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Citizens and Governance

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An Introduction to Political Science
Seventh Edition

W. Phillips Shively
University of Minnesota

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POLITICS: SETTING THE STAGE

Everyone knows something about politics, and many people know a great deal about it. It is an interesting, amusing, and moving spectacle that ranks not too far behind professional sports in the eyes of many. Political scientists, however, *study* politics and *analyze* it. This involves doing pretty much the same sorts of things that other people do who follow politics: we read the newspapers and listen to press conferences, take part in political campaigns, and so on. However, we also do some things differently. We usually try to see both sides of any question and to keep our emotions in low key, because emotions can cloud judgment. We borrow deliberately from other disciplines—such as economics, history, sociology, psychology, and philosophy—to help us understand what is going on politically. Above all, as you will see later in this chapter, we try to be precise about the meanings of the words we use. Many words having to do with politics—such as *liberal, represent,* and even *politics*—are quite complex, but most people use them unthinkingly. Political scientists are careful to analyze the varied meanings of such words and to use them precisely, partly because it is important to know exactly what we mean by the words we use and partly because careful examination of a richly complex word may teach us a lot about the things it describes.

What do political scientists study? Over the years, we have seen work in which political scientists:

- Measured just how much it actually costs a country to lose a war
- Devised a new system of voting in primaries that might have led to a different set of candidates for most presidential elections
- Analyzed and explained the various styles that members of the U.S. Congress adopt in dealing with their constituents
- Studied the spread of welfare reforms across the states

- Showed that the roots of successful government may go back to social institutions several centuries ago
- Showed why most nations will ignore warnings about surprise military action by hostile nations
- Studied why democracies almost never wage war on other democracies

These are the sorts of things political scientists do. In this book you will be introduced to the broad principles of what we have learned about politics, especially about the politics of democracies like the United States. I hope the study will sharpen and enrich the more general understanding of politics that you already have.

This first chapter, in particular, involves the precise definition of several words with which you are already somewhat familiar. We must examine these definitions because you should start your study with some basic terms in place. You may also find it intriguing to see complexity in words, such as *politics,* that have probably not struck you before as being particularly complicated.

POLITICS

What is politics? What is it that makes an act political? Consider the following questions, all of which involve political circumstances. What do these have in common?

- How was Hitler able to take power through a series of supposedly democratic elections?
- Why does the U.S. Congress so often disagree with the president in framing energy policies?
- Why should workers sort letters the way their boss directs if they know a more efficient way?
- Why were southern blacks denied the vote and placed in segregated schools throughout the 1950s while at the same time their housing was not as segregated as that in the North?
- Should communists be barred from teaching in the schools?
- Should fascists be barred from teaching in the schools?
- Why does the United States have only two major political parties when most democracies have more?
- Should state and local governments have the right to force landholders to sell them land that is needed for public purposes?
- Was Harry Truman right to bomb Hiroshima and Nagasaki?
- Why do people so often feel guilty about not doing what their parents want them to do?

These questions deal with politics. The questions about bosses and parents may not have looked to you as if they belonged in this group, but their connection with politics should become clearer by the end of this chapter.

What is it that these questions have in common? There are two main things, and both have often been used as the defining characteristics of politics. First, all the questions

involve the *making of a common decision for a group of people*, that is, a uniform decision applying in the same way to all members of the group. Second, all involve *the use of power* by one person or a group of people to affect the behavior of another person or group of people. Let us look at both of these in more detail.

POLITICS AS THE MAKING OF COMMON DECISIONS

Any group of people must often make decisions that will apply to all of them in common, as a group. A family must decide where to live, what sorts of rules to set for children, how to balance a budget, and so on. A class in a college or university (including the instructor as part of the "class") must decide what reading material to require, how students are to be graded by the instructor, how bright the light should be in the classrooms. A country must decide where to locate parks, what allies to seek out in war, how to raise revenue by taxing its citizens, how to care for the helpless, and many other things. Each of these requires the setting of common policy for the group, a single decision that affects all members of the group.

