



This is “Politics and Power”, chapter 1 from the book [A Primer on Politics \(index.html\)](#) (v. 0.0).

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Chapter 1

Politics and Power

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

In this chapter, you will learn about:

- Why people don't like politics, and why politics matters
- Why we have government
- What keeps government legitimate in the eyes of people
- How governments use power
- How governments have evolved over time

1.1 You Don't Care About Government, and Maybe You Should

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LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Understand why people don't like politics
2. Understand the meaning of politics
3. Understand why politics matters

You might have said this. Some of your classmates have said this. A lot of people say this:

“I don't care about politics.”

Many Americans have said this for a long time. Why? In a country founded on a great political experiment—in a country where we are sometimes so proud of ourselves that we annoy the heck out of foreigners—many Americans say they don't like politics, and sometimes appear to have only the dimmest notion of how the country works. Or how politics work at all. (For example, in one recent survey, more than half the people receiving some kind of government assistance did not understand that their assistance came from the government.)

Why don't we like politics? Talking about politics can help you start a bar fight, and easily turn you into flame-bait on Facebook. An old maxim states that the two things you shouldn't talk about are politics and religion (because those are good ways to start an argument). And many of us don't like to argue that much.

But as a professor of mine once said, those are precisely the two things we should talk about: How we live now, and how we might live in the hereafter. In this book, we're going to talk about how we live now. And how we live now is all about politics, because much of life is politics.

Our job is to cut through all the smoke and mirrors and understand how things are supposed to work and how they do work. Politics is a pretty good story—it’s the history of the world, the news this week, and a window on the future all once. Like a good movie, it’s got heroes and villains, romance and passion, action and adventure—and it’s all true. Together, we can tell that story and know more at the end than we did at the beginning.

What Is Politics?

What do we mean when we say **politics**¹? The dictionary definition is usually something along the lines of the art and practice of government. Unpack that definition, and you get all the things people do by way of defining, organizing and regulating society, from campaigns and elections to making laws, taxing and spending, regulating behavior and managing the economy. Politics is the art of the possible: How do you get people to agree to do something that you want to do, in a way that they won’t want to hurt you after you’ve achieved your objective?

The 20th century American political scientist Harold Lasswell offered a tighter (and insightful definition): “Who gets what, when, and how.” A similar definition comes from another heavy hitter of that era, political scientist David Easton, who called politics “the authoritative allocation of value.” If you work through this definition, it makes some sense.

“Authoritative” refers to some group of people with authority—the ability to make decisions and do something. Like a coach at a football game, political authority means that someone can call the shots. Things may not always work out as planned, but authority means someone can set a direction. “Allocation” means dividing things up—who gets what. At any given moment, the pie is one size, and “authoritative allocation” means somebody is deciding how it should be sliced. (The size of the pie regularly changes, another place where politics can have a great influence.) Finally, “value” is stuff that we want—food, shelter, money (retirement programs, health care assistance, support for business), public facilities (such as colleges, stadiums and airports), or even space (such as state and national parks and forests). So, as we said before, politics is how we make these kinds of decisions: Who gets what and who’s going to pay for it?

What Is Political Science?

Political science² is the study of politics (which is actually more interesting than it sounds, although the kinds of things that get political scientists excited might not make most people run for the video camera). It is a social science as it involves the study of people and how they behave, and therefore in the same family as

1. The art and practice of government.
2. The formal study of politics, and a way of measuring and understanding human behavior in society.

psychology, sociology, history, anthropology and economics (apologies to anyone I've left out). Because it deals with real people, we have to observe people, ask them questions and collect data on what really happens, as opposed to doing live experiments on folks. For our purposes, political science will help us study how government works (and when it doesn't), so that we understand politics better.

And we should want to understand it better. Politics is all around us, from the purely personal level all the way to the global economy. I used to hear people say, "that's just politics" to explain why something had happened or why someone got promoted over somebody else. And then, at last, it dawned on me: All life is politics. We are social creatures by nature, not naturally solitary, and what we do and why we do it has much to do with the networks of people we know, the cultural expectations we have of each other, and conditions in which we all live. People also sometimes say, "it's who you know, not what you know," and there's a lot of truth to that. (Successful players in politics at all levels know a lot of people, including the right people.)

Politics: Hate the Player, Not the Game

But if politics is so important, why don't people like politics? First, politics is not pretty. This is not dancing with the (fading) stars; this isn't a beauty contest (although it never hurts a political candidate to be considered good-looking). Politics is often partisan—people take sides, and try to win elections to get into power, and in the process say nasty things about the people running against them. Negative campaigning tends to make people dislike politics, Stephen Ansolabehere and Shanto Iyengar, "Going Negative," <http://pcl.stanford.edu/common/docs/research/iyengar/1996/goingneg.html> yet it's an accepted article of campaign faith that you can't nice your way to victory.

Meanwhile, many recent political candidates are fond of saying things like "The system is broken." The unstated subtext is that the candidate is the person we need to fix the system, but the message that may be getting through to voters is that government doesn't work, so why bother? It's no more broken than it ever was, and largely works like always has. Only the arguments have changed. As Pete Townsend said in "Won't Get Fooled Again," (the greatest rock'n'roll song ever written about politics), "The party on the left, is now the party on the right, and the beards have all grown longer overnight." (Really, nothing much changes in terms of human nature and how we attempt to make things work in society.) But telling people that it's broken has the counterintuitive effect of making them not care. People feel powerless in the face of problems they don't feel they can fix.

