



This is “Preface”, article 2 from the book [A Primer on Politics \(index.html\)](#) (v. 0.0).

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Preface

PLEASE NOTE: This book is currently in draft form; material is not final.

An Introduction to Politics proposes to chart a path that is at once a little more brief, concise and in between than those textbooks currently on the market. As this class is usually taught to freshmen, there is little to be gained and much to be lost with overloading a text with too much minutiae of the ins and outs of politics. Covering too much will, in the end, be covering too little if students don't read or give up on reading the book. Politics is a great story—the story of human existence. A successful textbook needs to tell that story.

The handful of students at elite universities might be ready for Magstadt or Roskin, however, that's not where most of us teach. Our students are no less capable; they have great potential and many of them will realize that potential in a variety of fields. But at the beginning level, many of them have to be convinced that politics, among many other things, actually matters in their lives. How many times have you heard a student say (or have you seen them write) "I don't really care about politics"? Their idea of politics is congressional and presidential bickering, which makes no sense until we explain to them that this is how our government—and much of the world—works.

This book should appeal to any professor who understands students and wants to be able to provide them with a basic outline of politics, what it means and how it works. For example, my proposed theory chapter would include a lot of useful information about how the politics of the western world developed, using theorists, as a way of explaining some of why we believe what we do. Moreover, such a book needs to engage students and help begin to convince them that politics actually matters. I've been teaching freshmen and sophomores for more than 15 years; that's forced me to be a generalist with an appreciation for the bigger picture and an understanding of how little new students may know.

All of the bells and whistles added to a typical text to try to make it relevant either mislead the students or bog them down with trivial and tangential information. As many professors know, students largely only read if they know that material from the book is going to be on the test. A textbook that is clear and direct and sticks to

the basics, while still being readable and not dry, will give students what they need without asking them to wade through a lot of extras. Hence one of my fundamental laws of explanation: All life is politics. An Introduction to Politics will attempt to demystify the political world, and make it relevant by showing how things actually work and why—how political systems divide the spoils and spread the burdens of civilized life; how economic and political systems intersect; and how approaches to politics have evolved to bring us where we are today.

The book will be divided into the following chapters, roughly paralleling the pattern found in existing books:

1. Politics and power—Defining both politics and power; describing why government seems to be necessary; explaining how governments use power to create situations in which society can flourish (and when they don't). Explanation of the concept of the state and the rule of law.
2. Taking a theorem to keep from getting thick—A survey of the major political theories throughout history; explaining how theory both predates and justifies different political system; citing examples of when and where theory has been put to use in creating new governments. This would also explain something about how we got where we are.
3. Isms—A survey of the different isms, including liberalism, libertarianism, socialism, communism, fascism, Nazism and anarchism, including the distinction between classical liberalism and the American subsystems of conservatism and liberalism.
4. A republic or a democracy—direct rule by the people versus representative governments, and the different flavors those come in. How governments apportion power in civil society. Also, the role of constitutions; federalism vs. unitary systems.
5. Citizens and politics—Ways people participate in politics; political culture; political communication including media systems; interest groups; protest movements.
6. Electoral systems—The importance of voting; who votes and who doesn't; why people do or don't vote; different kinds of electoral systems and how that changes the politics of a particular state. (This gets its own chapter because encouraging civic engagement is a common campus wide objective at many schools, and one that political science departments are ideally suited to address.)
7. The building blocks of government—executive, legislatures and court systems. How power is divided between different parts of government in different places.
8. Economic systems—market-based systems versus command systems (capitalism vs. socialism); the trade-offs involved in each approach; the

advantages and disadvantages of one system over another. Also, the intersection between business and government. This deserves a specific chapter because politics and economics are so intertwined; to my mind, politics is basically economic competition carried on by other means.

9. International relations—Relations between states; what kinds of factors play into the actions of states in dealing with other states; why domestic political interests and the realities of international relations sometimes don't match up. Realism versus idealism, and the different things nations do to achieve results in international relations.
10. Issues—How current issues inform political decisions: global climate change; global debt; the never-ending struggle for power and security; terrorism; trade. An issues chapter, written broadly enough, will help students connect the idea of politics and government to things that are happening around them. A comment my students frequently make is that they are very glad, at the end of the class, because things they see and hear on the news now make sense.