Not all human actions, of course, involve the making of a common policy for a group. When one brother teases another, he is not making a family policy, nor is a family member who decides to write the great American novel. A student who decides to read extra material on one section of the course (or, perhaps, to skip a bit of the reading) is not making a policy of the class. A person's decision to build a new house is not part of any common national policy, although the country may have policies—on interest rates, the regulation of building, land use, zoning, and so on—that affect this person's decision. Ford Motor Company's decisions on new-car styling are not part of a common national policy.

Those actions that contribute to the making of a common policy for a group of people constitute politics, and questions about those policies and the making of those policies are political questions. The political/nonpolitical distinction is not always easy to draw. The example of the Ford Motor Company, above, is tricky because Ford is so large that its decisions verge on being common policy for the whole United States, even though the company has no formal role in the nation's government. In other words, one might argue that because the U.S. government tolerates the concentration of our automobile industry among three giant corporations and because (as a result of this) the decisions of any one of the three bulk so large in American life, those decisions have a quasi-public character and are "sort of" political. In 1980, the quasi-public nature of large corporations was underlined when the government found that it had to become intimately involved in Chrysler Corporation's financing to prevent Chrysler from going out of business. Chrysler was so large that the economic health of the country was unavoidably bound to its economic decisions; therefore, the government decided it had no choice but to support Chrysler's loans. In this sense, decisions made by the management of Chrysler were to a degree binding on the country as a whole and became, to some extent, U.S. political decisions.

Another tricky aspect of the political/nonpolitical distinction is that it is partly a matter of perspective. Ford's design decisions are not (except via Ford's quasi-public nature) political decisions for the *United States*; but they *are* political decisions for Ford's stock-

holders, managers, and workers, because they set a common policy for the company. A family's decision to build a house is not a political decision for the *country*, but it is a political decision for the *family* as a group inasmuch as it involves a common policy for the family. "Company politics" is involved in Ford's decision, and "family politics" is involved in the family's decision. Neither, however, is a national political decision. Society consists of groups within groups within groups. Ford Motor Company is a group within the United States, and a family may be a group within the larger group of those dependent on Ford. Politics exists within any of these groups whenever a decision that will apply to all the members of the group is made. Depending on which group you are thinking of, a given decision—the decision of the Clauski family to build a house—may be treated as either political or nonpolitical. The Clauski decision is political for the family as a group but not political for the nation.

POLITICS AS THE EXERCISE OF POWER

A second characteristic of politics, one that runs through the questions at the start of this chapter, is that politics always involves the exercise of *power* by one person or persons over another person or persons. Power is the ability of one person to cause another to do what the first wishes, *by whatever means*. Politics always involves this: one person causing others to do what that person wants either by forcing or convincing them to do so. Looking back at the questions, we note that Hitler rose to high office by convincing many Germans to vote for him; the U.S. Congress disagrees with the president so often about energy policy because the president does not have much power either to force or to convince Congress to go along with his wishes in that area; and so on. In such ways, each of these questions involves the power of one person or persons over another or others.

The two defining characteristics of politics, then, are that (1) politics always involves the making of common decisions for groups of people *and* (2) those decisions are made by some members of the group exercising power over other members of the group. Power can consist of a wide variety of tools that help one person affect the actions of another. Power may be stark, as when a police officer stops a demonstrator from marching up the street; or it may be subtle, as when a group of poor people, by their very misery, elicit positive governmental action on their behalf.

Power may be exercised as *coercion* when we force a person to do something he or she did not want to do, as *persuasion* when we convince someone that that is what she or he really wishes to do, or as the *construction of incentives* when we make the alternative so unattractive that only one reasonable option remains. The ability to exercise any of these forms of power may be based on all sorts of things—money, affection, physical strength, legal status (the power of a police officer to direct traffic, for instance), the possession of important information, a winning smile, strong allies, determination, desperation (which helped North Vietnam to defeat the United States in the 1970s), and many more. Any of these can help some people get other people to act as they wish.

