Politics, and American politics in particular, has become far more polarizing and uncivil over the past several decades. Political parties, whose bases have become more extreme, have little incentive to work together and more incentive to demonize the ideas of the other side. Social media and the Internet have made the process even more acute; online trolls harass other Internet users and leave nasty comments on Facebook sites and online news articles. And the accusations go both ways: Republicans claim Democrats are being un-American. Democrats claim that Republicans are ruining the country. The phenomenon has even occurred within political parties. A recent Senate candidate in the West Virginia primary, Don Blankenship, called Senate majority leader and fellow Republican Mitch McConnell “not an American” and “cocaine Mitch” all in response to the lack of support he got in the race from the Republican Party.1 (Blankenship had also spent a year in jail following his role in a mine explosion.) New York Times reporter Amy Chozick writes in her account of reporting on the 2016 election of the nasty e-mails, comments, and even death threats that she received whenever she published a story that was critical of one of the major candidates.2

This type of rhetoric has led to a growing discontentment with politics as they are—perhaps contributing to Donald Trump’s presidential win in 2016 where he promised to “drain the swamp” of Washington and politics as usual.

The language used by politicians and their supporters today can certainly be disheartening—even to political scientists. The good news is that political science is not nearly the whirlwind of conflict, scandal, and frustration that is often, though not always, the object of its study. Politics is defined as the authoritative distribution of resources or rather the determining of who gets what, when, and how.

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**Chapter Objectives**

1. Distinguish between politics and political science.

2. Develop an understanding and appreciation of the history of political science.

3. Examine the extent to which political science is a science.

4. Identify and discuss major concepts in political science, including the state, government, power, and ideology.
Political science is the systematic and scientific study of politics, including institutions, behaviors, and processes. To that extent, political science is somewhat removed from the day-to-day chaos that is often reflected on our television screens.

Political science is a different animal altogether from what you usually hear on cable news channels with bright breaking news headlines. You would be forgiven, then, for being very confused about what political science is and means. Some students decide to major in it because they want to go to law school or into the military or because they already know they want to be a politician. Others won’t even go near a political science class unless it’s required because they “know” they won’t like it. In any case, that’s what this book is for—to clear up the misconceptions about what political science is and what’s involved in it. This chapter introduces the field of political science, first by distinguishing it from what politics is and then by looking at its history and what makes political science a science. Secondly, the chapter explores some of the fundamental concepts of political science, including public goods, states, government, ideology, and representation. Finally, Chapter 1 discusses the layout of the book and the road ahead.

Differences between Politics and Political Science

Perhaps the easiest way to talk about the differences between politics and political science is to look at a few examples. Take immigration, something we often hear about in the news. Some politicians complain about illegal immigration and express a desire to build a wall on the Mexican American border, while former president Barack Obama issued sweeping executive orders dealing with immigration. The rhetoric, particularly as it is portrayed in the media, often shows Republicans and Democrats arguing over things like whether illegal immigrants who are already in the United States should be allowed to stay and perhaps made citizens, or forced to leave. Of course, immigration is not nearly as simple as that; illegal immigrants make up a significant portion of labor-intensive work in the US economy, and many come to the United States to escape dangerous conditions in their home countries.

Political scientists move beyond the media rhetoric. Political scientists study this issue by looking at the factors that go into making immigration policy like the economy, political ideology, and public opinion. Others compare US immigration policy to policy in other countries to examine the differences and why they arise. Still others will examine the politics of executive orders, including former president Obama’s to allow some illegal immigrants to stay in the United States. Issues like sanctuary cities, federalism and state politics, and international relations are all aspects of immigration that political scientists study.

Yet another controversial policy in politics today is health care. With the passage of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act in 2010, those both for and against health care reforms have had much to talk about. Republicans have consistently derided the act and derisively nicknamed it Obamacare. Democrats have defended it
while acknowledging that improvements can be made. Republicans in the House of Representatives have voted more than fifty times to repeal the Affordable Care Act.

Political scientists study health care policy in an analytical, less political way. One major question has been why the United States didn’t act on health reform earlier than 2010 and, perhaps even more importantly, why the United States hasn’t followed the lead of most other Western democracies to implement a single-payer system. Hacker, among others, has published several articles looking at the history and politics of health care reform in the United States beginning in the early twentieth century. Hacker argues in “National Health Care Reform: An Idea Whose Time Came and Went” that things such as structural changes in Congress, the interest group community, changes in the health care industry, and public opinion, among others, finally coalesced and allowed health care reform to be considered by the Clinton administration in 1993 and 1994. Other studies examining health care have looked at the adoption of children’s health care policies across the states and the role of interest groups like the AARP and the American Medical Association (AMA). The AMA, for example, has traditionally been against major government involvement in health care practices, fearing that the doctors they represent could be hurt or even that the government might dictate to doctors how to treat patients. In this sense, it is the political context that has helped to shape health care reform, including policy considerations that are ongoing in the United States.

In these two examples, we see how political scientists move beyond shallow political issues and examine patterns of politics: what factors allow bills to be passed, patterns in how states adopt different policies, how the development of Congress or of the executive branch makes things easier or harder to accomplish. These questions might not be sexy enough to capture the attention of political pundits on television, but they are arguably more interesting, informative, and important as they address the underlying questions of how and why things happen in politics.

It might be hard to see how these issues affect you; immigration may not affect you directly, and being young, you may not appreciate the need for health insurance let alone reform. However, most things in society can be connected to politics and political science in some way. Interested in sports? One way to explore sports in politics might be how Congress has involved itself in issues from steroids in baseball to concussions in football. Additionally, when local municipalities build stadiums or arenas for their local teams, politics is involved. Interested in the fine arts? Think about education policies that have placed a greater emphasis on science, math, and reading, and drawn money and attention away from theater, arts, and music. Have a passion for space? You can study the politics of NASA and human spaceflight or even broader contours of science policy like climate change.

