What is Politics?

GVPT 100
SEPTEMBER 10, 2007
1. **Defining politics**
   i. Politics as the art of government
   ii. Politics as public affairs
   iii. Politics as compromise and consensus
   iv. Politics as power and the distribution of resources.

2. **Studying politics**
   i. Approaches to the study of politics
   ii. Can the study of politics be scientific?
   iii. Concepts, models and theories
People disagree about both what it is that makes social interaction “political,” and how political activity can best be analyzed and explained.

Heywood’s definition: “Politics, in its broadest sense, is the activity through which people make, preserve, and amend the general rules under which they live.”

Compare Harvey Mansfield’s characterization: “Politics means taking sides; it is partisan. Not only are there sides—typically liberal and conservative in our day—but also they argue against each other, so that it is liberals versus conservatives.”
Different Conceptions of Politics

- Politics as the art of government
- Politics as public affairs
- Politics as compromise and consensus
- Politics as power and the distribution of resources.
Politics as the Art of Government

This is a state-centered view of politics. Politics is what “governments” or “states” do. This means that most people, most institutions and most social activities can be regarded as being ‘outside’ politics. Businesses, schools and other educational institutions, community groups, families and so on are in this sense ‘nonpolitical.’
Machiavelli

- Italian Renaissance political philosopher and statesman, secretary of the Florentine republic, whose most famous work, *The Prince* (1531), brought him a reputation as an atheist and an immoral cynic.
Carl von Clausewitz

- The Prussian general and military thinker, whose work *On War* (1832) has become one of the most respected classics on military strategy. A notable line from his book: “War is only a continuation of state policy by other means.”

- Cf. Mao Tse-Tung: “Politics is war without bloodshed while war is politics with bloodshed.”
Otto von Bismarck

- Prime minister of Prussia (1862–73, 1873–90) and founder and first chancellor (1871–90) of the German Empire.
- Known for his famous line "politics is the art of the possible."
Realpolitik

- The adjective “Machiavellian” subsequently came to represent the Realpolitik principles of Machiavelli. It has been used in a pejorative sense to describe those who prefer expediency to morality and practice duplicity in statecraft or in general conduct.
- Both Clausewitz and Bismarck are known as major figures of the Realpolitik tradition.
Another implication of this state-centric conception of politics is that politics is thought of as a pejorative word.

It conjures up images of trouble, disruption and even violence on the one hand, and deceit, manipulation and lies on the other.
Politics, n. Strife of interests masquerading as a contest of principles. **Ambrose Bierce, The Devil's Dictionary**

Politics is the art of preventing people from taking part in affairs which properly concern them. **Paul Valery**

The more you read and observe about this Politics thing, you got to admit that each party is worse than the other. The one that's out always looks the best. **Will Rogers**
The Cynic View of Politics

- One has to be a lowbrow, a bit of a murderer, to be a politician, ready and willing to see people sacrificed, slaughtered, for the sake of an idea, whether a good one or a bad one. **Henry Miller**

- A politician is a fellow who will lay down your life for his country. **Texas Guinan**

- [A politician is] a person skilled in the art of compromise. Usually an elected official who has compromised to get nominated, compromised to get elected, and compromised repeatedly to stay in office. **Dick Gregory**
We would all like to vote for the best man but he is never a candidate. **Frank M. Hubbard**

You can lead a man to Congress, but you can't make him think. **Milton Berle**

In our age there is no such thing as "keeping out of politics." All issues are political issues, and politics itself is a mass of lies, evasions, folly, hatred and schizophrenia. **George Orwell**
The Cynic View of Politics

- Politics is the art of looking for trouble, finding it whether it exists or not, diagnosing it incorrectly, and applying the wrong remedy. Ernest Benn

- Politics is perhaps the only profession for which no preparation is thought necessary. Robert Louis Stevenson

- Politics is supposed to be the second oldest profession. I have come to realize that it bears a very close resemblance to the first. Ronald Reagan
The whole art of the political speech is to put 'nothing' into it. It is much more difficult than it sounds. **Hilaire Belloc**

Politics is made up largely of irrelevancies. **Dalton Camp**

Being in politics is like being a football coach. You have to be smart enough to understand the game, and dumb enough to think it's important. **Eugene McCarthy**

I have come to the conclusion that politics are too serious a matter to be left to the politicians. **Charles De Gaulle**
A second and broader conception of politics moves it beyond the narrow realm of government to what is thought of as ‘public life’ or ‘public affairs’. In other words, the distinction between ‘the political’ and ‘the nonpolitical’ coincides with the division between an essentially *public* sphere of life and what can be thought of as a *private* sphere.
In *Politics*, Aristotle declared that "man is by nature a political animal," by which he meant that it is only within a political community that human beings can live ‘the good life’. From this viewpoint, then, politics is an ethical activity concerned with creating a “just society.” It is what Aristotle called the “master science.”
The notion of politics is derived from the Greek word *polis* meaning a “city-state” such as Athens or Sparta. Affiliated words such as *politeia, politika,* and *politike techne* have the following meanings:

a. *politeia*: constitution, political regime, republic;

b. *politika*: political activities, anything in relation with the state, constitution, political regime;

c. *politike techne*: political skill; management skill.
One view of the public/private divide