It is not necessary to learn the specific bases of power listed. They are meant to provide a sense of the variety and complexity of power, not as an exhaustive list of its important sources. The point is that all politics involves the use of power, and such power may take varied forms.

GOVERNMENT

W. Phillips Shively

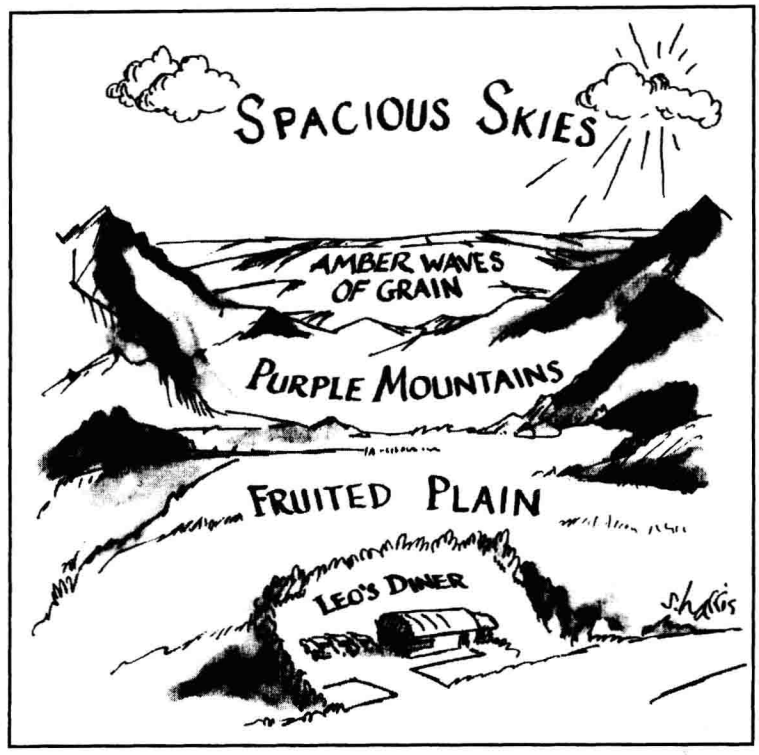
THE MODERN STATE

In this book, I will focus on the politics of the *state*—rather than on "office politics," politics in the family, and so on—simply because the state has come to play such a central role in modern politics.[1]

The extent to which the state has come to dominate our attention is evident even in the way we treat individuals. When we think about a person who comes from a different country, we are likely to think of him or her primarily in terms of this—to the exclusion of other characteristics that may actually have more to do with what the person is like. If you knew a Danish engineer named Ole, for instance, and were asked to say quickly, in one word, what Ole is, you would be likely to say "a Dane." The other likely answer would be "a man"; gender has not given way even to the state in the amount of attention we give it. Ole is an engineer, and that should say a lot about him; but not many people would choose that over his nationality as a label for him. He may be a Lutheran or a Jew, pious or apathetic, tall or short, a charmer or a clod; still, most people who know him would characterize him first as a Dane. This does not make much sense, because almost all the other things mentioned would have told you more about Ole's personality or person than does the fact that he is a Dane. It is a result not of logic but of our modern fixation on nationality and the state.

If you have ever lived abroad, you will have noticed this phenomenon in a particularly striking way. Most of us do not ordinarily think of ourselves in terms of the state to which we belong. However, let us reside in a different state, and suddenly our native state becomes a most important aspect of our identity. Canadians living in the United States or Europe begin to think of themselves much more as Canadians than they ever

[1] As noted in Chapter 1, the word *state* as used here does not refer to a place such as California or Pennsylvania. Rather, it means approximately what is often called a "country," such as Canada, Nigeria, or the United States of America.



have before, Nigerians studying or working in the United States suddenly begin to think of themselves as Nigerians, Americans living in Europe or Asia suddenly feel themselves to be vividly American, and so on.

