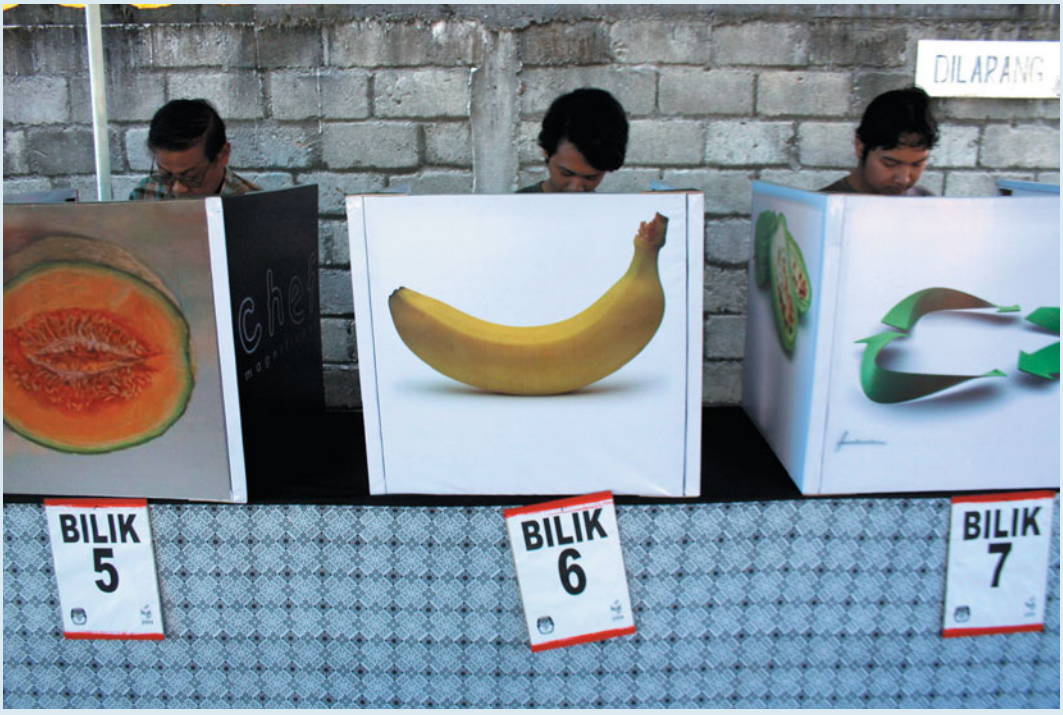
CHAPTER 2

Theories



Indonesia struggles to stabilize its democracy in its 2009 legislative elections. Many of the 38 competing parties used fruits as symbols to aid illiterate voters. (Himawan/epa/Corbis)

Why bother with theories at all, wonder many students new to political science. Why not just accumulate facts and let the facts structure themselves into a coherent whole? Because they won't. Gathering facts without an organizing principle leads only to large collections of meaningless facts, a point made by Kant (see box on page 15). To be sure, theories can grow too complex and abstract and depart from the real world, but without at least some theoretical perspective, we do not even know what questions to ask. Even if you say you have no theories, you probably have some unspoken ones. The kind of questions you ask and which you ask first are the beginnings of theorizing.

Questions to Consider

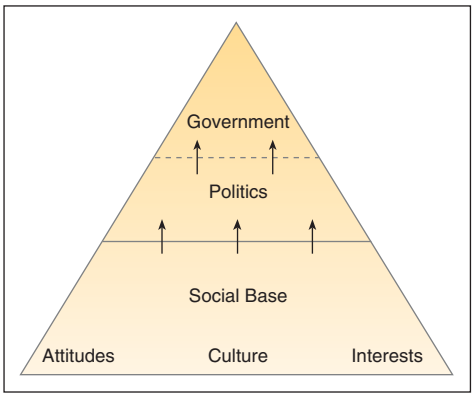
1. Who founded political science?
2. What did Machiavelli, Confucius, Kautilya, and Ibn Khaldun have in common?
3. How did Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau differ?
4. What is the crux of Marx's theory?
5. What is "positivism," and how does it underlie much of social science?
6. What is Easton's theory of the political system?
7. How does modernization theory borrow from Marx?
8. What is rational-choice theory?
9. Why must your paper have a "provable thesis"?

Take, for example, the structure of this book. We have adopted the view—widespread in political science for decades—that the proper starting point of political analysis is society. We assume that politics grows out of society. We start with people's values, attitudes, and opinions and see how they influence government. The subtitle of one influential book by a leading sociologist was *The Social Bases of Politics.* Its message: You start with society and see how it influences politics.

But that could stack the deck. If you assume that society is the basis of politics and that values and opinions are the important facts, you will gather much material on values and opinions and relatively little on the history, structure, and policies of government. Everything else will appear secondary to citizens' values and opinions. And indeed, political science went through a period in which it was essentially sociology, and many political scientists did survey research. This was part of the behavioral tide; survey research was seen as the only way to be "scientific" because it generated quantifiable data.