Politics, because it's often about conflict, is messy. As the 19th century American poet John Godfrey Saxe once said, people who like laws and sausages shouldn't watch either being made. The actual quote is "Laws, like sausages, cease to inspire respect in proportion as we know how they are made." The quote is often mis-attributed to the 19th century German political leader Otto von Bismarck. But that thought in itself gives us a reason to get over the less-pleasant parts of politics and focus on what matters: If how we live is determined, in part, by the laws of the country where we live, then it doesn't matter what happened on the way to those laws. For example, when I worked in a state Legislature, back in the day, I was amazed at the people who were there. And I mean the legislators. They were not all very nice, or very smart, and a lot of them had no taste in clothes (seriously). But eventually, it dawned on me that a law is a good law or a bad law irrespective of the personalities of the people who passed it. What really matters for most of us is how does the law work? And we should care about that, because those laws say something about how fast you can drive, what taxes will be, or what kinds of mind-altering substances it is legal to use.

One more reason why people don't like politics could be the parties and politicians themselves. In the United States, neither Republicans nor Democrats, conservatives nor liberals do a very good job of explaining what is that they believe. Part of that is because we seem to be living through an era of negative campaigning—parties and candidates spend more time attacking each other than they do explaining what they believe. And when they do explain, it's not always very clear. Neither side, to my mind, builds a very good case for one approach to government or another, and both sides have some logic behind their positions. I'm not always sure that candidates of any stripe have a clear understanding of why they believe what they say they believe, and as a consequence, they don't do a very good job of explaining it to you, the voter and citizen whose job it is to decide if that's the way the country should go. Meanwhile, as we've already noted, negative campaigning tends to turn people off when it comes to politics, so that doesn't help.

How Politics Affects You

Which brings us to another reason people don't like politics. People—and some younger people—sometimes say they don't like politics because it doesn't affect them. An ordinary person is quite busy with her or his life—working a job, going to school, taking care of family members, trying to have a little fun now and then. So it's easy to lose sight of why your local city council, the state Legislature, or even Congress should matter. Unfortunately, perhaps, in the United States, this has gotten to the point where many people don't seem to grasp how it all works (and, as we'll see, American government in particular can be a bit complicated).

Odds are, as you go through life, you're going to care more about politics. People do tend to care more about politics as they get older. In the United States, voter turnout is higher among older groups and lowest for the youngest voters. In Norway, for example, there's a senior citizens party. Senior citizens share many things in common, but one of them is they won't live forever. You might think, then, that the party would go the way of the dinosaur and eventually fade from view. But as people get older there, their viewpoints about what matters change, and the senior citizens party gets new members to replace the old ones.

Why would it be that people care more about politics as they get older? (And voting statistics show us that they do.) When you finish college and get a job, suddenly laws about behavior in the workplace and taxes are suddenly much more important. If you move away from home, and especially when you buy a house, you have more of a stake in your neighborhood and community, if only because your house value depends in part on what shape the neighborhood's in. And you're paying property taxes directly now, and maybe you have kids of your own, and suddenly the local school district and its governance is more important to you than when you were a student there yourself. So, as we say in politics, where you stand depends upon where you sit. And when it's your chair, that changes something about where you stand on politics and government in general.

Figure 1.1 *ART TO COME*

Who votes, demographically, over time: Voting by demographic group in even-numbered years in the U.S.

But take it as an article of faith that, whatever your age, government affects you in a lot of ways (and I mean all of you). Even if you're still living with your parents and not even old enough to vote, politics affects your life in many ways, from rules for younger drivers to requirements for standardized testing in high school. Every decision such as those is made in government, which means it was decided in a political process that involved people from all over the nation.

Politics decides if we go to war, and whether you'll be sent overseas to fight. Politics decides how high taxes are, and what programs get funded, and whether one drug is legal but another is not. Politics is how we sort through what you want and what I want. Politics is how we divide up the pie, and change its size and shape. Politics is how much public college tuition costs and how much that tuition is subsidized by the state.

Take that one example: Across the country, most public colleges are state-run institutions. (You're at a private college? Financial aid is often financed by federal and state governments. Student loan rates can be determined by Congress.) They

have boards of trustees or regents who oversee the operation, and those trustees often are appointed by governors and legislators. State legislatures often decide how much tuition can be raised, and usually decide how much state tax money will go to support higher education. And governors and state legislatures will also set tax rates to determine how much money states will have available. Those governors and state legislators all are elected by citizens. And many of those citizens may be more concerned about issues that affect their legislative districts than they are about the state as a whole. And all of that happens in the middle of a lot of competing interests—business groups, public employee unions, health care professionals, economic development advocates, transportation interests (which includes the people who build, maintain and manage the roads you travel on to get to school or work), social service providers, park and outdoor recreation users, and K-12 teachers, and people with kids. Every year, people with an interest in all of those areas push legislators to spend more on them, which may mean less spent on something else.

Politics—the push and pull, the negotiations, the arguments—are how we decide who gets what. And who gets what has an effect on every person in this country, whether they know it or not.

People also say, “Government doesn’t do anything for me” (students regularly tell me they hear this from their parents). And yet government organizes and pays for roads, bridges, airports, seaports, mass transit, schools, public hospitals, health care, retirement programs, police and fire services, parks, economic development, and national defense, among a lot of other things. Some people argue that many things on that list shouldn’t be part of government. Whatever you think about that, the fact of the matter is that government does do a lot of things, and how those things are done is a matter of politics. If nothing else, who gets elected will change the nature and operation of government services and that will affect you.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Politics is about who gets what, and how.
- Political science is the study of government, including policymaking, campaigns and elections, institutions, and people’s behavior with regard to politics
- Politics has a great impact on your life.

