes with the office, but it must also be cultivated. An American president gets much authority just because he is president. Gerald Ford was respected and obeyed even though he was not elected president or vice president. As minority leader of the House of Representatives, Ford became vice president when Spiro T. Agnew resigned and president when Richard Nixon resigned. Nixon, implicated in the Watergate scandal of 1972, suffered an erosion of executive authority so acute that he could not govern effectively. A president cannot rule by decree but must obtain the willing consent of Congress, the courts, the civil service, and important interest groups. When Nixon lost this consent, his power as president declined.

In short, legitimacy means respect for a government; sovereignty, respect for a country; and authority, respect for a leader. None are automatic; all must be earned. Where you find one, you find the others. Where one erodes, so usually do the others.

authority Political leaders' ability to command respect and exercise power.

one's genes. Some thinkers argue that human politics shows the same "dominance hierarchies" that other mammals set up. Politicians tend to be "alpha males"—or think they are.

The advantage of the biological approach is its simplicity, but it raises a number of questions. If we grant that humans are naturally political, how do we explain the instances when political groups fall apart and people disobey authority? Perhaps we should modify the theory: Humans are imperfectly political (or social) animals. Most of the time people form groups and obey authority, but sometimes, under certain circumstances, they do not. This begs the question of which circumstances promote or undermine the formation of political groups.

Psychological

Psychological explanations of politics and obedience are closely allied with biological theories. Both posit needs derived from centuries of evolution in the formation of political groups. The psychologists have refined their views with empirical research. One is the famous Milgram study, in which unwitting subjects were instructed by a professor to administer progressively larger electric shocks to a victim. The "victim," strapped in a chair, was actually an actor who only pretended to suffer. Most of the subjects were willing to administer potentially lethal doses of electricity simply because the "professor"—an authority figure in a white lab smock—told them to. Most of the subjects disliked hurting the victim, but they rationalized that they were just following orders and that any harm done to the victim was really the professor's responsibility. They surrendered their actions to an authority figure.

Psychological studies also show that most people are naturally conformist. Most members of a group see things the group's way. Psychologist Irving Janis found many foreign policy mistakes were made in a climate of "groupthink," in which a leadership team tells itself that all is well and that the present policy is working. Groups ignore doubters who tell them, for instance, that the Japanese will attack Pearl Harbor in 1941 or that the 1961 Bay of Pigs landing of Cuban exiles will fail. Obedience to authority and groupthink suggest that humans have deep-seated needs—possibly innate—to fit into groups and their norms. Perhaps this is what makes human society possible, but it also makes possible horrors such as the Nazi Holocaust and more recent massacres.

Cultural

How much of human behavior is learned as opposed to biologically inherited? This is the very old "nurture versus nature" debate. For much of the twentieth century, the cultural theorists—those who believe behavior is learned—dominated. Anthropologists concluded that all differences in behavior were cultural. Cooperative and peaceful societies raise their children that way, they argued. Political communities are formed and held together on the basis of cultural values transmitted by parents, schools, churches, and the mass media. Political science developed an interesting subfield, *political culture*, whose researchers found that a country's political culture

was formed by many long-term factors: religion, child rearing, land tenure, and economic development.

Cultural theorists see trouble when the political system gets out of touch with the cultural system, as when the shah of Iran attempted to modernize an Islamic society that did not like Western values and lifestyles. The Iranians threw the shah out in 1979 and celebrated the return of a medieval-style religious leader who voiced the values favored by traditional Iranians. Cultural theories can also be applied to U.S. politics. Republicans often win elections by articulating the values of religion, family, and self-reliance, which are deeply ingrained into American culture. Many thinkers believe economic and political development depend heavily on **culture.**

culture Human behavior that is learned as opposed to inherited.

rational Based on the ability to reason.

The cultural approach to political life holds some optimism. If all human behavior is learned, bad behavior can be unlearned and society improved. Educating young people to be tolerant, cooperative, and just will gradually change a society's culture for the better, according to this view. Changing culture, however, is slow and difficult, as the American occupiers of Iraq discovered.

Culture contributes a lot to political behavior, but the theory has some difficulties. First, where does culture come from? History? Economics? Religion? Second, if all behavior is cultural, various political systems should be as different from each other as their cultures. But, especially in the realm of politics, we see similar political attitudes and patterns in lands with very different cultures. Politicians everywhere tend to become corrupt, regardless of culture.

