**Chapter 1: Politics and Political Science**

**A) Learning Objectives**

After reading Chapter 1, students should be able to:

**1.1:** Evaluate the several explanations of political power.

**1.2:** Justify the claim that political science may be considered a science.

**1.3:** Evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of several theoretical approaches to political science.

**1.4:** Contrast normative theories of politics to political science.

**B) Lecture Outline**

I. Introduction

A. The relevance of political science

1. The end of the Cold War and the “triumph” of democracy

2. Collapse of the march toward democracy

a. Russia

b. China

c. Middle East

B. What is political science?

1. A topic of study: what is politics?

2. A method of studying a topic: what makes the scientific method a distinctive approach?

II. What Is Politics?

A. Defining political power

1. Political science focuses on power, which distinguishes it from other disciplines

2. Power defined

a. Power is the ability of A to get B to do something contrary to B’s will

3. Second founding father of political science is Niccolò Machiavelli

a. Emphasized the role of power in politics

B. Biological

1. Forming a political system and obeying is innate to human nature

a. Simple; but raises questions

C. Psychological

1. Similar to biological

2. Empirical

D. Cultural

1. Behavior is learned

a. Cause for optimism

E. Rational

1. People know what they want; have good reasons for what they do

F. Irrational

1. People are emotional, dominated by myths and symbols

G. Power as composite

1. Truth in all preceding explanations of power

2. Power is neither finite nor measurable

a. Power is a connection among people

* + - * 1. Power is earned not seized

1. Taliban in Afghanistan

3. Power is not the same as politics

a. Power as an ingredient of politics

b. Power as an enabling device of politics

c. Power as the goal of politics

III. What Is Political Science?

A. Understanding political science

B. You do not need to like politics in order to study it

a. Scientists study bacterium to learn from it

b. Political science is the same

1. Studying political science is not same as politics

a. Political science is training in the objective analysis of politics

* + - * 1. politicians and political scientists are very different

C. Aristotle: Founder of the discipline

1. Politics is the “master science”

a. Decisions of the *polis* have extensive effects on other aspects of society

Politics is the study of “who gets what” (Lasswell)

2. Almost everything is political

b. Even response to a natural disaster or medical research is political

D. Can politics be studied as a science?

1. How to define science

a. Original meaning: Knowledge

b. Now means: Precise, factual, supported by experiments and data

2. Attempts by some political scientists to become like natural scientists

a. Good contributions

b. Small-detail focus

3. Large areas of politics unquantifiable

a. How and why leaders make decisions

4. Some political science questions cannot be answered like those questions in the natural sciences

a. Political science is an empirical discipline that uses both quantitative and qualitative evidence

b. Seeks to generalize from persistent patterns

* + - * 1. Firm generalizations become theories; few cases where theories become laws

E. The struggle to see clearly

1. Political science is more like a natural science when researchers study things as they are not as they wish them to be

2. Reasoned

a. Stating assumptions minimizes bias

3. Balanced

a. Acknowledge that there are other ways of looking at the subject

4. Evidence

a. Qualitative or quantitative; evidence and sources cannot be secret

5. Theoretical

a. Connected to a broader theoretical point to advance knowledge

b. Description is not theoretical

* + - * 1. Google/Wikipedia are never enough

F. What Good Is Political Science?

1. More than just opinions

a. “Junk” political science

2. Not just studying to be a politician

a. Political science is training in objective and complex analysis rather than what the practice of politics requires, which is fixed, popular, and simplified opinions

3. Can contribute to good government by warning politicians that all is not well; speaking truth to power

G. Subfields of political science

1. U.S. politics: focuses on U.S. political institutions and process

2. Comparative politics: examines politics within other nations

3. International relations: studies politics among nations

4. Political theory: attempts to define the good polity

5. Public administration: studies how bureaucracies work and how they can be improved

6. Constitutional law: Studies the application and evolution of the Constitution

7. Public policy: Studies the interface of politics and economics

H. Comparing Political Science to History and Journalism

1. Understanding how others study politics makes political science distinct

2. Historians and journalists describe unique circumstances

a. History seeks to better understand the specific events of the past

b. Journalism focuses on reporting current events as they unfold

3. Political science instead seeks to generalize

a. What are the necessary and sufficient conditions that will lead to a political outcome?

