

Chapter 1

The Nation of Power, Politics, and Government

Why should you care about power, politics, and government?

1.1 Introduction



The United States of America was born in an explosion of rebellion against **authority**. The Declaration of Independence, defending that rebellion, spit forth a list of all the British monarch's crimes against the American colonies. Clearly, many colonists had lost faith in the British **government**—if not in government in general. In his widely read pamphlet *Common Sense*, the colonial firebrand Thomas Paine expressed a viewpoint held by many colonial Americans:

Society in every state [condition] is a blessing, but Government, even in its best state, is but a necessary evil; in its worst state, an intolerable one.

—Thomas Paine, *Common Sense*, 1776

This general mistrust of government did not end with the American victory in the Revolutionary War. It continues to this day. In 2011, more than a thousand Americans were asked this question in an opinion poll sponsored by two news organizations, CNN and ORC International: *How much of the time do you think you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right: just about always, most of the time, or only some of the time?*

Only 2 percent, or 1 person in 50, answered, “just about always.” 13 percent responded, “most of the time.” About three fourths answered, “only some of the time.” And a disgruntled 8 percent said, “never.”

This distrust of government also shows up in popular movies and television dramas. Corrupt or power-hungry politicians are often the villains in action movies. The plot lines of some television shows center on conspiracies hatched by public officials at the highest levels of government. Conspiracy theories about government involvement in the assassinations of President John F. Kennedy and civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. continue to generate books and magazine articles even today.

Is this attitude that politicians and government in general cannot be trusted justified? Is government at its best, in the words of Thomas Paine, “a necessary evil”? Or is it necessary at all? To answer these questions, we must first figure out what government is and what it does. One way to begin is to examine the central concern of all governments: **power**.

Speaking of Politics

authority

The legal right or power to give orders and enforce rules.

government

Institutions and officials organized to establish and carry out public policy.

power

The ability to cause others to behave as they might not otherwise choose to do.

legitimacy

The quality of being accepted as an authority, often applied to laws or those in power.

public good

A product or service that is available for all people to consume, whether they pay for it or not.

nation-state

An independent state, especially one in which the people share a common culture. In a nation-state, people have a sense of belonging to one country, even if they have different ethnic backgrounds.

sovereignty

The right to exercise supreme authority over a geographic region, a group of people, or oneself.

politics

The process and method of making decisions for groups. Although generally applied to governments, politics is also observed in all human interactions.

institution

An established organization, especially one providing a public service, and the rules that guide it.



Americans may distrust government, but as this cartoon suggests, it is something people can't live without. Most groups of people, large and small, develop some form of government to help order their lives. The term government comes from a Greek word that means “to steer” or “to control.”

The power to rule can be gained—or lost—in many ways. In the 1100s B.C.E., the Shang dynasty ruled north central China. However, tough military campaigns against other nearby kingdoms eventually exhausted the Shang's fighting forces. In time, the neighboring Zhou, under a leader named Wu, took advantage of this weakness. From their lands to the west, the Zhou attacked and quickly overwhelmed the Shang defenses. The Shang ruler reportedly committed suicide, and Wu became his people's new ruler.

The history of China, like that of many countries, is filled with tales of the violent overthrow of one government after another. The history of the United States, on the other hand, reveals mostly peaceful transfers of power. Whether one looks at an ancient Chinese ruler or a modern American president, what they have in common is the power to rule. How they use that power, however, can vary greatly.

What Is Power, and How Is It Exercised?

Power is a difficult concept to define. People seem to know it when they see it, but they have a hard time pinning down exactly what it is. The sociologist Max Weber defined power as "the possibility of imposing one's will upon the behavior of other persons." In his book *Three Faces of Power*, economist Kenneth E. Boulding refers to power as "our capacity to get other people to do things that contribute to what we want."

That's about as simple as the concept gets. When scholars dig deeper into the sources, uses, and effects of power, the subject seems to expand in many different directions. There are five sources of power, ranging from persuasion to **coercion**, or the use of force. Governments throughout the ages have relied on each of these types of powers, often in combination.

Whatever its source, the power to rule can be used for positive or negative ends, or purposes. Through the centuries, some rulers have used their power to build cities, promote the arts, or feed the poor. Others have abused their power by looting their subjects' wealth, turning captives into slaves, and even committing mass murder.