EXERCISES

1. List some of the ways politics and government affect your life right now.
2. Think of a law you'd like to see passed. What would it take for that to happen?

1.2 Do We Need a Government?

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

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Understand why we might want to have a government.
2. Understand the role of power in politics, and understand the different faces of power.
3. Get an overview about how systems of government developed over time.

You might have gone to a leadership camp or seminar some time. (I did.) The organizers trot out a speaker, often a broken down football coach who can speak a little. The old coach will say something very much like “You know what happens when you assume? You make an ass out of you and me.” (My impression at the time was that there really was only one ass in the room.) But there is a bit of point here—we all need to question our assumptions, and try to limit them. Realistically, you can’t get through life without some assumptions. (The mathematician and philosopher Kurt Godel proved that even basic arithmetic is founded on some critical assumptions.) If we take that to its logical conclusion, we don’t know anything. But let’s not go that far. It’s not impossible for us to know something, even if we know that our opinion on that something may change as we get more information.

So, with that in mind, the assumption we’re making in this book is that we need a government. And that’s not an assumption, as we’ll see, that’s been shared by everyone throughout history. Therefore, we should probably occasionally question that assumption. If nothing else, testing your assumptions helps you strengthen the arguments you use to support them.

Why do we have to do things this way? We don’t, necessarily. We could just let everything happen and let everyone choose for themselves. Anarchists have argued for centuries that government makes us worse people; that, left to their own, people will just get along and do what they want. Libertarians, who believe in minimal government, make a very similar argument (perhaps without realizing it).

There are a number of potential problems with the idea that we would be better with no government, however. (And, examined closely, anarchy doesn't really mean no government; it tends to mean a decentralized sort of government that limits the amount of power anybody has.) The first is what we might call the traffic light problem. In a society of any size, it becomes very difficult to predict what everybody will do, like having a lot of drivers at an intersection. Traffic lights help sort out who goes when, which cuts way down on accidents. You don't have to know people to know what each one will do—there's an established order (as long as everyone's watching the light as they approach the intersection). In economics, traffic lights are a classic example of a public or social good—traffic lights won't be provided by normal market activity because nobody can make a profit from them. Without some kind of social organization—government—there will be no traffic lights (or four-way stops or roundabouts or any other way making sense out of an intersection). As annoying as they can be when we're in a hurry, I think we'd actually miss them.

It's not all pretty lights, however. By living in an organized society, we give up some freedom in exchange for predictability and certainty. If society were the 30 or so people in your class or your section, you'd all get to know each other enough that your behaviors would be predictable and understandable. There wouldn't be so much need for written rules, because, generally, everyone would have a sense of what the rules are. But as societies grow, eventually you don't know everyone in the group, and organization becomes more likely as people seek to continue to make life predictable and stable. Human beings don't like change, and yet nothing is probably more certain in our lives. So government is one way we try to keep change at a minimum.

In a small society, say a band of the size of a class—up to 150 people, according to one study. The late W.L. Gore, the man who brought us Gore-Tex, based on his own observations, demonstrated that the ideal factory size was about 150 people, because then everybody in the plant would know everybody else and that tended to boost efficiency and productivity, as well as workers' contentment. Later studies have tended to support Gore's experience.—you can pretty much know everyone personally, and you can predict their behaviors. Rules get established by custom and tradition, and people will largely get along.

But as societies get bigger, we have a harder time predicting how everyone will behave. Very soon, we don't know everyone, and your custom and tradition might be slightly different than mine. (If you travel overseas, for example, don't flash someone a reversed peace sign [palm facing you], because in many parts of the world, that means something else, and it's not a welcoming gesture.)

Formal politics seems to arise in any society of any size. People begin to make rules, choose leaders, find ways to make decisions, and find ways to exercise power. Because as soon as someone's a "leader," or some person or group of people can make decisions, we're talking about power. Rightly or wrongly, human beings seem to tend to prefer some kind of organization in society. One of the great challenges of being human is that while there's nothing we avoid so much as change (unless we're in charge of the change), there's nothing so inevitable in our lives. Change is stressful; enough serious change can make you susceptible to illness. And so we build custom and tradition in our lives, because predictability can be comforting, and it's often less work. In economic terms, predictability in social life lowers transaction costs, which are the costs of negotiating and enforcing contracts. Every interaction with other people is not a contract, in a narrow sense, but like walking into a room full of people you don't know, if you couldn't predict anybody else's behavior, life would be a lot of work. Although sometimes we would prefer to do what we want when we want to, life is slightly easier when we know what the rules are, what is expected of us, and that there are formal consequences for our actions. Consequently, living in an organized society means trading some freedom for some level of predictability.

Politics and Power

Custom and tradition thus give rise to rules, and to government. (The fact that some people then try to use all this for their own benefit doesn't change the fact that most people seem to prefer some kind of government.) This formal politics means that some people in any society will be given some portion of **power**³. What does that look like? Power takes many shapes:

- The ability to get somebody to do something they wouldn't otherwise do. The government, by threats and rewards, gets you to buckle your seatbelt while driving, to file your income tax return on time, and to not throw your garbage in the street. You might do all those things on your own, but we probably know at least a few people who wouldn't. This is sometimes called coercive power, and government is more likely to have it than anyone else. Aside from self-defense, government tends also to have the sole ability to legally use force.
- The ability to set agendas. Agenda-setting means the ability to decide what gets talked about and what never comes up. This is a big deal in government. If your issue remains "on the back burner," as they say in politics, it won't get attention or resolution. Setting the agenda means that somebody has the power to decide what issues get the state's attention and which don't.
- Access to decision makers. Power can mean that you have somebody's ear. If Bill Gates calls the president, he gets a call back long before you

3. The ability to get people to do things, to set agendas, to participate in decision-making, and the ability to convince, persuade and coerce.

or I get a call from either one of them. Access means you at least have a chance to be heard, often in person, which means you will have greater influence on agendas and outcomes.