Most textbooks offered a "percolation up" model of politics. The first major bloc in most studies was concerned with the society and covered such things as how political views were distributed, how interest groups formed, who supported which political parties, and how people voted. That was the basis, the bottom part

Figure 2.1 ▶
Pyramid with social base and political superstructure. (Flow is from bottom to top.)

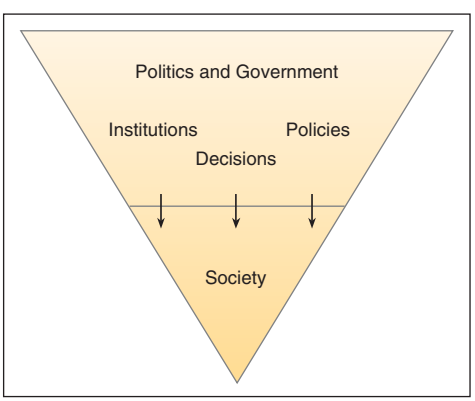


of the pyramid. The second major bloc was usually the institutions of government. They were assumed to be a reflection of the underlying social base. Legislatures and executives reacted to public opinion, interest groups, and political parties. The study of politics looked like Figure 2.1.

But just using the term social base assumes that society is the underlying element in the study of politics. Could it be the other way around? To use a coffee-making metaphor, instead of "percolating up," could politics "drip down"? Did healthcare reform percolate up from society or drip down from government officials? (Probably some of both.) One could imagine a book titled *The Political Bases of Society* that posits society as largely the result of political institutions and decisions made over the decades. Maybe politics leads society, in which case our model would look like Figure 2.2.

How can you prove which model is more nearly correct? It is possible (and very likely) that the flow is going both ways simultaneously and that both models are partly correct. Why, then, emphasize one model over the other? There is no good reason; it is simply the current fashion in political study, which began as a reaction against the emphasis on institutions that dominated political science before World War II. A seemingly simple matter of which topics to study first has theoretical implications. You cannot escape theory. We can only whet your appetite for political theories in our very brief discussion here. Consider further study of political theory; you will find that nothing is as practical as theory.

Figure 2.2 ▶
Pyramid with political institutions forming the social base. (Flow is from top to bottom.)



CLASSIC THEORIES

Some say Plato founded political science. His *Republic*, among other things, described an ideal polis, but his reasoning was largely speculative, and his ideal system ended up looking a bit like modern fascism or communism. Plato's student, Aristotle, on the other hand, was the first *empirical* political scientist. As noted in the previous chapter, he regarded politics as the "master science" and sent out his students to gather data from the dozens of Greek city-states. With these data, he constructed his great work *Politics.* Both Plato and Aristotle saw Athens in decline; they attempted to understand why and to suggest how it could be avoided. They thus began a tradition that is still at the heart of political science: a search for the sources of the good, stable political system. Aristotle was not shy about defining what was politically "best," as in this passage from *Politics*:

descriptive Explaining what is.

normative Explaining what ought to be.

realism Working with the world as it is and not as we wish it to be; usually focused on power.

> *[T]he best political community is formed by citizens of the middle class, and those states are likely to be well administered in which the middle class is large … in which the citizens have moderate and sufficient property; for where some possess much and others nothing there may arise an extreme democracy or a pure oligarchy, or a tyranny may develop out of either extreme. … [D]emocracies are safer and more permanent than oligarchies, because they have a middle class which is more numerous and has a greater share in government, for when there is no middle class, and the poor greatly exceed in number, troubles arise, and the state soon comes to an end.*

Even though *Politics* was written in the fourth century B.C., Aristotle could be describing why democracy succeeds or fails today: Much depends on the size of the middle class, a point confirmed by modern research. Do China and Iraq have a middle class strong enough to sustain democracy? Ancient can still be relevant. Aristotle was both **descriptive** and **normative**: He used the facts he and his students had collected to prescribe the most desirable political institutions. Political scientists have been doing the same ever since, both describing and prescribing.

Most European medieval and Renaissance political thinkers took a religious approach to the study of government and politics. They were almost strictly normative, seeking to discover the "ought" or "should" and were often rather casual about the "is," the real-world situation. Informed by religious, legal, and philosophical values, they tried to ascertain which system of government would bring humankind closest to what God wished.

Niccolò Machiavelli in the early sixteenth century introduced what some believe to be the crux of modern political science: the focus on power. His great work *The Prince* was about the getting and using of political power. Many philosophers peg Machiavelli as the first modern philosopher because his motivations and explanations had nothing to do with religion. Machiavelli was not as wicked as some people say. He was a **realist** who argued that to accomplish anything good—such as the unification of Italy and expulsion of the foreigners who ruined it—the Prince had to be rational and tough in the exercise of power.