The bottom line of this discussion is that political science is more than what we often think it is or can be. It is also more thorough, deliberate, and objective than the politics we see on TV or read about on the Internet. In that sense, even those who might be turned off by the nasty rhetoric or negative commercials might be interested in the actual dynamics of explaining why bills are passed or why the public feels the way they do.
Debates over the history and nature of political science are not new. (For readings on these topics, see the For Further Reading section at the end of this chapter.) Most everyone can agree that the roots of the discipline go back to ancient Greece with the philosophy of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. While Socrates himself is well known for his approach to teaching (the so-called Socratic method), his writings, if ever there were any, do not survive today. What we know about Socrates and his philosophy comes to us through his student Plato. Plato's writings, most importantly for us, *The Republic*, present his thoughts as a series of discussions between Socrates and his students. Many of these discussions centered on concepts like justice, government, morals, and what proper city-states should look like. Ironically, students are often taught that the origins of democracy come from ancient Greece quite literally: *demos* means “people” and *kratos* means “rule.” However, among other discussions in *The Republic*, Plato classifies democracy as being an unjust government along with timocracy, oligarchy, and tyranny. His reason for this is that democracy, allowing the people to rule, could lead to what is called tyranny of the majority. The danger, according to Plato, is that the majority could run roughshod over the rights of the minority and therefore devolve into a tyrannical, unjust government.

Aristotle continued this tradition in his work *Politics*. In it, Aristotle discusses what the best government is, arguing that the city is the natural community and the only just community. These three Greek philosophers left an indelible mark on political philosophy that would not be questioned nor significantly added to until the medieval period when philosophers like St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas wrote treatises on the nature and purpose of law. These writings will be explored further in Chapter 3.

As Europe moved from the medieval period into the sixteenth century, religion and its role in government came to the forefront of European political matters. The first prominent treatise that appeared at this time was Niccolò Machiavelli's *The Prince*. With its oft-heard exhortations like “the ends justify the means” and “It is much safer to be feared than loved,” Machiavelli’s name is sometimes used as an adjective to mean cunning and deceitful. The real purpose of *The Prince*, however, was to win Machiavelli favor with the powerful Medici family out of which had come popes and royalty. Machiavelli thus represented a real attempt at synthesizing advice for rulers that would make them not only successful but powerful. This focus on the practical applications of politics represents a shift in political theory, considering not just the fundamental building blocks of society but demonstrating how they could be put into practice. This tradition can also be seen in Sir Thomas More's 1516 book *Utopia*, describing an ideal society and its religious, governmental, and cultural practices.

Ironically, in More's England, a massive government upheaval was in the works. In 1534, King Henry VIII of England declared the Church in England to be independent of the Roman Catholic Church because he desired a divorce from his first wife. The religious upheaval generated by this one move helped lead to the English Civil War in the 1600s. During this period, a new generation of political philosophers arose,
questioning the original purposes of the governments under which they lived. What
gave the king the right to rule over his people? Was the divine right of kings, the
idea that God divinely inspired and supported monarchy and therefore implicitly sup-
ported the actions and decisions of kings, justifiable? Particularly given the religious
reformation of the time, what role should religion play in forming a government?

A new generation of philosophers arose from the ashes of the English Civil War
to try to provide answers to the now pressing questions. And while much of this
will be discussed further in Chapter 3, we will briefly describe some of the innova-
tions here. The philosophers Thomas Hobbes and John Locke separately proposed
to begin from a thought experiment called the state of nature, imagining what life
and human behavior might look like in the absence of government, society, and
culture. Based on this, both Locke and Hobbes agreed that individuals are granted
certain natural rights that all people have, but at some point, this state of nature
begins to break down. Hobbes, believing that human nature is suspect, saw a break-
down among the people leading to a life that is “nasty, brutish, and short.” Locke,
on the other hand, believed that the state of nature can be more pleasant, arguing
that people are naturally good; it is only the introduction of property and money
that causes disputes among the people. In any case, once the state of nature breaks
down, people, in need of safety, agree to enter into social contracts wherein every-
one gives up some of their natural rights to a government in return for order and
protection from one another. These ideas dramatically changed political theory. No
longer did rule need to be divinely ordained; no longer was there justification to
keep the common people from being involved in the operations of government. The
age of Enlightenment had begun.

These social contract theorists greatly influenced views on the role and responsi-
bilities of government moving into the eighteenth century. For example, the prin-
ciples of consent of the governed, natural rights, and social contract theory are widely
apparent in the founding documents of the United States. Jefferson readily admits
to “certain unalienable rights” in the Declaration of Independence, along with “their
right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government and to provide new Guards
for their future security.” Other influential theorists such as Montesquieu explicated
ideas such as separation of powers that Americans like John Adams expounded on
and advocated for the adoption of in a new American government.

**Establishing a Discipline**

Given the importance of such ideas to movements including the American and
French revolutions, no one could deny the significance of political philosophy and
theory. However, as the nineteenth century progressed and the role of the state grew,
there was a clamor in the American academy to establish some sort of area of study
that encompassed not only political philosophy but areas such as law and adminis-
tration. This was also reflected in the changes in the American university system as
it moved from a classical curriculum broadly focused on the classics, religion, and
ethics to a curriculum dominated by specialized fields of study.⁵
This conception of political science as a field would soon come into conflict with the idea of developing a science of politics. The second influence on the development of political science was the very idea of developing a systematic and scientific view of the political world. Woodrow Wilson, before becoming president of the United States, was one of the first political scientists in America and in 1887 wrote, “I suppose that no practical science is ever studied where there is no need to know it. The very fact, therefore, that the eminently practical science of administration is finding its way into college courses in this country would prove that this country needs to know more about administration.” Implicit in this idea is that political science can inform public officials and the government of ways to improve. The roots of later debates within political science about its purpose and methods are also implied in Wilson’s perception of the growth of political science.

Twentieth-Century Political Science

Most of the political science research carried out in the first half of the twentieth century was primarily observational, comparative, and categorizing in its intent. But as political scientists watched other social sciences, particularly psychology, develop (this was the time of Freud, after all), a movement arose to bring more scientifically based methods to the field. This movement came to fruition with the behavioral revolution in political science at the midcentury mark. Behind the concept of behavioralism was the idea that all human action, and therefore political action, can be observed, quantified, and explained in an objective, scientific way.