In *Common Sense*, Thomas Paine characterized British rule of the colonies as "a long and violent abuse of power." In his view, "a thirst for absolute power is the natural disease of monarchy." A century later, British historian Lord Acton echoed Paine's observations on the **abuse of power** when he wrote, "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely."

How Does Power Relate to Authority?

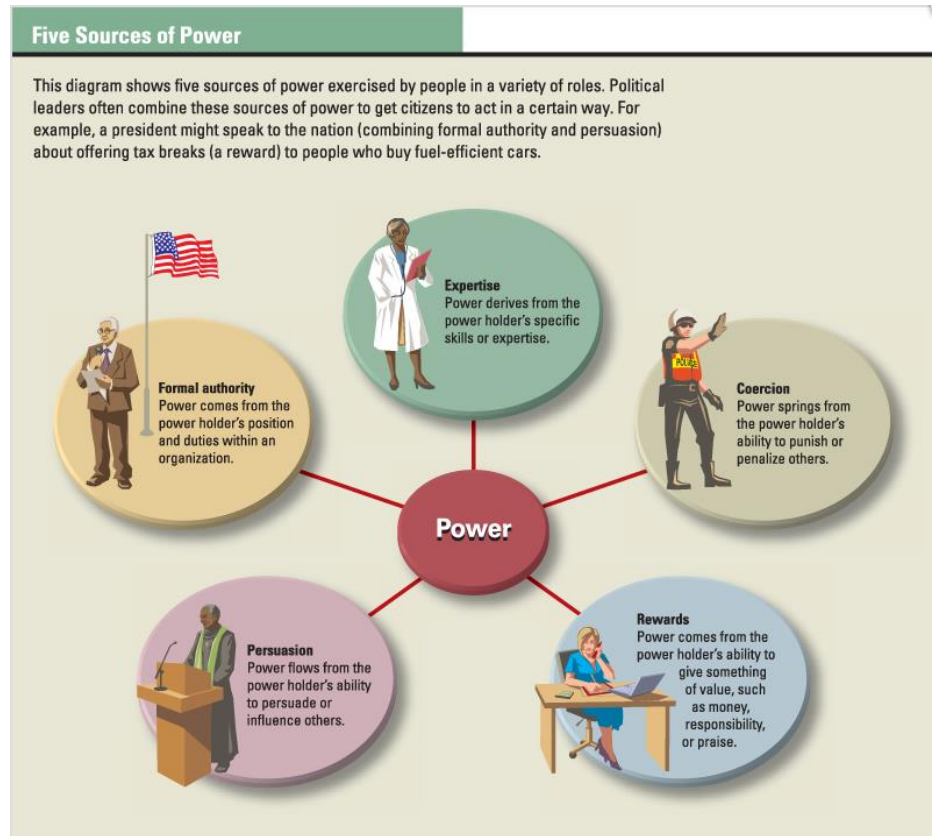
People with the right to use power are said to have authority. But how do they get that authority? Sometimes it comes through tradition. For example, parents have authority over their children. Religious leaders have authority over their congregations.

In the field of government, political scientists speak of **formal authority**, or power that has been defined in some legal or other official way. People with formal authority have the legal right to use power. The source of their authority might be a constitution, a contract, or another legal document. School principals have formal authority, as do police officers and presidents.

What Gives a Ruler Legitimacy?

Leaders whose power and authority are accepted as valid by the people they govern are said to have **legitimacy**. Legitimacy rises and falls depending on the willingness of those being led to follow those doing the leading. A military leader can seize power by force, as in the example of the Zhou leader, Wu. But to be considered a legitimate ruler, Wu had to convince the people he conquered of his right to govern them.

To enhance Wu's standing among the Shang, the Zhou introduced the **mandate of heaven**—a doctrine of legitimacy that would endure for more than 2,000 years. According to this doctrine, the Chinese ruler was the "son of heaven" and thus had authority over "all under heaven." The ruler retained this right only so long as he ruled his subjects



in a moral manner. If he failed to rule well, the mandate of heaven would pass to someone else. The Shang leader, they argued, had lost the mandate of heaven to Wu, who had been sent by heaven to unseat him.