Rational

Another school of thought approaches politics as a **rational** thing; that is, people know what they want most of the time, and they have good reasons for doing what they do. Classic political theorists, such as Hobbes and Locke, as we shall see in the next chapter, held that humans form "civil society" because their powers of reason tell them that it is much better than anarchy. To safeguard life and property, people form governments. If those governments become abusive, the people have the right to dissolve them and start anew. This Lockean notion greatly influenced the U.S. Founding Fathers.

The biological, psychological, and cultural schools downplay human reason, claiming that people are either born or conditioned to certain behavior, and individuals seldom think rationally. But how can we then explain cases in which people break away from group conformity and argue independently? How can we explain a change of mind? "I was for Jones until he came out with his terrible economic policy, so now I'm voting for Smith." People make rational judgments like that all the time. A political system based on the presumption of human reason stands a better chance of governing justly and humanely. If leaders believe that people obey out of biological inheritance or cultural conditioning, they will think they can get away with all manner of corruption and misrule. If, on the other hand, rulers fear that people are rational, they will respect the public's ability to discern wrongdoing. Accordingly, even if people are not completely rational, it is probably for the best if rulers think they are.

Irrational

Late in the nineteenth century, a group of thinkers expounded the view that people are basically **irrational**, especially when it comes to political power. They are emotional, dominated by myths and stereotypes, and politics is really the manipulation of symbols. A crowd is like a wild beast that can be whipped up by charismatic leaders to do their bidding. What people regard as rational is really myth; just keep feeding the people myths to control them. The first practitioner of this school was Mussolini, founder of fascism in Italy, followed by Hitler in Germany. A soft-spoken Muslim fundamentalist, Osama bin Laden, got an irrational hold on thousands of fanatical followers. Believing the myth that America was the enemy of Islam, some willingly ended their lives in terrorist acts.

irrational Based on the power to use fear and myth to cloud reason.

There may be a good deal of truth to the irrational view of human political behavior, but it has catastrophic consequences. Leaders who use irrationalist techniques start believing their own propaganda and lead their nations to war, economic ruin, or tyranny. Some detect irrationalism even in the most advanced societies, where much of politics consists of screaming crowds and leaders striking heroic poses.

Power As a Composite

There are elements of truth in all these explanations of political power. At different times in different situations, any one of them can explain power. Tom Paine's pamphlet *Common Sense* rationally explained why America should separate from Britain. The drafters of both the U.S. Declaration of Independence and the Constitution were imbued with the rationalism of their age. Following the philosophers then popular, they framed their arguments as if human political activity were as logical as Newtonian physics. Historian Henry Steele Commager referred to the Constitution as "the crown jewel of the enlightenment," the culmination of an age of reason.

But how truly rational were they? By the late eighteenth century, the 13 American colonies had grown culturally separate from Britain. People thought of themselves as Americans rather than as English colonists. They increasingly read American newspapers and communicated among themselves rather than with Britain. Perhaps the separation was more cultural than rational.

Nor can we forget the psychological and irrational factors. Samuel Adams was a gifted firebrand, Thomas Jefferson a powerful writer, and George Washington a charismatic general. The American break with Britain and the founding of a new order was a complex mixture of all these factors. The same complex mixture of factors goes into any political system you can mention. To be sure, at times one factor seems more important than others, but we cannot exactly determine the weight to give any one factor. And notice how the various factors blend into one another. The biological factors lead to the psychological, which in turn lead to the cultural, the rational, and the irrational, forming a seamless web.

One common mistake made about political power is viewing it as a finite, measurable quantity. Power is a connection among people, the ability of one person to get others to do his or her bidding. Political power does not come in jars or megawatts. Revolutionaries in some lands speak of "seizing power," as if power was kept in the national treasury and they could sneak in and grab it at night. The Afghan Taliban "seized power" in 1995–1996, but they were a minority of the Afghan population. Many Afghans hated and fought them. Revolutionaries think that they automatically get legitimacy and authority when they "seize power"—they do not. Power is earned, not seized.

Is power identical to politics? Some power-mad people (including more than a few politicians) see the two as the same, but this is an oversimplification. We might see politics as a combination of goals or policies plus the power necessary to achieve them. Power, in this view, is a prime *ingredient* of politics. It would be difficult to imagine a political system without political power. Even a religious figure who ruled on the basis of love would be exercising power over followers. It might be "nice power," but it would still be power. Power, then, is a sort of *enabling device* to carry out or implement policies and decisions. You can have praiseworthy goals, but unless you have the power to implement them, they remain wishful thoughts.