Proponents of behavioralism argue that the only way to uncover and explain political behavior is in a way that is value neutral, objective, and replicable. In this sense, political scientists can use the model of the natural sciences to improve their field and contribute scientifically to a basic body of knowledge. However, behavioralism is not without its critics. People are people, after all; much of what they do is not objective and is not replicable, especially when it comes to politics. How can political scientists expect to be objective and value neutral when their subjects are not? Additionally, the reasons people behave the way they do are varied, and often individuals are not even aware of why they behave in certain ways; what makes political scientists believe that they can distinguish these behaviors? While behavioralism has been discussed and debated within political science since the 1950s, many of its precepts abound today. Most political scientists seek to be objective, thorough, analytical, and explanatory. They use quantified data and statistical methods, and lacking that, they are methodical and precise in their analyses. Most political scientists are inculcated in statistical methodology and learn how to scientifically analyze data. Chapter 2 will discuss some of the ways in which statistics and quantitative analysis are used by political scientists to answer difficult questions.

Behavioralism is a view that political behavior can be explained through a focus on individual behavior; not everything in politics, however, is directed through individuals. Some things, such as laws and institutions, cannot necessarily be explained through a focus on the individual. Institutionalism and its proponents in the 1960s
and 1970s sought to refocus the discipline on an analysis of institutions, their development, and their effects on politics. One way to think about the difference between institutions and individuals is to think about the rules of the game and the playing of a game. Any game has rules; those rules shape how individuals play the game. When those rules change, for whatever reason, it affects how the game is played. For institutionalists, the way political institutions are designed is like the rules in a game. Applied to something like Congress, institutionalists would focus on how things like committees are set up or how much power leaders have and the types of effects that might have on congressional productivity or power structures.

Institutionalists in the 1960s and 1970s brought to the field techniques that borrowed from the field of economics. Things like rational choice theory and game theory allowed institutions to be modeled in a formal way. These models also led to predictions, another hallmark of the push for a natural science approach in political science. Perhaps one of the most well-known game theoretic models in political science from this period was Downs's book *An Economic Theory of Democracy.* In it, Downs builds a formal model of political behavior working from the assumption of rationality—that people and institutions make decisions based on what their preferences are. One of the results that comes from his analysis is that the likely number of major political parties in a country is a result of the distribution of voters and what they believe. Political parties also have an incentive to make their platforms vague and rarely change them to appear stable and attract as many voters as possible.

The difference between institutionalism and behavioralism is one of where the origins of political behavior lie: Is it with individual people or with the institutions and rules of the game that shape people's behaviors? Like many of the conflicts inherent in political science, there isn't necessarily a right or wrong answer; it's merely a reflection of where political scientists believe is the appropriate area for study.

The Role of Political Theory

The history of political science, detailed here, began with a discussion of political philosophy ranging from Plato to Montesquieu with Machiavelli and St. Augustine in between. Once political science as a discipline was formed, it would appear to a casual observer that political theory had been relegated to the dustbin of history. It is certainly true that since the late nineteenth century, the role of political theory and philosophy had been downgraded to an extent, but it has not disappeared entirely. Beginning in the mid-twentieth century, political theory experienced a resurgence of sorts with theorists reconsidering the role and purpose of the state. Theorists such as John Rawls published *A Theory of Justice,* exploring the shape that a truly just state would take. Meanwhile, Nozick contributed to a critique of *A Theory of Justice* from a libertarian perspective (libertarians believe in as little government involvement in life as possible). Political theory has increasingly explored the values of marginalized communities such as women, minorities, and the LGBTQ+ community. Books such as Pateman's *The Sexual Contract* and Mills's *The Racial Contract* take on the very ideas of what a social contract might mean in
today’s society. There have even been political theorists exploring the role of multiculturalism in politics.

Despite this renaissance of political theory in the past fifty years, some political scientists and even some political theorists have argued for a separation between the two fields. Grant explores the relationship between political theory and political science in her article for Political Theory titled “Political Theory, Political Science, and Politics.” She writes that political scientists see no place for political theory because it discusses normative questions—questions that by their very nature have no real answer. Further, theorists, political scientists argue, “lack meaningful standards for assessing what constitutes good research.” On the other hand, “Political theorists, on their part, find their work evaluated by people who believe that research must have a ‘cutting edge’ and that its aim is to produce new knowledge, beliefs that they often do not share.”

The debate, then, goes to the heart of whether the purpose of political science is to produce scientific knowledge or knowledge of what is good or bad, just or unjust. It is indeed ironic that political theory is at the very roots of what political science is, and yet today, some argue it does not belong. This book approaches political theory as not only a subfield but as a foundational part of political science that will be taken up further in Chapter 3.

Is Political Science a Science?

One of the basic questions of political science that permeates the field today is whether political science is a science or can ever be a science. Science is defined as a systematic search for knowledge through observation, experiments, and tests and is associated with the scientific method. The scientific method (see box) is a series of steps that, when followed, allows scientists to thoroughly and methodically ask a question and answer it using observational evidence.

If we take this as the basic meaning of science, then political science is clearly science. Practitioners ask questions, make hypotheses, and systematically test the hypotheses. Even qualitative analyses follow the same pattern of asking a question and very carefully testing and analyzing the evidence. But the deeper meaning of the question is whether political science can ever build a body of knowledge that can be used to better government and politics or at least predict what will happen.

The idea of prediction is built into the natural sciences. Physicists can predict the behavior of molecules on the tiniest scale; astrophysicists can predict the movement of the planets. Biologists can discuss evolution, genetics, and the appearance of different physical characteristics. Medical professionals can predict how the human body will respond to various sorts of treatments for various sorts of ailments. Perhaps one of the greatest stories of predictions is on the part of physicists, who, on the basis of what’s called the standard model, predicted the existence of something called a Higgs boson, otherwise known as “the God particle.” According to physicists, the Higgs boson is what gives mass to all other particles. While the existence of such a
particle has been predicted for some time, it was not until 2012 that scientists at the Large Hadron Collider in Switzerland confirmed its existence through physical tests.

It is hard to name one thing that political scientists can predict with certainty on the scale of the Higgs (at least in terms of importance). There are any number of studies analyzing congressional voting patterns on policies varying from health care to immigration; however, just because members of Congress behaved a certain way in the past does not guarantee they will behave the same in the future. A good way to think about this is in how political parties change over time. Following the Civil War, the Republican Party, the party of Lincoln, was known (at least in the North) to be more supportive of freed slaves, whereas the Democrats (the party of the South) were not. Just 100 years later, this disposition had shifted; Democrats were the party of civil rights and Republicans were not. If there had been any voting studies of how Republicans during the 1800s had voted on civil rights issues, the findings would not hold in voting studies in the twentieth century.

