

Introduction to Political Science

Political science is an academic discipline that deals with the study of government and political processes, institutions, and behaviors. Political science falls into the academic and research division known as the social sciences. Social sciences study the human aspects of the world—human-made constructs and structures. Disciplines in the social sciences include: psychology, the study of the human mind and human behavior; sociology, the study of society and the relationships within it; communications, the study of the flow of discourse through media; economics, the study of the allocation of resources; and history, the chronology, analysis, and interpretation of past events.

Why Is the Study of Political Science Important?

Political science is important because politics is important. Politics is the study of power—who gets what, and how. This power can be as modest as a city council making budgetary choices over municipal services and personnel, or it can be as significant as two world superpowers on the brink of all-out nuclear war.

Regardless, the extent to which politics has served as the basis for the most important (and devastating) events in U.S. and world history cannot be understated. For example, certain political ideologies—Communism, Fascism, and Nazism—were responsible for the murder of tens of millions of people throughout the 20th century by regimes with fanatical beliefs about the proper role of government and its leaders. All people's lives are affected by the priorities and choices of political institutions, and by the power structures that exist in society.

According to one prominent political scientist “the study of political science is motivated by the need to understand the sources and consequences of political stability and revolution, of repression and liberty, of equality and inequality, of war and peace, of democracy and dictatorship.” The study of political science reveals that the world of politics, along with its institutions, leaders, and citizens, is a complex and far-reaching one.

Cross-Disciplinary Connections

What distinguishes political science as an academic discipline is its emphasis on government and power. However, the study of government and power is not confined to political science—it naturally permeates into other social sciences as well. For example:

- *Economics*: Economic and political processes are closely related because the actions of political institutions frame—and can either expand or constrain—economic activity. Republicans are more likely to promote free-market policies such as tax breaks and business deregulation, while Democrats favor business regulation and government intervention as a way of promoting economic equality. Additionally, economic conditions can have a direct influence on political

institutions. Throughout history, the outcomes of many presidential and congressional elections have rested on the economy. Voters tend to vote against the party in power if they perceive a decline or standstill in their personal financial situations.

- *Sociology*: Political scientists also study the social bases of politics. For example, what are the political activities of various social classes, races, ethnicities, and religions? How do political values, attitudes, and beliefs come about? How do social forces work together to change political policies on issues such as abortion, criminal justice, foreign policy, and welfare? How do social movements outside of the formal institutions of political power affect politics? For example, the civil rights and women's suffrage movements helped to not only reshape public policy but public opinion as well.
- *History*: Political scientists attempt to analyze and understand historic political patterns in addition to specific political events. This requires putting historical events and texts into a political context. For example, how have political party systems helped to create long-standing changes in the electoral landscape and reshape traditional party coalitions throughout the 19th and 20th centuries? A good textual example is the U.S. Constitution. It is both a historical (and historic) document, in that it describes the creation of a new form of government by the Founding Fathers, and a political one, in that it sets the framework for the functioning of the U.S. government as a system of shared powers, checks and balances, and federalism.

Subdisciplines in Political Science

Political science is organized into several subdisciplines, each representing a major subject area of teaching and research in colleges and universities. These subdisciplines include comparative politics, American politics, international relations, political theory, public administration, public policy, and political behavior.

Comparative Politics

Comparative politics involves the study of the politics of different countries. Some subdisciplines study a single country or a culturally similar group of nations, such as the countries of Southeast Asia or Latin America. Political scientists who study these countries, also known as "area specialists," tend to be well versed in the languages, histories, and cultures that are most relevant to their work. Other political scientists compare countries that are culturally, politically, and linguistically dissimilar. These comparisons are often motivated by the need to develop and test theories—for example, theories of why revolutions happen. This may lead political scientists to discover commonalities between countries that are widely separated and appear very different. For example, political scientists have found many similarities between the

transitions from authoritarian rule to democracy in Latin America and Eastern Europe in the 1980s and 1990s.

American Politics

Political scientists usually organize the study of their own country into a separate subdiscipline, so within the United States, American politics is recognized as its own specialty. Given the size of the United States and its role as a world superpower, the American politics subdiscipline is very large. Political scientists interested in American politics often study political institutions such as Congress, the presidency, and the judiciary. They also examine the various factors that impact these institutions, such as political parties, elections, public opinion, voting, and interest groups.

International Relations

International relations is the study of the interactions between nations, international organizations, and multinational corporations. There are two traditional approaches used by international-relations scholars—realism and liberalism. Realism emphasizes the danger of the international system, where war is always a possibility and the only source of order is the balance of power. Liberalism is more idealistic and hopeful, emphasizing the problem-solving abilities of international institutions such as the United Nations, NATO, and the World Trade Organization. According to many scholars, after the Soviet Union dissolved and the Cold War ended in 1991, the balance of opinion briefly shifted in favor of liberalism, but realists were quick to point to the potential for future international conflicts.

Political Theory

Political theory involves the study of philosophical thought about politics from ancient Greece to the present. Political theory is concerned with the fundamental questions of public life. It addresses such issues as the nature of political authority, the relationship of the state to the individual, and citizens' obligations and responsibilities to one another. Political theory seeks to interpret abstract concepts such as liberty, justice, human rights, and power, and in so doing it draws upon classics in the field—by, for example, Plato, Aristotle, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, David Hume, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and John Stuart Mill. Many scholars use these classics to help them fully understand present-day issues such as terrorism, civil rights and liberties, and domestic and foreign policy.

Public Administration

Political scientists interested in public administration study government organizations. Public administration is the art, science, and practice of effectively managing government. Americans are impacted in innumerable ways by the actions of public administrators (also known as “bureaucrats”), often without even being aware of

it. Government is one of the largest employers in the United States, and government spending accounts for almost half of the gross national product. In addition, with increasing interaction between the public and private sectors, those who do not work *in* government increasingly must work *with* government, making an understanding of government and public administration essential. Public administration includes the study of public financing and budgeting systems, public management, human resources, public-policy analysis, nonprofit management, and urban planning. Political scientists investigate how these organizations work, and try to devise methods of improving them. For example, the landmark book *Reinventing Government* (1992) inspired many state and local governments (as well as the federal government) to cut red tape and adopt more competitive, efficient, and customer-friendly approaches to delivering services to the public.

Public Policy

The subdiscipline of public policy involves the study of specific policy problems and governmental responses to them. Political scientists involved in the study of public policy attempt to devise solutions for problems of public concern. They study issues such as health care, pollution, crime, welfare, and the economy. Public policy is about problem solving, designing and implementing strategies, and evaluating outcomes. Additionally, this field is concerned with the *process* of policymaking and the many actors and agencies that are involved in it.

Political Behavior

Political behavior involves the study of how people participate in political processes and respond to political activity. The field emphasizes the study of voting behavior, which can be affected by social pressures; the effects of individual psychology, such as emotional attachments to parties or leaders; and the rational self-interests of voters. The effects of gender, ethnicity, religion, income, and the media are also factors in analyzing political behavior. The results of these studies are applied during the planning of campaigns and elections, and influence the design of advertisements and political-party platforms.