In the 1500s, powerful European monarchs proclaimed a similar doctrine of legitimacy, known as the **divine right of kings**. This doctrine, like the mandate of heaven, held that monarchs represented God on Earth. Because their right to rule was divine, or God-given, monarchs did not have to answer to the people for their actions. God had granted them absolute power to govern as they saw fit.

Before long, some Europeans began to challenge this doctrine. The English philosophers Thomas Hobbes and John Locke popularized what became known as the **social-contract theory** of government. According to this theory, the legitimacy of a government stems from an unwritten contract between the ruler and the ruled. Under the terms of this contract, the people agree to obey a ruler in exchange for the ruler's promise to protect their rights. A ruler who breaks this contract by abusing power loses legitimacy and should be removed from power.

1.3 The Foundations of Government



The Mayflower Compact is an example of how a central government can stabilize a group of people. In addition to quelling revolts, the Mayflower Compact also became the foundation of the colonists' government once they landed at Plymouth.

In 1620, a group of English colonists arrived off the shore of Plymouth, Massachusetts. They hoped to settle there as a community. However, before their ship landed, some colonists threatened to split off from the others. To quell this revolt, the group's leaders demanded that all adult males sign a document promising to obey the rules and laws enacted by the group. This agreement, the Mayflower Compact, organized the signers into a "civil body politic," or a government.

The Purposes of Government: Order, Protection, and Public Goods

Like the signers of the Mayflower Compact, groups of all shapes and sizes throughout history have felt the need for some sort of government. Government serves many purposes. Among the most important are maintaining public order, protecting life and property, and providing **public goods**.

Living in violent times, both Hobbes and Locke emphasized the need for government to preserve order and protect people's lives and property. Without such protection, wrote Hobbes, people would be condemned to live in "continual fear and danger of violent death."

Today, governments are equally concerned with providing a wide range of public goods to their citizens. You benefit directly from public goods. Your community's schools, the roads you travel on to get to school, and the fire and police protection you enjoy are all public goods that you receive from your government. You also benefit from public goods

when you visit a national park or feel safer knowing that our nation is protected by the armed forces.

Public goods have two key characteristics. First, more than one person can consume them without reducing the amount available to others. Consider streetlamps. If you walk under a streetlamp, you do not reduce the ability of others to use its light. Second, once a public good is made available, all people have the right to use it. After being installed, a streetlamp shines its light on everyone.

Neither of these characteristics is true of private goods. Consider an apple that you buy at a grocery store. Once you take a bite of the apple, you have reduced the amount available to others. And since you own the apple, nobody else has a right to consume it. Your apple is a private good.



Public goods, such as Millennium Park in Chicago, Illinois, belong to all citizens. Government creates public goods, and citizens pay for them with their tax dollars. Unlike private goods, public goods are available to everyone. Once they are established, even people who pay no taxes are free to use them.

The Building Blocks of Government: Coercion and Revenue Collection




Governments throughout history have had two key powers that are essential for providing protection and public goods. These two building blocks of government are (1) a means of coercion and (2) a means of collecting revenue.

Coercion refers to the various ways in which government can use its power to force citizens to behave in certain ways. The most obvious means of coercion include the police, the courts, and the prison system. Governments use the threat of arrest and punishment to maintain public order and keep people secure in their homes and in public spaces.

Other means of coercion relate to involuntary services required of citizens. One example is conscription, or a military draft, in which government compels young men and women to serve in the armed forces. Another involuntary service is jury duty, in which a panel of citizens decides an accused person's guilt or innocence.

The second building block of government is a means of collecting **revenue**. All governments need money to provide security and pay for public goods. They generally get that money from the people they govern or control.

The ways that governments collect revenue have varied historically. Ancient empires extracted **tribute**, or payments, from the smaller states they controlled. Such “gifts” of goods or money were a sign of submission from the smaller states. For much of its history, China received tribute from peoples on its borders. China also levied taxes on its citizens. Through taxation, the Qin dynasty acquired the resources it needed to build one of history's early public goods: the Great Wall.