- The ability to participate in decision making. Here again, power can be the ability to weigh in on what will be done on issues that have made the public agenda. Elected (and some appointed) officials tend to have the most of this, but that's why we elect, them isn't it?
- Power is also the ability to persuade. For example, when the president speaks, it's news, and if the president speaks well, he or she can rally the nation in one direction or another. An effective president can also push Congress to approve one law or stop another. Part of the skill required to be an effective leader is being able to convince people to do things.

All of this matters to us because whatever our elected officials do will have an impact on us, at home, at school, or at work. Changes in state laws have made it illegal to talk or text on a cell phone while driving, or for young drivers to have too many people in their cars. The federal No Child Left Behind Law pushed states to adopt standardized testing, which, it can be argued, changed the whole direction of education across the country. The people who favored that law had the power to see it enacted into law; the federal government, by tying it to federal funds to education, had the power to make state governments apply it to the schools within their borders. Power is the ability to make things happen and to get things done. Power can be a good thing or a bad thing (if it's used to oppress or kill people), but it's always there.

Models of Power

All of the types of power show up in and around government. But who has power? There are different theories, and all of them have some truth.

- Majoritarian: The majority decides. Elections are typically decided on a **majoritarian**⁴ basis. Whoever gets the most votes wins, so, at least for that election, a majority decided. That presumes, however, that the winner got 50 percent plus one; if we allow multiple candidates, someone can win with a plurality of votes (the most votes among the candidates, but not a majority of the total vote cast). Majorities also tend to be temporary things, and that doesn't tell us much about who might be pushing people to become part of one majority or another.
- Pluralist: Different groups coalesce around different issues at different times, each competing for desired outcomes in decisions made by government. The pluralist model suggests that there are a lot of competing groups, each looking out for their own issues, and, to some

4. A theory of power that says majorities rule and therefore have power.

extent, helping to keep each other in check. The evidence for **pluralism**⁵ includes the fact that groups do tend to be focused on particular issues while ignoring others. This means that no group is likely to be all-powerful. For example, a campaign for a school levy may unite disparate groups of people the community, but the same group isn't likely to spend much time on issues that don't relate to local schools.

- **Elitist: Elitism**⁶ says that despite the evidence for a pluralistic division of power, wealthy and powerful elites tend to dominate decision-making, with relatively little meaningful competition among groups. One of the flaws in pluralism might be that even if there are a lot of groups involved in politics, they won't necessarily keep each other in check. And as some groups have more money, those groups likely will be more powerful. So car dealers were able to block a proposed national "lemon" law in part because consumer advocates were less organized and much less well-funded than were the dealers.

As we'll see throughout our exploration of politics, there is evidence for majoritarian, elite and pluralist models. Groups do form around certain issues and compete over them. Elites do exist, and tend to exert greater influence on some issues. Elites, however, are not monolithic, and frequently are in conflict with each other.

Legitimacy and Power

Whatever the form of government, it has to be legitimate in the eyes of its people to survive. **Legitimacy**⁷ is the belief by citizens that their government has the right to rule, that the government's laws should be obeyed. People feel they have a stake in society, which usually means they're getting something from it. It also means that governments must be seen to be fair. If a government treats its citizens unequally, people will become angry. Throughout history, protest movements grow out of inequality, particularly inequality of opportunity but also inequality of achievement. The American Civil Rights movement, which pushed for equal political treatment and equal economic opportunity for people of diverse backgrounds, grew out of 100 years of discrimination that followed the end of slavery and the Civil War.

Every state has to establish its legitimacy, and no state that isn't legitimate in the eyes of its people can be successful for very long, if at all. If the state is seen as legitimate, then people support it, obey its laws, and pay their taxes. At the most basic level, legitimacy has always depended on two things: Keeping people safe, and keeping them fed. If either one of those things fail, a government is likely to fail as

5. A theory of power that says that groups contend for power, but not all at the same time or over the same things.

6. A theory of power that says that politics and government are frequently dominated by the wealthy and powerful.

7. Citizens' belief that their government has the right to rule and should be obeyed.

people lose faith in it and stop supporting it. Even non-democratic governments face this test.

Most governments therefore try to remain legitimate in the eyes of their citizens. Some governments make appeals to nationalism, a kind of pride in the nation-state. This can be risky; nationalism can lead to anger at foreigners or people who are in some way different. Extreme nationalism pushed people in Nazi Germany to condone the killing of Jews, gypsies and gays. China has pushed nationalism as a substitute for the ideology of communism, but saw anti-Japanese riots break out in 2005 in partial response. China and Japan have a not always happy history, but at the moment they are major trading partners and Japan has been a big investor in China. As the Chinese government's other legitimization tactic is economic growth, riots against a major trading partner might be counterproductive.

Governments also are expected to create the conditions that provide people with an acceptable standard of living. Stagnant living standards helped topple the Soviet Union; poverty in rural China has led to protests even as living standards rise in other parts of the country.

Governments also obtain legitimacy by allowing people to participate in politics—voting, running for office, and having access to people in government. If nothing else, if people get to vote, they are less likely to take up arms and try to overthrow the government. If you participate in something, you're more likely to support it. Perhaps you've done an exercise like this: You break up into groups, and each group is supposed to complete a quick project—make a flag, come up with a motto, something. Usually it doesn't go well; the final product won't get taped to the refrigerator at home. But ask the groups to stand up for their work, and they all cheer heartily. Government is the same way. If you get to participate in any meaningful way, it becomes your government, and a little bit more legitimate.