The question thus becomes whether the findings of political scientists are contingent on history. By contingent, we mean dependent on historical circumstances of the type noted previously. For example, given our current state of political polarization, perhaps any findings political scientists have about politics today might be contingent on the polarization that already exists. This historical contingency is apparent when political scientists claim unique historical factors for why something happens in politics. For example, both historians and political scientists have argued that President Lyndon B. Johnson’s passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and other elements of the Great Society agenda were only possible in the wake of President John F. Kennedy’s assassination and the Democratic landslide that it helped contribute to in the 1964 elections.

### Scientific Method

The scientific method is a series of steps through which researchers can systematically study and analyze a given topic or question. While some scholars would add to the following steps that follow, the basic steps of the scientific method are these:

1. Form a research question.
2. Formulate a hypothesis, a reasonable guess as to what the answer to the question is.
3. Do background research.
4. Design a test through which to answer the question.
5. Perform the analysis and gather the results.
6. Make conclusions based on your data. Was your hypothesis right or wrong?
To be sure, there is nothing wrong with historical contingency; if accidents of history have helped contribute to certain political events, it would be malpractice to ignore or deny it. The problem is that historical contingency often prohibits political scientists from making sweeping pronouncements that allow for future prediction. And if we cannot make predictions, then what is the purpose of political science? Is it all right for the purpose of political science to be simply the discovery of new knowledge or does it need to go further to justify its own existence? Again, these are existential questions built into the very foundation of what political science is as a discipline and again, the answers to the question do not lie in the category of right or wrong but in the mind of individual political scientists.

One way we use predictions in political science is in presidential elections. For the past four presidential election cycles, the political science journal *PS: Political Science and Politics* has published the results of several predictive models of the presidential election. Each model takes different factors into account, ranging from the economy to public opinion. The models take data from previous election cycles and combine it with current data to predict which candidate is more likely to win the presidential election. However, issues of data availability and contingent historical events are also important. Campbell notes that “an implicit assumption of election forecasting is that no major idiosyncratic events intervene between the forecast and the vote that divert the election’s results from what would be historically expected by the fundamentals incorporated in the models.” Should an “October surprise” happen, an unexpected event or announcement that can interrupt political campaigns, those forecasts may lose their predictive power.12

In the end, human nature and the confluence of history conspire to make prediction difficult. Human brains cannot be looked at and taken apart in petri dishes in some lab; they are real and living and able to change. In fact, a well-known phenomenon known as the observer effect acknowledges the idea that when people are told how they act or how they may act in the future, they will likely change their behavior. Applying the observer effect to politics, it could be possible that once members of Congress are told the factors that make them likely to vote for a bill (political party, salience, importance to their constituents), they may in fact change their behavior confounding any possible prediction that may have once come about.

So is political science a science? It is insofar as political scientists adhere to the scientific method, but attempts to make predictions, while admittedly few and far between, are far more difficult to model than the natural sciences. Recognizing the difficulties in predictions, it does not mean that political scientists do not try to learn and understand why politics happens the way it does, it just means that we are cautious in making any long-term predictions.

**Major Concepts of Political Science**

Before moving on to look at the individual fields of study that can be found within political science, we will examine some of the primary ideas and concepts that are
found throughout. These include things such as states, forms of government, civil liberties and civil rights, power, representation, political culture, and ideology. While there are certainly many others that can be added to this list, these concepts can be found throughout the study of political science regardless of subfield.

Public Goods, the Tragedy of the Commons, and Free Riders

One of the key reasons often cited for the need for a government is the provision and protection of what are called public goods. Public goods are goods that are “available for, and consumed by, all individuals. Their consumption by any one person does not diminish their consumption by others. People cannot (easily) be excluded from sharing in their consumption and at times have no other choice.” Public goods include things like roads, schools, police, and the military—these are all things that everyone can partake in and cannot be excluded from.

To further understand what happens when these goods and services are provided, political scientists use the concept of the tragedy of the commons. Imagine a small village with no government to speak of and imagine that in the middle of this village is an open field. This open field can be used for farming or for animals to graze on. While this field is available to all, if too many people use it for too many purposes, its value to animals and crops will be limited. In other words, private individuals may abuse the common goods for private gain without thinking about the needs of others. A more modern example of this tragedy of the commons is in overfishing. With seas and oceans being openly available resources, private businesses will often overfish to their own gain. However, when fish populations become sufficiently limited as a result, it ruins the opportunities for others to use that public good and even eventually for the business that overfished in the first place. Since nobody can be excluded from the field or the seas, everybody uses the good so that at some point it is overused, thereby reducing the benefit to everyone. In this sense, governments are needed not only to provide public goods that may not be otherwise provided by the group but to protect the public goods that do exist.

If part of the purpose of a government is to regulate and provide these public goods, how can that government assemble the necessary resources to do so? Roads must be built, and police and military must be trained and fielded. If citizens know that they will receive these public goods no matter what, what incentive do they have to participate and/or pay for them? This concept is often called the free rider problem; if public goods cannot be exclusive to only the people who pay for them, there are bound to be those who seek to cheat the system and not pay. In terms of the government, this problem is circumvented by the requirement of taxes through which public goods can be provided.

Career Guidance

The use of the scientific method is not exclusive to science, whether it is a hard science or political science. The scientific method can also be seen as a way of critical thinking or analysis, which many employers find useful. You can transfer this way of thinking to solve problems, analyze markets, or consider strategy for a future employer. This is an excellent skill to highlight in future job hunts.
The free rider problem can also be applied to smaller groups and associations like interest groups. In interest groups that are organized around the public interest, the benefits they pursue cannot be provided solely to the group members. For example, one of the missions of the American Cancer Society (ACS) is to support research looking for a cure for cancer. If a cure was ever found, the ACS cannot keep nonmembers from accessing that cure. What is the incentive, then, for people to join the ACS if they know they will receive the benefits anyway? Olson addressed this very problem in his book *The Logic of Collective Action*. He theorized that groups like the ACS must use selective benefits in order to entice people to join their groups, things like material benefits (discounts, T-shirts, magazines, etc.), purposive benefits, or solidarity benefits. In sum, then, the government can overcome the free rider problem through its power to require taxes, but other groups must find some other incentive to cause people to want to join.