Others see the essence of politics as a *struggle for power*, a sort of gigantic game in which power is the goal. What, for example, are elections all about? The getting of power. There is a danger here, however. If power becomes the goal of politics, devoid of other purposes, it becomes cynical, brutal, and self-destructive. The Hitler regime destroyed itself in the worship of power. Obsessed with retaining presidential power, President Nixon ruined his own administration. As nineteenth-century British historian and philosopher Lord Acton put it, "Power tends to corrupt; absolute power corrupts absolutely."

KEY CONCEPTS ■ THE SUBFIELDS OF POLITICAL SCIENCE

Most political science departments divide the discipline into several subfields. The bigger the department, the more subfields it will likely have. We will get at least a brief introduction to all of them in this book.

U.S. Politics focuses on institutions and processes, mostly at the federal level but some at state and local levels. It includes parties, elections, public opinion, and executive and legislative behavior.

Comparative Politics examines politics within other nations, trying to establish generalizations and theories of democracy, stability, and policy. It may be focused on various regions, as in "Latin American politics" or "East Asian politics."

International Relations studies politics among nations, including conflict, diplomacy, international law and organizations, and international political economy. The study of U.S. foreign policy has one foot in U.S. politics and one in international relations.

Political Theory, both classic and modern, attempts to define the good polity, often focused on major thinkers.

Public Administration studies how bureaucracies work and how they can be improved.

Constitutional Law studies the applications and evolution of the Constitution within the legal system.

Public Policy studies the interface of politics and economics with an eye to developing effective programs.

quantify To measure with numbers.

hypothesis An initial theory a researcher starts with, to be proved by evidence.

IS POLITICS A SCIENCE?

If we cannot pinpoint which factors contribute what weight to politics, how can politics be a science? Part of the problem here is the definition of science. The original meaning of science, from the French, is simply "knowledge." Later, the natural sciences, which rely on measurement and calculation, took over the term. Now most people think of science as precise and factual, supported by experiments and data. Some political scientists (as we will consider later) have attempted to become like natural scientists; they **quantify** data and manipulate them statistically to validate **hypotheses**. The quantifiers make some good contributions, but usually they focus on small questions of detail rather than on large questions of meaning. This is because they generally have to stick to areas that can be quantified: public opinion, election returns, and congressional voting.

HOW TO . . . ■ STUDY A CHAPTER

Read each chapter *before* class. And do not simply read the chapter; learn it by writing down the following:

A. Find what strikes you as the *three main points.* Do not outline; construct three complete sentences, each with a subject and predicate. They may be long and complex sentences, but they must be complete declarative sentences. You may find two, four, or six main points, but by the time you split, combine, and discard what may or may not be the main points, you will know the chapter. Look for abstract generalizations; the specifics come under point C, examples or case studies. Do not simply copy three sentences from the chapter. Synthesize several sentences, always asking yourself the following: What three sentences distilled from this chapter will most help me on the exam? These might be three main points from Chapter 1:

1. Study politics as a scientist studies nature, trying to understand reality without getting angry at it.
2. Political science combines many disciplines but focuses on power: who holds it and how they use it.
3. Politics can be studied objectively, provided claims are supported by empirical evidence.

B. List a *dozen vocabulary words*, and be able to define them. These are words new to you or words used in a specialized way. This text makes it easier with the boldfaced terms defined in the margins; for terms not in boldface, read with a dictionary handy. These are the key terms from Chapter 1:

authority	methodology
culture	political power
discipline	quantify
empirical	rational
hypothesis	scholarship
irrational	sovereignty
legitimacy	

C. Note specific *examples* or *case studies* that illustrate the main points or vocabulary words. Most will contain proper nouns (that is, capitalized). Examples are not main points or definitions; rather, they are empirical evidence that support a main point. The examples need not be complete sentences. These might be examples from Chapter 1:

Aristotle's "master science"
AIDS versus breast-cancer research
West Germany's success story
Communist regimes in Eastern Europe
Iraq's chaos
Shah's regime in Iran erodes

empirical Based on observable evidence.