If governments have legitimacy, they can exercise power. A government with no power is not a government worth discussing. It can't do anything. People sometimes talk as though they want government to have no power, but that would eventually mean government couldn't do the things you might want it to do (and, granted, everybody seems to have their own list of what that would be.)

The State

For our purposes, the institution that collectively holds this kind of power is often called "**the state**"⁸. This doesn't mean the U.S. state that you live in; it means a hypothetical government of a hypothetical nation (like in economics where we talk about "the firm," meaning any typical business). We mean governments in general,

8. Any hypothetical or real government, controlling a defined territory.

so we mean the state in the way we might say, “the car,” as an idea, as opposed to that specific car over there. So the state is the government and all the people in it, and even though every nation is different, they tend to share some similarities. (We should note that a “**nation**”⁹ is also used in the sense of a group of people who share a common culture, language, religion and/or ethnicity, so that a nation isn’t always a state).

A state is said to be sovereign, which means there is no higher power above it. A **sovereign**¹⁰ state is independent of other states; has defined borders which its neighbors respect; it has ultimate legal authority within those borders.

That means the state has power. If we talk about the power of the state, we’re talking about what the state can do—what it can compel people to do. So the power of the state enforces speeds limits, decides where houses and businesses can be located, and decides what taxes will be and how that money will be spent. If you attend any kind of public school, drive on a public road, or get time-and-a-half if you work more than 40 hours in a week, that’s all, in part, because of the active power of the state.

And yet people in general, and Americans in particular, have mixed feelings about the power of the state. We tend to like the services government can provide, but we aren’t as certain about the limits on individual behavior that come with an organized state. Like people throughout history, we’re less excited about the taxes we pay than we are about the services we receive. So while we’re grateful for a functioning highway system, we have less consensus over speed limits, and motorcycle helmet and seatbelt laws (all of which have been shown to keep people safer on the road). People in general, and Americans in particular, don’t like other folks telling them what to do. But living in an organized society means you probably don’t have complete freedom to do anything at any time or place.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Government can provide predictability and stability in daily life.
- A state has to have power to do anything.
- Power shows up in several different ways, and is exercised by different individuals and groups at different times and places.

9. A group of people united by a common language, culture, ethnicity, and/or religion; not necessarily a state.
10. The notion that a state has defined borders which are respected by its neighbors, and which has ultimate legal authority within its own boundaries.

EXERCISES

1. Who has power in your life? Who do you have power over?
2. Is the government where you live legitimate? What does this government do that preserves its legitimacy in the eyes of its citizens?

1.3 A (Very) Brief History of Government

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

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Understand the historical path of the development of governments.
2. Understand historical events and forces that shaped the development of those governments

One piece of evidence that would suggest that humans prefer an organized government is that for thousands of years, we've always had them. For much of human history, people seem to prefer to live in organized groups. These groups took different forms in different times and places, but generally there seems always to have been a process by which people made decisions. We know a little about the earliest states, which ranged from democracies and republics in ancient Greece and Rome, to early kingdoms and empires all over the world, to ancient states in China where everybody who wasn't the king was, in effect, a slave.

Tribal societies tend to be somewhat **egalitarian**¹¹—everyone tends to have more of an equal say. Native American tribes and tribes in ancient Europe might have had a king or a chief, but that person was often elected and had limited power (with no guarantee that you'd be succeeded by your son or daughter). Some tribes, such as the Comanches of the American Southwest, chose separate war and peace chiefs, who even then had authority only to the extent that they were successful in the ventures they organized. The state has always had to provide something to people to be legitimate, and even the kings and emperors of antiquity weren't immune to public pressure. Governments continued (and still continue) to rule as long as they provided some combination of stability, safety and prosperity.

11. A society or community in which people are treated roughly the same, with equal respect and privileges. The opposite would be aristocratic, in which some people have more rights than others.

Many ancient kingdoms and empires made religious appeals, even going so far as to say that the king or emperor was a god and therefore had to be obeyed. We don't know to what extent people believed this, even among the people who said it. And it was a dicey proposition—if you're a god, and you make it rain, and then one year it doesn't rain, people might begin to doubt. An El Nino weather event resulted in droughts in Egypt that toppled the Old Kingdom around 2150 BCE. Succeeding

pharaohs in the Middle and New Kingdom eras were a little more careful about claiming to be rainmakers after that.

States and rulers didn't give up entirely as a basis for religion. Kings and emperors around the world, from Japan and China to Europe, frequently claimed to be either chosen by god or, in some instances, gods themselves. In ancient Greece and Rome, religion was an important part of civic life. Elected officials in the Roman republic had to perform ceremonial religious duties as part of their jobs. Roman emperors often claimed to be gods themselves, but then adopted Christianity as a way of maintaining authority and legitimacy as the empire came under increasing pressure from within and without.

The Greeks and Romans

Not every state was ruled by a king or an emperor. Studies have shown that if societies become wealthy enough, they tend to become more democratic. Minxin Pei, *Economic Institutions, Democracy and Development*, <http://carnegieendowment.org/1999/02/26/economic-institutions-democracy-and-development/2uv0> This appears to be because having satisfied their basic needs, people can turn to other pursuits, and are less likely to surrender quite so much liberty in exchange for security. So, city-states (states not much bigger than a city, but sovereign nations nonetheless) in Greece and nearby lands evolved into something like democracies. Ancient Athens was a **democracy**¹², in that a lot of people voted directly on the affairs of state. However, that voting population was limited to free, property-owning males, so that women, foreigners and slaves (which may have been as much as two-thirds of the population of Athens) didn't get to vote. And even in this democracy, the citizens elected less-numerous councils above them to make important decisions. So they were also somewhat like **republics**¹³, in which people elect other people to make decisions on their behalf.