**States**

When we think of the term *state* in America, we usually also think of the fact that the country is called the United States of America. Although some political scientists may debate the true meaning or conceptualization of the term *state*, in general, states refer to groups of people living under a single governmental system. Often, the term denotes sovereign states in the sense that those states have complete control over what happens to them, their government, and their people in the same way that the United States of America is a single group of people who have control over their political lives. The origins of the name *United States of America* comes from the period following the Declaration of Independence when each of the former colonies truly was sovereign, or all powerful, within its territory. Despite the existence of the Articles of Confederation, power resided with these thirteen states, and no central body had authority over them. When the Constitution was created and ratified, those thirteen formerly independent and sovereign entities became the United States of America.

States are often the main subject of study in political science. Political scientists study patterns of governmental or political behavior within a single state or compare such behaviors across multiple states or regions. Some try to understand the philosophy and reasoning behind the governmental structures of a state. Still, others seek to understand what makes states succeed, thrive, and prosper and others fail. In fact, the question of failed states is one that perplexes political scientists today; failed states are those entities that lose power and authority over their territory or people. Whether that is because those states have been overthrown by invaders or their own people, because of war or famine, or simply because the government did not operate as effectively as it could have are all up for debate. What is not up for debate is the effect that these failed states can have throughout the world; for example, Somalia, located in the Horn of Africa, is a failed state, and the lack of any control over the territory has allowed terrorist groups like al-Qaeda to thrive and for pirates to operate off its coasts. These effects, therefore, are not simply local but of a global nature. The topic of states, while
important in establishing constitutions and governments, is an important part of the
comparative politics subfield and will be addressed in Chapter 8.

One way of understanding what a state is is to know what a state is not. Many
people confuse states with nations or even governments. This is natural, and we
hear it all the time—particularly from people who may argue this or that about the
“nation of the United States.” While country is often (correctly) used as a synonym
for state, it is not necessarily appropriate to use the term nation in this way. A nation
refers to a group of people who have a common background, history, culture, lan-
guage, etc. For example, the Native American nation of the Sioux represents a dis-
tinct cultural heritage, yet they do not have their own state in the sense that they
have a piece of territory that they solely have control over. Some may argue that
the United States comprises a single people brought together in a melting pot of
immigration; others still see the United States as a multicultural entity with separate
groups of Hispanics, Irish, Chinese, Middle Eastern, etc. For most of history, the
main actors in global politics were called nation-states, representing a state that also
encapsulated one group of nationals or peoples. For this, we can think of historical
Europe, where England represented a single cultural group and the French another.
In turn, each of these peoples managed to establish states in their territories earning
the label of nation-state.

Government

Where states are groups of people living under one governmental system, the very
term government means the style and structure of the institutions that make author-
itative decisions for a society. Governments come in many different styles, from dem-
ocratic republics of the American type or authoritarian regimes under dictators. One
way to think about these different types of governments or regimes is to categorize
them by how many people are involved in making decisions for society, from the one
to the many (see Figure 1.1). We can begin with those governments in which only
one person has the ultimate authority, and in this case, there are two potential styles
of government: monarchy and authoritarian dictatorships.

In a monarchy, the highest authority is the king or queen. While the United
Kingdom immediately comes to mind as an example of a monarchical system, today
the United Kingdom is actually a constitutional monarchy where power resides with
Parliament, an elected legislative body, and the ruling monarch is merely a figure-
head. A better modern example of this style of government is the kingdom of Saudi
Arabia, which is currently ruled by the House of Saud. These differences are import-
ant; for a system to be a true monarchy, the king or queen must have final say; this
is not the case in the United Kingdom but is true for Saudi Arabia.

An authoritarian dictatorship, on the other hand, is rule by one individual with
no constraints of law, institutions, or custom. When we use the term, it generally
infers a malevolent nature, invoking the tenures of dictators like Hitler, Stalin, or
Mao. However, that doesn’t necessarily have to be the case as the term could poten-
tially be used in a more positive manner—for instance, in what might be called a
benevolent dictatorship. While we have never witnessed such a regime in history, the fact remains that a dictatorship or government of one does not automatically imply either the intentions or the ideology supporting it. For example, Hitler's regime was one that operated under a fascist ideology, or a belief that the state came before all. On the other hand, Stalin's dictatorship utilized communist ideology, and as such, Hitler and Stalin intensely disliked each other. Thus, despite them being fellow dictators, they could not cooperate nor respect one another because of differing positions on ideology. This is all a means of illustrating how the structure of government (dictatorship) can be separated out from ideology (a consistent set of beliefs about how the world or government should work, discussed later in this chapter).

It might also appear easy to confuse a monarchy with a dictatorship; after all, one country's king could be another's dictator. Under a monarchical government, power is traditionally passed on by family ties; however, in dictatorships, this is not an absolute. When Stalin died in the Soviet Union, there was no clear successor to his duties; Nikita Khrushchev eventually came to power but was unable to secure it for more than a few years. In the authoritarian regime of North Korea, leadership has been passed down in the Kim family from the founder of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Kim Il-sung, to his son, Kim Jong-il, and finally to his son, Kim Jong-un.

Some states, instead of being ruled by one, may be ruled by a few; this is called oligarchy. In these situations, oligarchs usually represent the most prosperous or most powerful individuals in a state, and it is among these people where power is brokered and decisions are made. Following the signing of the Magna Carta in 1215, England went from an absolute monarchy to what could be arguably termed an oligarchy, where the king's power came from the landed aristocracy who could control some of what the king intended to do. The Soviet Union following Stalin and then Khrushchev could also be considered an oligarchy with the Soviet Politburo, the top communist organization in the state, controlling much of what went on in the country and replacing leaders when necessary. Today's modern Russia can also be seen as an oligarchy as Russian president Vladimir Putin is backed in his position by a small group of oil barons who have made billions of dollars from Russian oil reserves.

As more and more people gain power and the ability to contribute to decisions in a government, the type of government changes. This is where we may begin to think about democratic governments. There are two main types of democracies: indirect and direct. Indirect democracy is where citizens vote on people to represent them in the halls of government; this is called a republic and is the type of
government that we have in the United States. In this sense, even though it is a democracy, all people do not have direct input in decisions; they exercise this power only indirectly through elected officials. If all people are involved in all decisions, this would be a direct democracy.