But large areas of politics are not quantifiable. How and why do leaders make their decisions? Many decisions are made in secrecy, even in democracies. We do not know exactly how decisions are made in the White House in Washington, the Elysée in Paris, or the Zhongnanhai in Beijing. When members of Congress vote on an issue, can we be certain why they voted that way? Was it constituents' desires, the good of the nation, or the campaign contributions of interest groups? What did the Supreme Court have in mind when it ruled that laying off schoolteachers based on race is unconstitutional but hiring them based on race is not? Try quantifying that. Much of politics—especially dealing with how and why decisions are made—is just too complex and too secret to be quantified. Bismarck, who unified Germany in the nineteenth century, famously compared laws and sausages: It's better not to see them being made.

Does that mean that politics can never be like a natural science? Political science is an **empirical** discipline that accumulates both quantified and qualitative data. With such data, we can find persistent patterns, much like in biology. Gradually, we begin to generalize. When the generalizations become firmer, we call them theories. In a few cases, the theories become so firm that we may call them laws. In this way, the study of politics accumulates knowledge—the original meaning of science.

The Struggle to See Clearly

Political science also resembles a natural science when its researchers, if they are professional, study things as they are and not as they wish them to be. This is more difficult in the study of politics than in the study of stars and cells. Most political scientists have viewpoints on current issues, and it is easy to let these views contaminate their analyses of politics. Indeed, precisely because a given question interests us enough to study it indicates that we bring a certain passion with us. Can you imagine setting to work on a topic you cared nothing about? If you are interested enough to study a question, you probably start by being inclined

CLASSIC WORKS ■ CONCEPTS AND PERCEPTS

In the late eighteenth century, the great Prussian philosopher Immanuel Kant wrote, "Precepts without concepts are empty, and concepts without precepts are blind." This notion helped establish modern philosophy and social science. A precept is what you perceive through your sensory organs: facts, images, numbers, examples, and so on. A concept is an idea in your head: meanings, theories, hypotheses, beliefs, and so on. You can collect many precepts, but without a concept to structure them you have nothing; your precepts are empty of meaning. On the other hand, your concepts are "blind" if they cannot look at reality, which requires precepts. In other words, you need both theory and data.

scholarship Intellectual arguments supported by reason and evidence.

to one side. Too much of this, however, renders the study biased; it becomes a partisan outcry rather than a scholarly search for the truth. How can you guard against this? The traditional hallmarks of **scholarship** give some guidance. A scholarly work should be *reasoned, balanced,* supported with *evidence,* and a bit *theoretical.*

Reasoned You must spell out your reasoning, and it should make sense. If your perspective is colored by an underlying assumption, you should say so. You might say, "For the purpose of this study, we assume that bureaucrats are rational," or "This is a study of the psychology of voters in a small town." Your basic assumptions influence what you study and how you study it, but you can minimize bias by honestly stating your assumptions. Early in the twentieth century, German sociologist Max Weber (1864–1920), who contributed vastly to all the social sciences, held that any findings that support the researcher's political views must be discarded as biased. Few attempt to be that pure, but Weber's point is well-taken: Beware of structuring the study so that it comes out to support a given view.

Balanced You can also minimize bias by acknowledging that there are other ways of looking at your topic. You should mention the various approaches to your topic and what other researchers have found. Instructors are impressed that you know the literature in a given area. They are even more impressed when you can then criticize the previous studies and explain why you think they are incomplete or faulty: "The Jones study of voters found them largely apathetic, but this was an off-year election in which turnout is always lower." By comparing and criticizing several approaches and studies, you present a much more objective and convincing

KEY CONCEPTS ■ POLITICS VERSUS POLITICAL SCIENCE

Political science ain't politics. It is not necessarily training to become a practicing politician. Political science is training in the calm, objective analysis of politics, which may or may not aid working politicians. Side by side, the two professions compare like this:

Politicians	Political Scientists
love power	are skeptical of power
seek popularity	seek accuracy
think practically	think abstractly
hold firm views	reach tentative conclusions
offer single causes	offer many causes
see short-term payoffs	see long-term consequences
plan for next election	plan for next publication
respond to groups	seek the good of the whole
seek name recognition	seek professional prestige

The two professions of politician and political scientist bear approximately the same relation to each other as do bacteria and bacteriologists.

case. Do not commit yourself to a particular viewpoint or theory, but admit that your view is one among several.

Supported with Evidence All scholarly studies require evidence, ranging from the quantified evidence of the natural sciences to the qualitative evidence of the humanities. Political science utilizes both. Ideally, any statement open to interpretation or controversy should be supported with evidence. Common knowledge does not have to be supported; you need not cite the U.S. Constitution to "prove" that presidents serve four-year terms.