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<th>Public</th>
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<td>The state: apparatus of government</td>
<td>Civil society: autonomous bodies: businesses, trade unions, clubs, families, and so on</td>
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- The traditional distinction between the public realm and the private realm conforms to the division between the state and civil society.
- On the basis of this ‘public/private’ division, politics is restricted to the activities of the state itself and the responsibilities that are properly exercised by public bodies.
An alternative view of the public/private divide

<table>
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<th>Public</th>
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<tr>
<td>Public realm: politics, commerce, work, art, culture, and so on</td>
<td>Personal realm: family and domestic life</td>
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- An alternative ‘public/private’ divide is sometimes defined in terms of a further and more subtle distinction, namely that between ‘the political’ and ‘the personal’
- Although civil society can be distinguished from the state, it nevertheless contains a range of institutions that are thought of as ‘public’ in the wider sense that they are open institutions, operating in public, to which the public has access.
This conception of politics as something positive and public activity was firmly endorsed by Hannah Arendt, a German-born American political theorist. She argued in *The Human Condition* (1958) that politics is the most important form of human activity because it involves interaction amongst free and equal citizens. It thus gives meaning to life and affirms the uniqueness of each individual.
Another example is Václav Havel: “Genuine politics—politics worthy of the name and the only politics I am willing to devote myself to—is simply a matter of serving those around us: serving the community and serving those who will come after us. Its deepest roots are moral because it is a responsibility expressed through action.”
The third conception of politics relates to the way in which decisions are made. Specifically, politics is seen as a particular means of resolving conflict: that is, by compromise, conciliation and negotiation, rather than through force and naked power. Politics becomes the process of “conflict resolution.”

In this view, the key to politics is a wide dispersal of power. Accepting that conflict is inevitable and social groups possess and compete for power, they must be conciliated; they cannot merely be crushed.
There are two methods of curing the mischiefs of faction: the one, by removing its causes; the other, by controlling its effects. The inference to which we are brought is, that the causes of faction cannot be removed, and that relief is only to be sought in the means of controlling its effects. “The Federalist #10”
The fourth definition of politics is both the broadest and the most radical. Rather than confining politics to a particular sphere (the government, the state or the ‘public’ realm) this view sees politics at work in all social activities and in every corner of human existence.

In this sense, politics takes place at every level of social interaction; it can be found within families and amongst small groups of friends just as much as amongst nations and on the global stage.
Distribution of Power and Resources

- At its broadest, politics concerns the production, distribution and use of resources in the course of social existence. Politics is, in essence, power: the ability to achieve a desired outcome, through whatever means. This notion was neatly summed up in the title of Harold Lasswell’s book *Politics: Who Gets What, When, How?* (1936).
- From this perspective, politics is about diversity and conflict, but the essential ingredient is the existence of scarcity: the simple fact that, while human needs and desires are infinite, the resources available to satisfy them are always limited. Politics can therefore be seen as a struggle over scarce resources, and power can be seen as the means through which this struggle is conducted.
Studying Politics

- Approaches to the study of politics
- Can the study of politics be scientific?
- Concepts, models and theories
• The term *politikē* used both by Plato and Aristotle meant the knowledge, the art, or some other capacity that is devoted to the political affairs. For both Plato and Aristotle, the task of political expertise was normative.
Values

- What we today call “values” or as the ancients called “ends” were central to the philosophical approach to political science.
- Values are the sort of things that can induce personal and social conflict by stirring human emotions such as anger, envy, and hatred. Disputes over quantifiable “facts” do not necessarily give rise to such emotions.
- Socrates points this out in Plato’s dialogue *Euthyphro*.
Socrates: What is the difference about, best of men, that makes for enmity and anger? Let's consider as follows. If you and I should differ about number—which of two groups of things is greater—would our difference about these things make us enemies and angry at each other? Or would we go to calculation and quickly settle it, at least about such things as these?

Euthyphro: Quite so.
Socrates: Then what would we differ about and what decision would we be unable to reach, that we would be enemies and angry at each other? Perhaps you have nothing ready to hand, but consider while I speak whether it is these things: the just and the unjust, and noble and shameful, and good and bad. Isn't it because we differ about these things and can't come to a sufficient decision about them that we become enemies to each other, whenever we do, both I and you and all other human beings.