What good is understanding different types of governments, or rather, what type of analytical leverage can this gain us in political science? The concept of government can be quite helpful not only when comparing different governments but can also give political theorists a sense of the best form of government or even the worst. This was the subject of Plato, Socrates, and Aristotle in their early studies of government. Being able to recognize and identify different types of governments also helps us to explain why states behave the way they do. How do dictators preserve their power? How do voters vote? What constraints are placed on a state’s leadership? Thus, the concept of government has significant value in understanding and explaining behavior in a global context and many of these types of governments are further explored in Chapter 8.

**Power**

In both of the previously given concepts, the idea of power is central to defining a state and a government. Both have the authority and legitimacy to wield power over their citizens, yet the concept of power is not easily defined or measured. Many scholars define power as the ability to get one to do something they otherwise would not do. For example, making citizens pay taxes or obey laws they would otherwise not pay or obey is the exercise of power. In these examples, this power is legitimate in the sense that the government has the privilege and ability to do these things. But how do we know power when we see it? And are there different types or forms of power? These questions are far more complicated than simply defining a word.

One of the most popular conceptions of power, at least in American politics, is from Neustadt, who argued that power is persuasion, or the ability to convince someone that they want to do this on their own, not simply because an individual is forcing them to do it. Neustadt’s argument, while appearing similar to the description of power that was just given is subtly different in the sense that you would be convincing someone that what you want them to do is in their best interest, not just yours. Therefore, Neustadt, who was writing this with respect to the US president, adds another layer to the power equation: not only making someone do what you want them to but do it because they want to.

Power is also a key concept in the realm of international relations where Barnett and Duval have defined it as “the ability of states to use material resources to get others to do what they otherwise would not.” Again, this definition, while appearing similar, invokes a different layer of interpretation. States are using their military, economic, and diplomatic resources to force others to act in a particular way. Theoretically, these assets might not be needed in a more general conception of power, but for international relations theorists, the fact that different means of persuasion, to use Neustadt’s term, are being used is key. Nye has identified different types of power in global politics, differentiating between hard and soft power. Hard
power represents the military and economic resources that a country possesses that can make countries respond in a positive way to what a country wants. However, soft power encompasses the values, example, prosperity, and openness that Nye says can “co-opt people rather than coerce them.” Nye, then, makes a distinct difference between force and persuasion of the Neustadt type.

In any case, it is quite difficult to measure power or to see it in action. Sometimes, for example, diplomatic negotiations or negotiations among policymakers may take place in public view, through public statements, news reports, and an interplay with public opinion. When this happens, it is somewhat easy to identify who is powerful and who is successfully using their power. However, far more often these types of actions take place hidden from public view, which makes it much harder to discern what is happening.

Much of politics is a game of power, getting people to agree, to act in a particular way, or to make something happen; this makes power an important element of political analysis and helps to explain political outcomes. Take health care reform, for example. When former president Bill Clinton attempted policy change in 1993 through his wife and first lady Hillary Clinton, he could not muster the support needed to get the reform he desired passed by Congress. However, President Barack Obama was far more successful in 2009; a fair question, then, is what made Barack Obama more powerful in regard to health care reform than Bill Clinton? While both were Democratic presidents with Democratic majorities in the House and Senate, Clinton could not wield his power in a way that would induce Congress to pass reform while Obama could. While the answers to this conundrum are out of the scope of this text, the question is nonetheless an excellent example of how the concept of power is often used in political science to help understand and explain outcomes.

Ideology

In the same way state, nation, and country are often confused, so are the ideas of ideology and government, and political party. An ideology is a consistent and coherent set of ideas concerning any number of things from religion and morals to theories about politics and how states should be run. Some of the ideologies that interest us most include liberalism, conservatism, and even communism. The reason that ideology is often confusing is that ideologies are often conflated with types of government—for example, communist dictatorship or liberal democracy. And while it is completely appropriate to use these terms together to signify a dictatorship that is run under a communist ideology or a democracy that is run under a liberal ideology, all too often the terms are taken to mean the same thing. Ideologies are not forms of government or how states are run, they are the theoretical underpinnings as to what the government should do or how they do it.

Two of the major ideologies that are often discussed today are liberalism and conservatism, although these ideas as ideologies may be quite different from the way you have heard them discussed by politicians or the news media.
Liberalism as an ideology developed out of the Enlightenment period—the same moment when Locke and Hobbes debated the rationales of government and natural rights. Classical liberals, in fact, based many of their beliefs on Locke’s philosophy, including a belief in natural rights, a social contract view of government, and the values of liberty and individualism. This early view of liberalism emphasized limited government as the best means of protecting these values; however, modern liberals have evolved to endorse a more active role for government in society. Modern liberal ideology espouses the belief that government can and should be used to enforce the equality and liberty of all people, including racial and gender equality. They also believe that government can be more broadly used to better the overall condition of society.

Because of the philosophical and political upheaval of the 1600s, many in Britain were concerned about the pace of political change and urged a slower movement toward it. They believed in order and tradition and, at least in Britain, felt that there was a place for the monarchy and the aristocracy. These early conservative proponents would give rise to the conservative ideology that we are more familiar with in the United States today. Modern conservatives also value law and order, but they believe that rather than slowing down change, change in government should be sped up. Specifically, they believe that that change should be toward reducing the scope of government and what government is asked to do and instead allow private and community organizations to take the place of the services that government currently provides. Thus, while liberals maintain that government involvement in society is desirable, necessary, and proper to better all of society, conservatives believe that the government should be limited and that it is this type of situation that best serves society as a whole.

Based on these two descriptions, it is easy to see the difference between ideology and government; government provides the vehicle, whereas ideology provides the direction. In many ways, central tenets of ideology refer specifically to government and to ideas about the proper size and scope of it. Despite the possibility for confusion, ideology plays a key role in political science. Not only does it form the central questions of political theory—a subfield of political science to be discussed in Chapter 3—but it helps to explain why political actors behave as they do. If an ideology becomes dominant across a country or region, this too can explain the ultimate actions of these players. People and countries do not act simply to act; there is a cause and an underpinning as to why they are behaving the way they are, and in this sense, ideology can form the basis of those justifications.