But if you say presidents have gained more and more power over the decades, you need evidence. At a minimum, you would cite a scholar who has amassed evidence to demonstrate this point. That is called a "secondary source," evidence that has passed through the mind of someone else. Most student papers use only secondary sources, but instructors are impressed when you use a "primary source," the original gathering of data, as in your own tabulation of what counties in your state showed the strongest McCain vote. Anyone reading a study must be able to review its evidence and judge if it is valid. You cannot keep your evidence or sources secret.

Theoretical Serious scholarship is always connected, at least a little, to a theoretical point. It need not be a sweeping new theory (that's for geniuses), but it should advance the discipline's knowledge a bit. At a minimum, it should confirm or refute an existing theory. Just describing something is not a theory, which is why Google or Wikipedia are seldom enough. You must relate the description to another factor, supported, of course, with empirical evidence. The general pattern of this is as follows: "Most of the time X accompanies Y." Theory-building also helps lift your study above polemics, an argument for or against something. Denouncing al Qaeda, which we all may do with gusto, is not scholarship. Determining why people join al Qaeda (currently studied by several scholars) would have important theoretical and practical impacts.

What Good is Political Science?

Some students come to political science supposing it is just opinions; they write exams or papers that ignore all or some of the preceding points. Yes, we all have political views, but if we let them dominate our study we get invalid results, junk political science. Professional political scientists push their personal views well to one side while engaged in study and research. First-rate thinkers are able to come up with results that actually refute their previously held opinion. When that happens, we have real intellectual growth—an exciting experience that should be your aim.

Something else comes with such an experience: You start to conclude that you should not have been so partisan in the first place. You may back away from the strong views you held earlier and take them with a grain of salt. Accordingly, political science is not necessarily training to become a practicing politician. Political

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science is training in objective and often complex analysis, whereas the practice of politics requires fixed, popular, and simplified opinions.

Political science can contribute to good government, often by warning those in office that all is not well, "speaking Truth to Power," as the Quakers say. Sometimes this advice is useful to working politicians. Public-opinion polls, for example, showed an erosion of trust in government in the United States starting in the mid-1960s. The causes were Vietnam, Watergate, and inflation. Candidates for political office, knowing public opinion, could tailor their campaigns and policies to try to counteract this decline. Ronald Reagan, with his sunny disposition and upbeat views, utilized the discontent to win two presidential terms.

As far back as 1950, the American Political Science Association warned about the weaknesses of U.S. political parties; they were decentralized and uncontrolled. Political parties in the United States cannot force views on members, nor do the parties control who call themselves members. In 1989, David Duke, a former leader of the Ku Klux Klan with ties to Nazis, won a seat as a Republican in the Louisiana state legislature. The Republican National Committee tried to distance itself from Duke, but he continued to call himself a Republican, and there was no legal way to stop him. Parties in the United States are too weak even to control who uses their names.

Some political scientists warned for years of the weak basis of the shah's regime in Iran. Unfortunately, such warnings were unheeded. Washington's policy was to support the shah, and only two months before the end of the shah's reign did the U.S. embassy in Tehran start reporting how unstable Iran had become. State Department officials had let politics contaminate their political analyses; they could not see clearly. Journalists were not much better; few covered Iran until violence broke out. Years in advance, American political scientists specializing in Iran saw trouble coming. More recently, political scientists warned that Iraq was unready for democracy and that a U.S. invasion would unleash chaos. Washington deciders paid no attention to the warnings. Political science can be useful.

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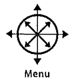
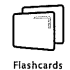
Apply what you learned in this chapter on MyPoliSciKit (www.mypoliscikit.com).



Assessment Review this chapter using learning objectives, chapter summaries, practice tests, and more.



Flashcards Learn the key terms in this chapter; you can test yourself by term or definition.

Video Analyze recent world affairs by watching streaming video from major news providers.

Comparative Exercises Compare political ideas, behaviors, institutions, and policies worldwide.

KEY TERMS

authority (p. 9)
culture (p. 11)
discipline (p. 4)
empirical (p. 15)
hypothesis (p. 14)
irrational (p. 12)
legitimacy (p. 8)
methodology (p. 7)
political power (p. 7)
quantify (p. 14)
rational (p. 11)
scholarship (p. 16)
sovereignty (p. 8)

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