Greece was never a very big country, and even when Alexander the Great conquered a good chunk of the world he knew about, his empire didn't outlive his death at age of 33. But the Greeks are very important to the history of politics. They wrote—a lot—and a lot of their work survives. The multiplicity of Greek city-states meant they experimented with a variety of governments. The work of Plato and especially Aristotle invented political science as the formalized study of governments. What they did and wrote had a huge impact on the western world, and eventually on the globe.

Rome was also a city-state, and the Romans were very impressed with the culture and learning of the Greeks. The Roman state was much more enduring, and Roman political practice and law also had a huge impact on the development of

12. A system of government involving direct rule by the people.

13. A system of government in which people elect others to make decisions on their behalf.

government through the ages. Rome, which grew from a city-state to an empire, evolved from rule by a king to a republic in about 508 BCE. The Roman republic featured a series of elected officials, each with specific duties, and a senate, where elected citizens would also weigh in on the tasks and issues of the day. Roman government was noted for its checks and balances—it wasn't difficult for one part of government to block action by another part. The Roman republic had so many checks and balances that it was in fact hard to get anything done, so that needed changes to the law, such as land reform and tax reform, never happened. In the end, the richest empire in the western world couldn't afford to defend itself, and attempted to rule an empire with what amounted to a government designed to run a city.

When Octavius, (Julius Caesar's nephew) became emperor in 27 BCE, it meant that somebody could finally make a decision, and the Roman Empire lasted nearly another 500 years. But a system of government that relies on continually finding just the right guy to be in charge is an iffy proposition.

The Eastern Roman (Byzantine) Empire, based in Constantinople (now Istanbul) lasted another 1,000 years. In the west, however, what survived the empire was what we now think of as the Catholic Church, and it was to dominate European politics for the next 1,000 years. The church, as the one institution that survived the fall of Rome (conquered, sacked and then finally occupied by invading peoples from the north and east), created order, preserved learning, and exercised some influence and authority over the many kingdoms that divided up Europe and the old Roman world.

Meanwhile, the Islamic empire that grew out of Saudi Arabia around 700 CE also was heavily influenced by faith, so that the two competing sides in the western world were significantly faith-based states. This led to a lot of debate about the role of the church in secular (everyday) affairs, a debate that never quite seems to leave us, even today.

After the Roman Empire

This era in Europe, from 500–1,000 CE, is sometimes called the **Dark Ages**¹⁴, which scholars have more recently decried as an incorrect characterization of life at the time. But it is true that life was less safe; the old Roman order had broken down. Travel became more difficult, trade dried up, and people again traded liberty for security. This led to the development of a system called feudalism, in which common people bound themselves to powerful rulers who offered security in exchange for labor and goods. The legitimacy of the feudal state was, to some extent, based on this mutual obligation—feed me and I'll keep the bad guys away.

14. A time in Europe when society was in a state of uncertainty following the collapse of the Western Roman Empire.

Some scholars say feudalism flourished between 900 and 1500 CE, part of which (around 900–1200 CE) is often referred to as the **Middle Ages**¹⁵. At its best, it meant a safer life; at its worst, it meant economic exploitation and a lack of freedom. A peasant classified as a serf, for example, was bound to the land and the person who owned it—not quite a slave, but certainly not a free person.

Feudalism¹⁶ was not very economically efficient. Being self-sufficient is an attractive idea, but you generally get better stuff at better prices if you can shop around. And not every part of every country is as good at producing things as some other places—it would be very expensive to grow oranges in the Dakotas, and they probably wouldn't taste as good as oranges from California and Florida. But with trade limited by the uncertain conditions at the time, people's living standards were sometimes lower than they had been than during the Pax Romana (the Roman peace).

This wasn't to last, however. Feudalism helped create order out of chaos. This system held together, somewhat roughly, for 500 years or so. Order created safety, which made travel and trade possible again, and that meant more wealth. As Karl Marx once observed, by creating security, feudalism sowed the seeds of its own demise. From small, self-sustaining political units, empires and kingdoms grew. Travel and trade became possible again, people's lives got better, and suddenly the guy with the big muscles and the pointed stick wasn't quite as important as the guy with all the gold. Increasingly, urban areas grew and cities began to clamor for freedom if not outright independence from kings, queens and the duke of whatever.

The Renaissance

The return of stability and order helped create **Renaissance**¹⁷. From an old French word meaning “to be reborn,” the Renaissance (14th–17th centuries) saw an increase in arts and literature as well as trade and material wealth, and, inevitably, more participatory forms of government. Italian city-states such as Florence and Venice became republics; people in what is now Switzerland and the Netherlands fought for and won their independence from the descendants of the feudal lords of Europe.