Another pair of ideas that is too often confused is ideology and political party. Because political parties also put forward their own ideas about how government should work and what it should do, it is easy to see how this mistake may be made. However, these two concepts are quite different in one major respect: Where ideologies represent consistent and coherent beliefs (one belief does not contradict another), political parties do not. Take, for example, the Republican Party. Many Republicans believe in the need for smaller government—something that conservatives would also agree with. But many Republicans also call for a larger military or a
government that is more involved with social choices like abortion. The belief in the need for a smaller government and the belief in a larger military are contradictory; you cannot have a smaller government while having a larger defense force. Political parties, as the aggregate representation of a large group of people, have these sorts of contradictions built into their platforms. Because of this, their beliefs are not coherent and consistent and are thus not ideologies.

This does not make political parties any more or less worthwhile. Indeed, they are an intrinsic part of political science and understanding group political behavior. Now more than ever, the political party is an important concept in political science. Following the contentious presidential primary battle that ultimately led to the matchup between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump, many were asking how the Democrats and Republicans, respectively, came to nominate such disliked candidates. Understanding how and why political parties behave and operate are key to answering this puzzle. These types of questions will be taken up in Chapter 5, which focuses on electoral and party systems.

Civil Liberties, Civil Rights, and Human Rights

The twin concepts of civil liberties and civil rights are inherent in the ideologies of liberalism and conservatism; they are the natural rights of which liberals speak and believe government should expand to enforce, particularly when it comes to civil rights. They are also those rights and liberties that conservatives believe are best protected when the government is small. Civil liberties encompass these natural rights or our ability to do certain things that must be protected from government. These include freedom of speech, thought, and action; freedom of religion; the ability to own and possess firearms; and the right to be free from unwarranted search and seizure. While we often call these things “rights,” they are more properly termed civil liberties. One of the original concerns over the Constitution was that it did not contain a listing of these rights that many believed should be protected and that government should never be allowed to infringe on. As a compromise between those who supported the Constitution, the Federalists, and those who did not, the Anti-Federalists, the Federalists agreed to draft a Bill of Rights that would be amendments to the Constitution; this is where most of our American civil liberties are enshrined.

Civil rights, on the other hand, are our freedoms to be treated fairly and equally, and all too often these rights must be enforced by government rather than protected from it. Civil rights include the right to vote and have that vote count just as much as the next person’s and the freedom from discrimination by law. Over time, the application of civil rights has greatly expanded to include minorities such as African Americans, women, and more recently individuals from the LGBTQ+ community.

These ideas can be divisive in a global environment. While many in America may believe in the right to freedom of religion or equality of women, these are not universally accepted beliefs. Following the end of World War II and the discovery
of the atrocities committed by the Germans in the Holocaust, efforts were made at the international level to establish a set of human rights that could be agreed to across the world and, ultimately, ideally, enforced. The result of this effort was the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), which delineated many of the civil liberties and rights we find in our own Constitution as well as some that go above and beyond it, including a right to an education and an explicit right to privacy. Many of the rights, however, that we find in the UDHR are not actively implemented in some of the countries that originally voted for it, including Pakistan and Egypt. Other countries with significant Muslim populations have also decided not to sign on to it. The question quickly becomes, then, what should be done about countries that refuse to endorse or implement the idea of human rights, that all people should have certain civil liberties and civil rights regardless of who they are or where they are? This is a major question for international relations scholars today and will be taken up in further detail in Chapter 9.

Representation

Particularly for democratic countries, representation is a key concept through which we can view how the government operates. Representation is the idea that even though they are not there, the views of all the people in a society are considered when decisions are being made. The wishes and desires of those people may not always win out, but to be truly represented, they must at least have been thought about and considered. The extent to which all are represented in government is important when asking whether a country is democratic or not or even how democratic a country is; these two questions are especially relevant in the field of comparative politics, which is discussed in Chapter 8.

To better understand the idea of representation, let’s consider a few examples here in the United States. David Mayhew posits that elected officials in Congress behave the way they do because they desire reelection more than anything else. If this is the case, those members of Congress will want to please their constituents, but therein we run into a problem: Not everyone votes. It would not be rational for the member of Congress to try and please everyone—just those who vote. Who is being represented then: all constituents or just those who vote? Given that voter turnout in the 2016 presidential election was 61.4 percent of the voting age population, just how representative is our resulting government? And if we’re not representing everyone, just how democratic is the United States? This example also demonstrates that there are different types of representation. While elected officials may be technically representing all people in their district even though some of them didn’t vote, we can say that those who didn’t vote may only have symbolic representation and those who did vote have substantive representation. A key theoretical question is what effect there may be of having people both symbolically and substantively represented—for example, to which group of people will the legislator respond? Are those who are symbolically represented ignored in the political process? What are the ramifications of these differences?
We can further consider a different type of representation that many political scientists find important: descriptive representation. Descriptive representation is the idea that those we elect look like us. Again, consider the US Congress. In 2015, less than 20 percent of the members of Congress were female while over 50 percent of the people of the United States are female. While the gap has closed with 127 women serving in Congress after the 2018 elections (women now make up 23.7 percent of the Congress), this still-significant shortfall in the number of women in the United States and the number of women representing people in the United States demonstrates a lack of descriptive representation. Proponents of descriptive representation argue that when bodies of elected officials mirror proportions found in society, that government can better represent the ideas, beliefs, and desires of everyone involved. To this end, some Western European countries have instituted quotas in their legislatures to ensure that descriptive representation is better achieved. Again, some comparativists, those that study comparative politics, find these concepts quite useful in understanding the operations of governments around the world and what makes them better or worse or more or less democratic. Chapter 8, for instance, explores different definitions of democracy and considers how democratic governments around the world actually are.

**Political Culture**

Many of the ideas that we have discussed thus far contribute to this final concept to be discussed: political culture. Just as culture is the set of values, beliefs, behaviors, and norms that a society holds in common, a political culture consists of those political ideas, norms, beliefs, and actions in which a group of people generally believes. Think about the things we as Americans generally believe; we believe in civil liberties and civil rights, in a liberal democratic government, in the idea of the American dream. Granted, these are somewhat general and amorphous in nature; therefore, it is often more useful to look at different regions or areas of the globe or the United States to better understand political culture and categorize and define it.