b. Ignores factors that are irrelevant outside of their context

IV. Theory in Political Science

A. Theories are not facts; they are suggestions for how facts should be organized

1. Some have more evidence to support them than others

2. Like all scientists, test theories with observations

3. Adjust theories to better reflect observations

B. Behavioralism

1. Institution focus

a. Discover how politics really worked, not how it was supposed to work

b. Positivism

(i) Application of natural science methodology to the study of society

2. Numerous critiques

a. Not value-free

b. Neglect possibility of change

c. Works best in established democratic systems

d. Focus on relatively minor topics and steer clear of big questions

3. Buildup of critiques leads to post-behavioral movement

a. Synthesis of behavioral and traditional approaches

C. New Institutionalism

1. Rediscovering institutions

2. Government structures shape the behavior of people within them

D. Systems Theory

1. David Easton political systems model

a. Simplifies reality by looking at complex entities as systems (roots in biology)

b. Inputs and outputs

2. Systems theory not as applicable in some situations

a. Main problem: black-box conversion process

(i) Inner workings of government are important and have an influence on the outputs

(ii) Domestic politics matter

(iii) Also, pressures from various parts of government matter: “withinputs,” as Easton himself adds

3. Modified systems model

E. Rational-choice Theory

1. Political behavior can be predicted by knowing the interests of the actors involved

a. This is possible because actors behave rationally and therefore predictably

b. Minimize costs and maximize benefits

2. Game theory

a. Setting up political decisions as if they were games

(i) Cuban missile crisis example

b. Seeing how people interact gives us insight into why bad things happen

V. “Political Theory” vs. Theory in Political Science

A. Plato

1. Republic focused on the ideal *polis* or political community

2. Ideal system ended up looking like fascism or communism

B. Aristotle

1. First empirical political scientist

a. Gathered data on political systems

b. His work *Politics* was based on these data

2. Both he and Plato searched for the source of Athenian decline and sought to prevent this

a. Search for a good, stable political system still at the core of political science

3. His work was both descriptive and normative

C. Machiavelli

1. Introduced a focus on political power

a. *The Prince* was about power acquisition and retention

b. Realist

(i) Rationally pursue goals

(ii) Exercise power to pursue goals

D. The “contractualists” analyzed why government should exist at all

1. Hobbes

a. State of nature

b. Self-interest leads people to form civil society

c. Society then is founded upon rational self-interest

2. Locke

a. State of nature is not as hostile as Hobbes perceived and people lived in equality and tolerance

b. However there is no way to secure property

Individuals contract to form government to protect life, liberty, and property

(i) Heavy influence of Locke in U.S. political system

3. Rousseau

a. State of nature is good and people live as noble savages

b. Society is the source of corruption, but society can be changed

(i) Just society is a voluntary community that adheres to the general will

c. Society makes people; if people are bad it’s because of society

(i) Roots of totalitarian states?

4. Marxist Theory

a. Economics

(i) Focused on profits

b. Social class

(i) Bourgeoisie (the capitalists)

(ii) Proletariat (the working class)

c. History

(i) Class conflict drives history

(ii) Differential growth in economic basis and the class superstructure

d. Failures of Marxism

(i) Prediction did not come true—capitalism did not collapse

(ii) Failed to account for the changing nature of capitalism

(iii) Capitalism is more than just a single system

**C) Lecture Suggestions**

**I. Lecture Starters**

1. People, especially students, have a hard time understanding how politics affects their lives, and consequently, struggle to find ways to involve themselves in politics. Begin a lecture by discussing the role of students as part of the anti-war movement during Vietnam. In telling the stories, make sure you emphasize that students were involved for various reasons (for example, the draft, ideological opposition to war, counter-culture movement). Follow this with a counterfactual of an anti-war movement absent student involvement. Use this to launch into a discussion of why politics matters and what happens if students do not take an interest in politics, while others do, and how that could work against their interests. (LO 1.5)

**II. Classroom Activities**

1. Students might have chosen to be apathetic towards politics or they simply might not have been exposed to politics. Spend some time talking about issues that affect their lives that are very much products of the political system. Ask students to come up with a list of five issues that are important to them, have them share these with the class, and then ask the class how these issues are related to politics. (LO 1.2)