Along the way a couple of remarkable events occurred that had great impact on the later history of governments. In the middle of a dispute with a group of unhappy barons, in 1215 King John of England was forced to sign a document we now refer to as the Magna Carta, “the Great Charter.” (They didn't call it that. It was later referred to as Magna Carta so as to distinguish it from another charter.) The Magna Carta talked about a lot of things that involved particular disputes between John and the feudal lords underneath him. But of particular importance to us, it

15. After the Dark Ages and before the Renaissance, a historical period when feudalism helped restore order to Europe.

16. A system of government in which people trade liberty for security.

17. A period in which Europe recovered from the uncertainty of the previous several hundred years, highlighted by the growth of trade, wealth, and the arts and sciences.

established that justice had to be applied evenly to all, as opposed to the king just throwing you in jail. As with a lot of good ideas from antiquity, this didn't apply to you if you were a serf, but it was a start. (A serf was a half-step above a slave but below a true citizen; serfs were bound to the land and the people who owned it.)

Magna Carta formalized the council of feudal lords and churchmen who had advised English kings since William the Conqueror, although it would be a mistake to call this a parliament. And, in fact, King John didn't make much use of it despite signing the Magna Carta (and he died in 1216). But his grandson, Edward I, called Parliament into formal session in 1295, including the barons, earls and dukes of the kingdom, church officials, but also knights and burgesses (free citizens who were leaders of local communities) from every shire and borough. The knights and burgesses eventually became the commons, which today is called the House of Commons, in effect the community of the state.

Why would a king call a parliament into session? Edward, like rulers before and after, wanted money with which to fight wars. He wanted more land; and his neighbors wanted to take land from him. Having the parliament raise money took pressure off the king and legitimized the raising of taxes. But it also gave this early legislative body a power that would eventually make it far more durably powerful than any king. Eventually members of this parliament were elected, although it would take another 500 years before ordinary citizens were allowed to vote and a century after that for women to gain that right. But as with the legal rights prescribed in the Magna Carta, it was a start.

The other big event that was to echo down the hallways of history was the Reformation. In 1517, in Wittenberg, Germany, a professor and priest named Martin Luther walked up the church door and nailed a series of statements (the "Ninety-five Theses") that were to change the western world. (While this may sound like an act of defiance, in fact it was the 16th century equivalent of posting something on Facebook to see how people will react.) Luther's arguments weren't about politics; in his mind, he only hoped to reform the church. The church, dominated by popes and cardinals in Rome, was raising money for wars and monuments by promising salvation to people who paid enough money. From what Luther observed, that wasn't what the Bible said, and consequently people who couldn't afford it were giving up money for a promise the church couldn't keep. Neither the pope nor Luther would back down in this dispute. Some German princes, eager to be out from under the thumb of both the church and the Holy Roman emperor (who was elected by the princes and affirmed by the pope), protected Luther and helped him start a new flavor of Christianity, Protestantism.

This matters for politics because Luther argued that everyone was equal in the eyes of God. And while Luther was not a terribly progressive thinker when it came to politics, he had let the genie out of the bottle with his argument. If we are equal before God, it's not a huge leap to begin arguing that we should also be equal in the eyes of the state.

The American Experiment

For the country that became the United States, this was all very important. It meant that the Europeans who came to the New World after Columbus bumped into it in 1492 brought traditions with them that led to the founding of the United States. Americans sometime grow up with the romantic notion that the revolution was a battle against tyranny and taxation, but that isn't quite the story. The colonists in British North America elected their own legislatures and levied their own taxes and enjoyed as much liberty as any people in the world. So it's not immediately obvious why the colonists decided to revolt.

The usual story is about taxes, but that's a relatively small part of it. Following what Americans call the French and Indian War (1754–1763, which the British refer to as the Seven Years War), the cost of defending the colonies caused the British government to raise taxes on the North American colonies. While the colonists had in fact levied taxes on themselves, they were less keen on taxes imposed from elsewhere. But the bigger issues were economic. Parliament had banned the export of manufacturing equipment to the colonies; trade of many goods had to move on British ships through Britain on its way to North America.

Take, for example, the Boston Tea Party. In more recent times, a political movement calling itself the Tea Party has complained about taxes and a somewhat mixed list of other issues (such as the remarkably frequent calls to “Keep the government out of my Medicare.” Think that one through). But, in fact, the original tea party had nothing to do with taxes and everything to do with tea. Tea was a big deal when it arrived in the western world from the east. It can only be grown in certain places, so transplanting the crop is difficult. Before tea, people drank alcohol as a way of drinking water that wouldn't kill you. Water otherwise had to be boiled. Making tea means boiling water, and tea has the opposite effect of alcohol. So when the British government arranged to dump a lot of tea on the North American tea market, to help bail out the East India Company, Boston tea merchants responded by dressing up as Native Americans, climbing aboard three ships, and dumping a lot of tea in the harbor. Parliament backed off on some laws, particularly taxes, but not on others, and the Americans became increasingly concerned that their economic futures were in doubt. Ben Baack, *The Economics of the American Revolutionary War*, <http://eh.net/encyclopedia/article/baack.war.revolutionary.us>

Another interesting thing to note about the American Revolution is that while the Declaration of Independence goes on at some length about the sins of King George, by that point in history the king was on his way to being a bit player in British politics. The revolutionaries' real beef was with Parliament, and there was no real check on the power of Parliament.

And so the Americans sought political and economic independence from the most politically liberal state on earth. It wasn't a direct road from revolution to functioning republic, however. The war ended in 1783; briefly, the 13 colonies toyed with the idea of becoming 13 separate states. Instead, they stayed united under the Articles of Confederation. This didn't work well. Congress had no power over the states and no authority to raise money. Money borrowed during the war wasn't being paid back; the states threatened to go to war with each other; and the fledgling nation stood in danger of being cherry picked by the Europeans.