Our fixation on the state goes almost beyond what reason would dictate. We have seen that we could say more about Ole if we characterized him as tall or university educated than merely as a Dane. Another paradoxical result of our fixation on the state is that most people pay a good deal more attention to the national government, which is remote and inaccessible to them, than they do to their relatively more accessible local governments. In America, politics and attention to politics reach a peak every four years at the election of a new president. This national event so seizes our attention that enrollment in political science courses at American universities generally follows a four-year cycle, rising 10 percent or so in a presidential election year! Americans turn out to vote in considerably larger numbers at presidential than at local elections.

The paradox in such attention to national politics is that in a country as large as the United States, an individual voter has almost no chance of affecting the outcome of a national election. As a character in Skinner's *Walden Two* remarks to his friend,

"How is the people's will ascertained? In an election. But what a travesty! In a small committee meeting, or even a town hall, I can see some point in voting, especially on a yes-or-no question. But fifty million voters choosing a president—that's quite another thing."

"I can't see that the number of voters changes the principle," said Castle.

"The chance that one man's vote will decide the issue in a national election," said Frazier, speaking very deliberately, "is less than the chance that he will be killed on his way to the polls."[2]

By contrast, an individual voter in a modest-sized city has a small but significant chance of casting the deciding vote in a local election, where perhaps ten or twenty thousand other people will vote in the same election. One can also reasonably argue that the policies of local government are just as important as the policies of the national government. It is true that foreign policy and issues of war or peace, the state of the national economy, and the broad issues of social policy—all the purview of the national government—are extremely important to people's lives. However, the policies of local government are also important. The public schools, the condition of the street in front of your house, the purity and taste of your drinking water, how you are treated by police officers—all these and more are decided by your local government.

How odd, then, that most people pay so much more attention to their national than to their local government. This is just further evidence that our focus on the state and its operations goes beyond the demands of reason.

The people of the world have not always been so thoroughly organized into states. In the remainder of this chapter, we shall look at the history of how the modern system of states arose; we shall then consider the relationship between the modern state and "nationalism"; finally, we shall look at contemporary challenges to the state and emerging political forms that might serve as alternatives to the state.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE MODERN STATE

The invention of this thing to which we pay so much attention, the state, is fairly recent. Six or seven hundred years ago, people did not think of themselves as belonging to a state or nation as we know it. Most people lived on subsistence farms, intimately concerned with the village in which they lived but not caring much about the world beyond. Armies sometimes raided the village, but it did not make much difference to the villagers whether the army was hired by the king of France, by the pope, or by the Inca king. Barbara Tuchman's picture of today's "France" as it existed in the fourteenth century depicts a geographic region carved into various political divisions that might be controlled by the English king, or by the French, and whose populations did not seem to care much which of these was their ruler.[3]

In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, as European kings began to claim greater powers and to tighten their control over large territories, these shifting political divisions

[2] B. F. Skinner, *Walden Two* (New York: Macmillan, 1948), pp. 220–21.

[3] Barbara W. Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous Fourteenth Century* (New York: Knopf, 1978).