2. Students may have a difficult time understanding the various subfields of the political science discipline. Bring several copies of the local newspaper to class (or provide electronic access), then organize students into small groups and have them locate a news article that references a topic that would be studied in each of the seven subfields. Provide them with a work sheet to practice citing news sources and provide a brief description of the article and how it applies to a particular subfield. (LO 1.1)

3. Bring in a handout with a map of U.S. presidential election results at both the state and county levels for 2004, 2008, and 2012. Organize the students into small groups and ask them to compare the outcomes among the elections, looking first at the state level maps and then at the county level maps. Ask them to generate possible explanations for the national outcomes based on the data they gather from the maps. (LO 1.2)

4. Choose a current political situation, either foreign or domestic, and review the basic facts with students. Ask them to consider how each of the following thinkers might approach understanding this situation: Machiavelli, Rousseau, and Marx. Write their ideas on the board and ask for clarifications or modifications from other students. After conducting this analysis, give students five to ten minutes to write a short essay (a paragraph or two) describing what one of the thinkers would recommend to an American policymaker involved in this situation. Have students share what they wrote with the class. Alternatively, divide the students into three groups, assigning each group to one of the thinkers, and ask the group to make the policy recommendation, choosing a spokesperson to read the group’s recommendation to the entire class. (LO 1.4)

**III. Discussion Questions**

1. Consider the various foundations of power in society. Why do some people have power over others in society? Why do we obey some people and not others? Why might it be difficult for us to come up with a single explanation for why people have political power? How do we know how much power any person has? These questions should prompt a discussion centered on the idea of political power whereby students start to connect the various foundations of power identified in the text. In addition, this line of questioning should prompt students to think about the difficulty of studying and measuring political power. (LO 1.1)

2. Political scientists follow the basic scientific method, but that doesn’t necessarily mean that they are scientists. Ask students to come up with criteria beyond method to judge a discipline based on its level of “scientificity.” Consider issues of quantification, objectivity, and prediction. Try to get the class to agree on at least two or three criteria, then discuss how well political science meets those criteria. (LO 1.2)

3. Explain to students that rational-choice theory attempts to model political behavior as a product of individuals rationally pursuing their self-interest. Ask students to construct the theory of human nature that supports this approach, then discuss whether or not this theory seems to hold up well to reality. Remind students that rational-choice theory, like many approaches to political explanation, simplifies the world by focusing on a small set of factors that are more important than other factors. Does the simplification underlying rational-choice theory work fairly well? What important factors does it leave out? Are they as important as critics of rational-choice theory claim? (LO 1.3)

4. Students might have a tendency to dismiss Marxism off hand because of the failure of the Soviet Union (and the capitalist drift of China). Write this proposition on the board: “The Persian Gulf War and the Iraq War were about gaining access to Middle Eastern oil.” Ask students to indicate how many of them have either heard this said or believe it themselves, then discuss whether or not this is a Marxist claim. (LO 1.4)

**D) Suggested Assignments**

1. Short Assignment: Reflection Essay

Have students respond to the following questions in no more than two pages. Why do they voluntarily obey the laws of the United States? What would need to happen for them to choose to disobey the law? If they chose to disobey the law, what, if anything, would it say about their government? (LO 1.1)

2. Short Assignment: Corruption Investigation

Organize students into teams of investigative journalists. Have them research instances of scandal or corruption in their local or state community. After their investigation the team will make a five to ten minute in-class presentation, complete with visuals, about this example of corruption and how it affected the legitimacy of the government. (LO 1.4)

3. Long Assignment: The Influence of Other Disciplines

Have students research the Watergate scandal in U.S. politics that led to the resignation of President Richard Nixon. Assign each student a role in the scandal (for example, Nixon, one of the plumbers, one of the Congressmen on the Watergate Committee). Using secondary sources, ask each student to write a mid-length essay in which they discuss the event and how it is affecting them personally, the effectiveness of the government, and the country as a whole. At the assignment’s conclusion, have the class come together to discuss not only their perceptions as reflected in their essays but also their experiences with secondary source research. (LO 1.3)

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