In 1787, a subset of the folks we think of as the Founding Fathers met in Philadelphia at what became known as the Constitutional Convention. They faced an uphill slog. They distrusted centralized power, but they knew that government needed some power in order to get anything done. Under a total news blackout, they hammered out the document that became known as the Constitution, which was eventually approved by all 13 states. It attempted to balance power between different branches and levels of government, and it gave Congress the power to tax and spend, and to regulate commerce that travels between the states. The Founding Fathers were by no means perfect, and there are no perfect governments. But the depth and breadth of their experiment, which has had a large impact on the practice of politics all over the world, still is worth thinking about and admiring.

The result was the United States of America. While not the first republic, it was certainly the largest ever attempted. Previous attempts at participatory government tended to be small, homogenous states, and the degree of participation was limited. You will sometimes hear that the United States is the world's oldest democracy. In fact, it's neither a democracy (it's a republic) nor the world's oldest republic. (It does have the world's oldest constitution that remains in use.) Voting as part of government long predates the American Revolution. Electing kings and chiefs was common in many ancient cultures. The Icelandic parliament, the Allthing, is nearly 1,000 years old, and the world's oldest republic, San Marino (an independent enclave surrounded by Italy) got its start when it was founded in the year 301. Its current constitution was adopted in 1600, although some observers argue that the documents of 1600 weren't really a constitution. The Faeroe Islands' Logting may be older than the Icelandic Allthing, and the parliament of the Isle of Man, a self-governing part of the British state, dates to at least the 1500s. All this being said, the American experiment was ground-breaking.

A Full House of Commons Beats a Pair of Kings

History did not stop with the U.S. Constitution. Subsequent experiments in government have had a record no less mixed, and perhaps more uneven, than has the American one. Slowly, over the last two centuries, more states have adopted participatory forms of government—allowing more and more people to vote. As the world moved into the 1800s, more and more states added legislative bodies such as parliaments to their governments. So even where kings and emperors still ruled, they were increasingly aided by legislatures. The pressure for this came from citizens of all types, including business people and nobles. Civil unrest and outright revolutions occurred across Europe during the 1800s, and pressure for a state that offered more to all people began to grow.

Nonetheless, this was actually a relatively stable period for the Europeans, who used that stability and advances in military technology to conquer and subjugate most of Africa and large parts of Asia. Africa had been home to a long series of substantial kingdoms and empires, some of which were greatly damaged by the slave trade that followed the conquest of the New World. (African states went to war with each other to capture slaves to sell to Europeans, to the extent that all were weaker when the Europeans showed up with guns and a hunger for land.) The British, Portuguese and French carved up and conquered the several states of India, and the Chinese empire, once the world's most advanced, had so turned inward on the world that it was nearly helpless when Europeans began to rip off chunks of the country to rule as their own. So, it was a profitable time for some Europeans, but not such a good time for many other people around the world.

The years around World War I saw the end of **monarchy**¹⁸ as a legitimate form of government. The last few major monarchic states fell apart, from the Qing Dynasty in China to the collapse of the German and Austro-Hungarian empires at the end of World War I in 1918. Nonetheless, it wasn't all an inevitable road to progress. The side trips from what we loosely call democracy have been significant. Many European and Asian nations tried to become participatory—governments based on voting and elections. Sometimes it worked, and sometimes these fledgling republics were overwhelmed by strong men who became dictators. Republican Russia lasted all of six months until the government was toppled by the Bolsheviks, who became the Communists and, after World War II ushered in a half-century of experimenting in dictatorial socialism. Those governments eventually lost legitimacy too. They were economically inefficient and politically closed and unfair. As there was no check on the power of the state, the state could go haywire and often did. The Soviet dictator Josef Stalin killed perhaps seven and 20 million of his own people (estimates vary widely) while attempting to create a communist paradise. Germany and Italy experimented with fascism in the middle of the 20th century, and multiple states tried out socialism as an economic system and communism as a political and

18. Rule by a king.

economic system up until the 1990s. The results, as you probably know, ranged from inefficient (moribund economies that never seemed to produce enough goods and services) all the way to catastrophic—war, repression, millions of people killed over their beliefs and refusal to cooperate with ideas that they disagreed with.

Governments today remain diverse in their approaches to governing, but democratic-style governments have been on the rise. By one account, 121 of 192 sovereign states rely on elections for choosing governments, up from only 76 in the 1980s. Karatnycky, Adrian and Piano, Aili and Puddington, Arch, Editors, *Freedom in the World 2003: The Annual Survey of Political Rights and Civil Liberties*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003 This is important, if only because Americans sometimes get the impression that they live in the only country with political liberty. Meanwhile, the 21st century world features very few actual monarchies, which was the dominant form of government for much of the last 2,000 years. Communist states have shrunk to two—Cuba and North Korea—while many states remain dictatorships with limited political participation outside of an inner circle of rulers. Increasingly, states have to prove their legitimacy by letting people participate meaningfully in government. That can range from a parliament in a monarchy such as Kuwait, to a theocratic (church-based) republic such as Iran (also called a **theocracy**¹⁹, but that doesn't have to be a republic). The Arab spring has seen states from Tunisia to Libya to Egypt overthrow dictators and replace them with elected governments, although it's too early to tell how successful they will be.

We appear to live in an age dominated by market economics and, in some small way, by more participatory government. You'll have to decide how that's working. Hopefully, how it works will make more sense as we go along.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Systems of government have evolved over time.
- The American Revolution was as much about economic issues as it was about political issues.
- The United States is not the only republic, or the only place where people enjoy political liberty.

19. Rule by the church.

EXERCISES

1. Where did your ancestors come from? What was the government like when they left there, and what is it like now?
2. If history doesn't stop happening, what could government be like in the future? For example, how might technology affect the way we govern ourselves?

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