Euthyphro: Yes, this is the difference, Socrates, and about these things.
The young man holding the flagpole, now a labor foreman living in Maine, vividly recalls the “blind anger” that motivated him—anger aimed, he says, at the urban policies that were ruining the close-knit South Boston neighborhood where he’d grown up: “When the busing started, it was, ‘You can’t have half your friends’—that’s the way it was put towards us,” Rakes says. “They took half the guys and girls I grew up with and said, ‘You’re going to school on the other side of town.’ Nobody understood it at [age] 15.”
The empirical approach to political analysis is characterized by the attempt to offer a dispassionate and impartial account of political reality. The approach is ‘descriptive’ in that it seeks to analyze and explain, whereas the normative approach is ‘prescriptive’ in the sense that it makes judgments and offers recommendations.
The Scientific Tradition

- In the 1870s, ‘political science’ courses were introduced in the universities of Oxford, Paris and Columbia, and by 1906 the *American Political Science Review* was being published.

- The enthusiasm for a science of politics peaked in the 1950s and 1960s with the emergence, most strongly in the USA, of a form of political analysis that drew heavily upon *behaviouralism*. For the first time, this gave politics reliably scientific credentials, because it provided what had previously been lacking: objective and quantifiable data against which hypotheses could be tested.
The attraction of a science of politics is clear. It promises an impartial and reliable means of distinguishing ‘truth’ from ‘falsehood’, thereby giving us access to objective knowledge about the political world. The key to achieving this is to distinguish between ‘facts’ (empirical evidence) and ‘values’ (normative or ethical beliefs). Facts are objective in the sense that they can be demonstrated reliably and consistently; they can be proved. Values, by contrast, are inherently subjective, a matter of opinion.
Objective Facts: What are they good for?

- An objective fact often involves some kind of numeric value or undisputable piece of information.
- That the capital of the United States is Washington, DC is an undisputable information.
- That the current population of the US is about 300 million and the US citizens without health insurance coverage is about 47 million are also “facts.”
- But can “facts” alone say anything meaningful about the political reality without making use of value-laden concepts?
THE SACK OF ROME

In 410 CE, the Goths invaded and sacked Rome. The psychological effect among the Romans was one of shock: “The city to which the whole world fell has fallen. If Rome can perish, what can be safe?” lamented St. Jerome. The British monk Pelagius, who was in Rome when the attack occurred, gave this report: “Every household had its grief, and an all-pervading terror gripped us.”
The non-Christian Romans blamed the abandonment of the worship of ancient Roman gods and the ascendance of Christianity for this calamity.

Against their indictment of Christianity, Saint Augustine pointed out that Rome had already been destroyed twice in the past when the Roman gods were actively worshipped. This shows that Christianity could not be responsible for the sack of Rome.
Interpreting September 11: Competing Narratives

- On September 11, 2001, America was attacked. But while we know what happened on that tragic day, many of us don’t understand why it happened.
"Americans are asking, why do they hate us? They hate what we see right here in this chamber -- a democratically elected government. Their leaders are self-appointed. They hate our freedoms -- our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other."
On a Christian television program, Rev. Jerry Falwell made the following statement:

“I really believe that the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the ACLU, People For the American Way, all of them who have tried to secularize America. I point the finger in their face and say ‘you helped this happen.’”
To clarify his remarks, Falwell later said that he believes the ACLU and other organizations “which have attempted to secularize America, have removed our nation from its relationship with Christ on which it was founded. . . I therefore believe that that created an environment which possibly has caused God to lift the veil of protection which has allowed no one to attack America on our soil since 1812.”
D. James Kennedy in his book *Why Was America Attacked?* : “Maybe the timing of Rev. Falwell's statements could have been a little better, but I suspect that no matter when he would have spoken the truths he did he would have been maligned for doing so. He also made the mistake of not including the sins of Christians in with the other groups he discussed. Rev. Falwell has apologized for his comments. However, I think that in spite of that, we need to recognize that what he said has been said in churches across the nation for years. What he said was the truth, just not the whole truth.”
Douglas Kellner, a UCLA Professor:
“In retrospect, the events of September 11 can be seen as a textbook example of “blowback,” a concept developed in a book with this title by Chalmers Johnson (2000) who uses it to describe the unintended consequences of aggressive military and covert policies, a shorthand term for describing that a nation reaps what it sows.”
CONCLUSION

• The inescapable presence of diversity (we are not all alike) and scarcity (there is never enough to go around) ensures that politics is an inevitable feature of the human condition.

• The study of politics is scientific to the extent that it is possible to gain objective knowledge about the political world by distinguishing between facts and values. This task is nevertheless hampered by the difficulty of gaining access to reliable data, by values that are implicit in political models and theories, and by biases that operate within all students of politics.