The most well-known study of political culture was published in 1965 by Almond and Verba. *The Civic Culture* identified three subtypes of political culture based on how much people were involved in the political process: parochial, subject, and participant. In a parochial political culture, people don’t pay much attention to a central government if they are aware of it at all; as such, they are rarely involved in governmental decisions interested in them. In a subject culture, people are more aware of the government and its decisions but are relatively helpless at influencing or changing them. Finally, a participant culture is one in which people are aware of and can participate in the processes of government.

While Almond and Verba’s study of political culture defines it based on the amount that citizens can participate in government, an alternative classification scheme is that of Elazar. In studying the United States, Elazar argues that instead of one political culture, there are actually several that vary largely by region. A moral political culture generally refers to regions where people believe society is
more important than the individual and that government is generally good and can be used to benefit that society as a whole. Communities are more important than individuals, so individual rights or abilities may often be sacrificed for the good of the whole. In regions with an individual political culture, government is used for practical concerns even though it may be corrupt or seen as “dirty.” Governments are in place to serve individual needs, and individuals are placed above community. In the final type, traditional, politics follows a natural social order, where there is a hierarchy among families and groups and those at the top run the government. While limited government is the dominant idea, those in a traditional political culture see it as a way to perpetuate the traditional order and hierarchy.

Elazar identifies states where these political cultures are dominant and those states that may have a mixture of ideas. In any case, what these conceptions of political culture allow us as political scientists to do is compare and contrast dominant attitudes about politics and government and what effects those attitudes have on political outcomes. They are a means of analyzing both the structure of government—particularly at the state and local levels and explaining what those governments may or may not do. For example, if we wish to compare the state of politics in California and Texas, the differing political culture may be one fruitful explanation to explore.

**Plan of the Book**

In the coming chapters, many of these concepts will continue to be essential in understanding the state of study in political science. For example, the nature and structures of things such as states and governments is further considered in Chapters 4, 5, and 8. While the ideas outlined previously are meant to provide you with a starting point from which to embark, this book is also structured in a way to provide you with a solid foundation about the field of political science and the state of research today. It is thus divided into three parts. Part I: Foundations, encompasses this chapter and the next two: Chapter 2 takes up how political scientists study politics or, in other words, the science in political science. Chapter 3 discusses political theory, which, as discussed previously, is the historical basis for today’s political science. Part II examines common institutions and political behavior. Chapter 4 discusses constitutions and their writing and systems of law and justice. Chapter 5, meanwhile, examines types of electoral and party systems—most specifically presidential and parliamentary systems. Chapter 6 examines the role of the media, which is vital in both democracies and nondemocracies alike.

Finally, Part III focuses on the subfields of political science. Much like medicine, the study of political science can be subdivided into different fields of interest and specializations; in graduate education, and sometimes for your undergraduate degree, students in political science choose a particular subfield to concentrate most of their time in. Chapters 7 through 11 serve as introductions to some of the more commonly recognized subfields in political science, including American politics, comparative
politics, international relations, and public policy and administration, and political economy. To be sure, political scientists often disagree about whether one particular area or not should be elevated to subfield status, but it is reasonable to consider the ones discussed here as most, if not all, of the major subfields of political science.

Taken in total, then, Part I will provide you with common theoretical and methodological foundations while Part II fills in some of the operational details that apply across political science. Part III introduces you to how the concepts and ideas discussed in the previous two parts are put into practice in the various fields of political science. Given that *Political Science Today* is an introduction to a wide and diverse field, it is necessary to limit discussion of key issues and debates; however, at the end of each chapter, you will find resources that can help you build on what is presented here, including additional readings and resources and critical thinking questions. Case studies throughout the chapter will also allow you to see how political scientists see and think about current issues. Thus, *Political Science Today* is a book about the state of political science in the late 2010s—where we’ve been, where we are, and where we’re going.

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**CHAPTER SUMMARY**
- Political science is the scientific study, analysis, and understanding of political processes and behavior.
- People have been studying politics since ancient Greek and Roman times. Only in the nineteenth century did political science become a formal field of study.
- Political scientists can study politics from a variety of angles, including from the perspective of individual actions (behavioralism) or institutions of governments (institutionalism).
- Political scientists use the tools of science and the scientific method to systematically study politics.
- No matter the subfield, political scientists across the discipline utilize common ideas or concepts to understand politics around the globe, including public goods, states, governments, power, ideology, representation, and political culture.
KEY TERMS

behavioralism: The concept that all human action, and therefore political action, can be observed, quantified, and explained in an objective, scientific way

civil liberties: Natural rights or our ability to do certain things that must be protected from government

civil rights: Freedoms to be treated fairly and equally, which must be enforced by government

free rider problem: The idea that people will not pay to participate in achieving a public good or to participate in a public interest group

government: The style and structure of the institutions that make authoritative decisions for a society

ideology: A consistent and coherent set of ideas concerning any number of things from religion and morals to theories about politics and how states should be run

institutionalism: The study of political institutions and how they influence individual behavior

nation: A group of people who have a common background, history, culture, language, etc.

natural rights: A set of rights that all humans have

political culture: A set of political ideas, norms, beliefs, and actions in which a group of people generally believes

political science: The systematic and scientific study of politics, including institutions, behaviors, and processes

politics: The authoritative allocation of resources

power: The ability to get one to do something they otherwise would not do

public goods: Goods that are nonexclusive and whose use does not reduce the availability of the good to others

representation: The practice of all views being considered in governmental decisions

science: The systematic search for knowledge through observation, experiments, and tests

scientific method: A series of steps scientists use to systematically ask and answer a question

social contracts: Agreement entered into by members of a society agreeing to give up some rights in return for a governing structure

state of nature: A thought experiment imagining what life and human behavior might look like in the absence of government, society, and culture

states: Groups of people living under a single governmental system

tragedy of the commons: Describes a situation where people, acting rationally, overuse a common good thereby depleting it for all

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What does political science mean to you? Can you think of any real-life examples of political science that you’ve encountered?

2. Come up with a research question that relates a topic you’re interested in to politics. How might everyday interests be translated into political science questions?

3. What is the relationship of political theory to political science today? Do you believe that political theory should be treated as a
separate subject area or remain embedded within political science?

4. What are some historical impacts that influence the practice of political science?

5. Do you believe political science is or could possibly be a science? Why or why not?

FOR FURTHER READING


American Political Science Association (APSA): www.apsanet.org


NOTES


4. A form of government where only property owners participate in government.


25. Ibid.