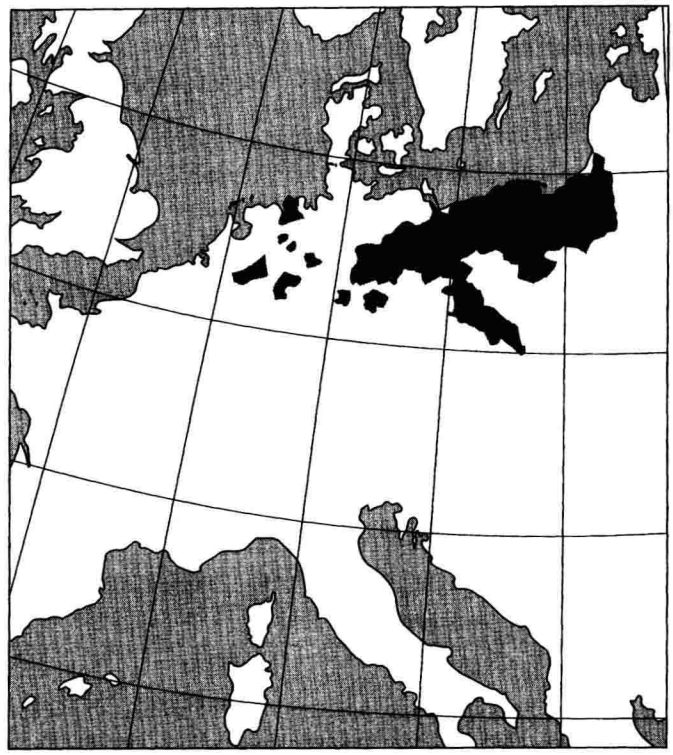


FIGURE 3–1
Prussia in 1789.

began to coalesce into states. Even in Europe, however, it was not until the early nineteenth century that states were well established in the form we know.

Throughout the early period of state building in Europe, populations continued to be largely indifferent about the state to which they belonged. During the early stages of its formation, for example, the state of Prussia was spread in little smears and droplets all over the map of northern Europe (see Figure 3–1), and this did not especially concern the Prussians. Some of these regions had been acquired for the crown by royal marriages, others by settlements of war or debt, and the people living in them were transferred like property from one ruler to another.

If ordinary people did not care much about the state, the leaders and the educated elite also saw it more as a convenience than as something special. This was particularly true early in its formation, but to some extent it remained true even as late as the eighteenth century. At the beginning of the period of state building, most members of the elite, if they could write, wrote in Latin rather than in their local tongue. Although daring writers such as Dante were breaking out in their local languages by the fourteenth century, most writers still tended to think of themselves well into the seventeenth century as

belonging primarily to a cosmopolitan, European literary world rather than to a local English, French, or Spanish community.

The kings who were creating these new states often had family ties or other interests that took priority over their state. As late as 1714, a German line of kings whose members could not even speak English for the first generation came to power in England. Later, during World War I (after Britain and Germany had evolved into modern states), it would prove an embarrassment to the British royal house that the kaiser of Germany was their cousin—so much so that they changed their name from Hanover to Windsor.

Even military affairs were not as clearly divided by state through much of this period as they were at the end. Foreign mercenaries were an important part of most wars: Bands of English soldiers could be hired by the French king to fight the English, and vice versa. In the American Revolution, the king of England hired German troops (the Hessian soldiers) to do some of the fighting in America.

It was not until the early nineteenth century that the state as we know it could be seen—a relatively large territory with stable boundaries, whose people were bound together by intricate political ties and who thought of themselves distinctively in terms of the state to which they belonged.

The invention of modern states in Europe may be said to have been completed by Napoleon from 1800 to 1815. In France, he created one of the first recognizably modern states by joining the excitement and the passions of the French Revolution to an active and efficient bureaucracy and army. The resulting state was nearly invincible and succeeded in conquering most of Europe. Its power rested partly on the first European army whose members fought not only for what they themselves might gain but for their nation—*France*. The modern state had finally emerged. Even after Napoleon eventually overreached himself and was defeated, things could never be the same. He had demonstrated what could be accomplished by a full-fledged state, and the new or remaining states that emerged after 1815 tried, some eagerly and some with more hesitation, to emulate his method of organization.

Although the modern state had finally been invented in Europe and North America by the early nineteenth century, most other peoples of the world still lived under a variety of other arrangements. However, a great surge of European colonial expansion during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had divided the rest of the world into colonies organized somewhat as subsidiary states. When, in the twentieth century, European power waned as a result of two disastrous world wars, these colonies were able to break away and establish themselves as independent. Then their new leaders, almost all of whom had been educated in Europe, adopted the state as their own form of political organization. The modern state became the universal form of political organization.

THE ORIGIN OF STATES

What was it that led to the invention of the state over the last several centuries? Perhaps an exploration of this question will help us to better understand the nature of the state. There has long been a vigorous debate among scholars as to why states developed in