Aristotle's Classification of Governments				
The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle sought to determine the best form of government. He considered the number of people who might take part in governing and the moral character of those who held power. He concluded that power spread out over a large number of people lessened the chances of tyranny—whether by a single, selfish leader or a thoughtless mob.	Who Holds Power	Rule Motivated by the Common Good	Rule Motivated by Self-Interest	
	One		Kingship Government by one virtuous ruler	Tyranny Rule by one lawless ruler
	A Few		Aristocracy Government by the virtuous few for the good of all	Oligarchy Rule by the wealthy few in their own interest
The Many		Polity Constitutional government in which everyone has a share in political power	Democracy Rule by the poor in their own interest	

Who Should Rule: The One, the Few, or the Many?

Governments take many forms. In the past, most governments, like that of China, were headed by a single, powerful ruler. In contrast, the ancient Greeks experimented with forms of government ranging from rule by the rich and powerful to rule by all male citizens.

The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle, who is revered as the father of political science, thought deeply about who should have the power to rule. Aristotle was motivated by an interest in ethics, or proper conduct. This led him to an examination of many possible forms of government.

Aristotle categorized governments along two lines. One was how many people are involved in governing—one powerful ruler, a few upper-class aristocrats, or the mass of common people. The second was their motivation in making decisions. Ideal rulers, he said, cared about the common good. Corrupt rulers, in contrast, cared only about advancing their own selfish interests.

As a philosopher, Aristotle liked to consider ideal forms. The ideal form of government, he reasoned, was a monarchy led by a single, virtuous ruler. But Aristotle also prided himself on being a realist. Rule by a single person, he knew from experience, could easily lead to the abuse of power. He admitted that

Political writers, although they have excellent ideas, are often unpractical. We should consider, not only what form of government is best, but also what is possible and what is easily attainable by all.

—Aristotle, *The Politics*, Book IV

In the real world, Aristotle wrote, rule by the well-intentioned many would suit most societies. He called this kind of government a **polity**. In a polity, he argued, the best-qualified citizens, whether rich or poor, would dominate government. Two thousand years after Aristotle wrote about government, the founders of the United States faced some of the same questions he had explored. Although they ended up creating a different kind of government than imagined by Aristotle, his writings strongly influenced their thinking.

The Governments of Modern Nation-States

When political scientists study government today, they are usually concerned with the larger and complicated governments of **nation-states**. All nation-states share these four characteristics:

Territorial integrity. A nation-state occupies a specific geographic territory, with internationally recognized boundaries.

Stable population. A nation-state has people living permanently within its boundaries.

Code of laws. The people of a nation-state agree to live under a common legal system.

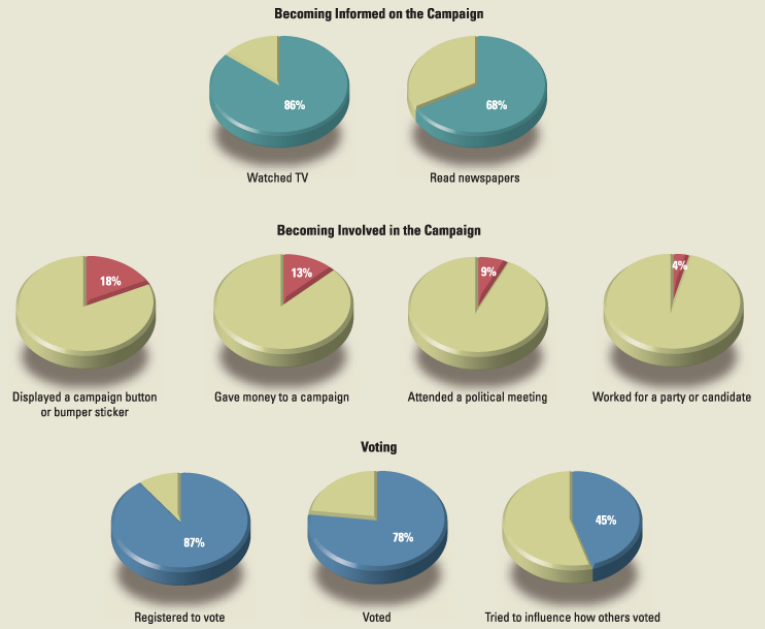
National sovereignty. A nation-state is independent and self-governing. The nation-state is a fairly modern political phenomenon. It merges two concepts: the nation and the state. A nation is a group of people who share a common ethnic origin, culture, and language. A state is a geographical area controlled by a single government.

The governments of modern nation-states are quite varied. In some, power is concentrated in the hands of one or a very few powerful leaders. In others, like the United States, power comes from the people and is broadly distributed throughout the government.

Rule by the Many in the United States

In the United States, the people govern by participating in elections and politics. These graphs show the percentage of American adults who participated in political activities during the presidential election year of 2008. Can you see yourself doing all of these things or just a few?

Political Activity in the 2008 Presidential Election



Source: The ANES Guide to Public Opinion and Electoral Behavior, American National Election Studies, www.electionstudies.org.

1.4 Politics and Political Activity

The idea that governments should provide public goods is not new. In the early American republic, federal and state governments supported the building of ports, roads, and canals to facilitate travel and commerce. These projects did not come together overnight. The idea for the Erie Canal, for example, was first proposed in 1724, when New York was still a colony. The first bill supporting the building of the canal reached the state legislature in 1787 but failed to win passage. Construction finally began in 1817, but only after extensive debate, planning, report writing, compromising, and arm-twisting—in short, **politics**.

The political process that results in projects such as the Erie Canal is extremely complex. Yet political scientist Harold Lasswell was able to boil it down to just a few words. He famously described politics as the process of determining "who gets what, when, how." People who participate in that process engage in many forms of political activity. But all political activity has a few common characteristics.

Political Activity Has a Purpose

Political activity can range from looking at a political cartoon to running for public office. Some political actions take little effort. Others require a significant amount of time, money, effort, and even courage. No matter how simple or difficult, political activity is purposeful. It is done for a reason.

Consider this situation. A city council is contemplating a proposal to build a new skateboard park in the community. Most residents care about children and want them to have recreational opportunities. For that reason alone, they at least follow the issue in the local newspaper. They might also discuss it with friends or co-workers.

Some citizens, however, are motivated to look more deeply into the proposal. One group, concerned that construction and insurance costs might cause their taxes to go up, speaks out against the proposal at city council meetings. Another group, believing that the skateboard park will make the town more attractive for young families, speaks up in support.

Prompted by their enthusiasm for the park proposal, a group of skaters and their parents become more actively involved. Some seek appointment to a study group that is reviewing the proposal. One parent even decides to run for a seat on the city council in the next election. For these citizens, the possible benefits of becoming politically active outweigh the costs in time, effort, and resources.

As this example suggests, political activity is intentional, not random. That is, people think through what they are trying to achieve and weigh the costs and benefits of the actions needed to achieve their goals.

Political Activity Involves Collective Action

Individuals can achieve many of their goals by acting on their own. But political activity is collective—it involves working with others to achieve shared goals. As the late American anthropologist Margaret Mead once wrote,

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.

—Margaret Mead

Even when people share a common goal, acting collectively can be challenging. Once again, consider the proposed skateboard park. Skateboarding enthusiasts from around the city come together to plan how best to make their case. They all want the park to be built, but they do not agree on where it should be located.

Conflicts within a small group like this one can often be resolved through face-to-face negotiation, or informal bargaining. In large groups, bargaining sessions may follow more formal rules. In either case, for collective action to work, the people involved need to be prepared to seek and accept compromise.

Institutions Shape Political Activity

The **institutions** we live with also influence political activity. Institutions are organizations or sets of rules that shape the behavior of groups. They have a social purpose and permanence in human affairs. The family is an ancient institution. Its purpose now, as long ago, is to provide for the physical and emotional well-being of its members. Schools, hospitals, and governments are other old and familiar institutions.

Institutions establish routines for dealing with recurring problems. For example, when students misbehave in class, schools have standard procedures for dealing with the problem. In this way, institutions tend to limit conflict while encouraging the kind of cooperation that can lead to the solution of a problem.

Institutions also establish the rules, both written and unwritten, that shape political activity. These rules tell us who has the authority to make decisions, how decisions get made, and how we can influence those decisions.

In the scenario involving a proposed skateboard park, the community's political institutions shape how residents participate in the decision-making process. Some residents share their views in meetings. Others send e-mails to the city council. A few join a study group looking at alternative sites. But once a decision is finally made, most people accept the result, believing that their voices have been heard in the process of determining “who gets what, when, how.”



Formal written rules guide the activities of political institutions, from Congress to your school's student council. Some scholars even argue that the rules are the institution. Without the structure these rules provide, they say, an institution could not function and might even cease to exist.