Although long depreciated by American political thinkers, who sometimes shied away from "power" as inherently dirty, the approach took root in Europe and contributed to the elite analyses of Mosca, Pareto, and Michels. Americans became acquainted with the power approach through the writings of the refugee German scholar of international relations Hans J. Morgenthau, who emphasized that "all politics is a struggle for power."

The Contractualists

Not long after Machiavelli, the "contractualists"—Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau—analyzed why political systems should exist at all. They differed in many points

CLASSIC WORKS ■ NOT JUST EUROPEANS

China, India, and North Africa produced brilliant political thinkers long before their European counterparts. Unknown in the West until relatively recently, it is unlikely that their ideas influenced the development of Western political theory. The existence of these culturally varied thinkers suggests that the political nature of humans is basically the same no matter what the cultural differences and that great minds come to similar conclusions on how to deal with politics.

In China, Confucius—a sixth-century B.C. advisor to kings—propounded his vision of good, stable government based on two things: the family and correct, moral behavior instilled in rulers and ruled alike. At the apex, the emperor sets a moral example by purifying his spirit and perfecting his manners. He must think good thoughts in utter sincerity; if he does not, his empire crumbles. He is copied by his subjects, who are arrayed hierarchically below the emperor, down to the father of a family, who is like a miniature emperor to whom wives and children are subservient. The Confucian system bears some resemblance to Plato's ideal republic; the difference is that the Chinese actually practiced Confucianism, which lasted two and a half millennia and through a dozen dynasties. Some claim it formed the cultural basis for East Asia's recent remarkable economic growth.

Two millennia before Machiavelli and Hobbes, the Indian writer Kautilya in the fourth century B.C. arrived at the same conclusions. Kautilya, a prime minister and advisor to an Indian monarch, wrote in *Arthashastra* (translated as *The Principles of Material Well-Being*) that prosperity comes from living in a well-run kingdom. Like Hobbes, Kautilya posited a state of nature that meant anarchy. Monarchs arose to protect the land and people against anarchy and ensure their prosperity. Like Machiavelli, Kautilya advised his prince to operate on the basis of pure expediency, doing whatever it took to secure his kingdom domestically and against other kingdoms. Kautilya thus could be said to have founded both political economy and the realist school of statecraft.

In fourteenth century A.D. North Africa, Ibn Khaldun was a secretary, executive, and ambassador for several rulers. Sometimes out of favor and in jail, he reflected on what had gone wrong with the great Arab empires. He concluded, in his *Universal History*, that the character of the Arabs and their social cohesiveness was determined by climate and occupation. Ibn Khaldun was almost modern in his linking of underlying economic conditions to social and political change. Economic decline in North Africa, he found, had led to political instability and lawlessness. Anticipating Marx, Toynbee, and many other Western writers, Ibn Khaldun saw that civilizations pass through cycles of growth and decline.

Notice what all three of these thinkers had in common with Machiavelli: All were princely political advisors who turned their insights into general prescriptions for correct governance. Practice led to theory.

but agreed that humans, at least in principle, had joined in what Rousseau called a **social contract** that everyone now had to observe.

social contract Theory that individuals join and stay in civil society as if they had signed a contract.

state of nature Humans before civilization.

civil society Humans after becoming civilized. Modern usage: associations between family and government.

general will Rousseau's theory of what the whole community wants.

Thomas Hobbes lived through the upheavals of the English Civil War in the seventeenth century and opposed them for making individuals frightened and insecure. Hobbes imagined that life in "the **state of nature**," before **civil society** was founded, must have been terrible. Every man would have been the enemy of every other man, a "war of each against all." Humans would live in savage squalor with "no arts; no letters; no society; and which is worst of all, continual fear, and danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." To get out of this horror, people would—out of their profound self-interest—rationally join together to form civil society. Society thus arises naturally out of fear. People would also gladly submit to a king, even a bad one, for a monarch prevents anarchy. Notice how Hobbes's theory, that society is based on rational self-interest, is at odds with Aristotle's theory that humans are born "political animals." Which theory is right? (Hint: Have humans ever lived as solitary animals?) But also notice that Hobbesian situations appear from time to time, as in Iraq, where Sunni and Shia murdered each other as if there were no government.

Another Englishman, John Locke, also saw the seventeenth-century upheavals but came to less harsh conclusions. Locke theorized that the original state of nature was not so bad; people lived in equality and tolerance with one another. But they could not secure their property. There was no money, title deeds, or courts of law, so ownership was uncertain. To remedy this, they contractually formed civil society and thus secured "life, liberty, and property." Locke is to property rights as Hobbes is to fear of violent death. Some philosophers argue that Americans are the children of Locke. Notice the American emphasis on "the natural right to property."

Jean-Jacques Rousseau lived in eighteenth-century France and, some say, laid the philosophical groundwork for the French Revolution. He accepted the theories of Hobbes and Locke but gave them a twist. Life in the state of nature, Rousseau theorized, was downright good; people lived as "noble savages" without artifice or jealousy. (All the contractualists were influenced by not-very-accurate descriptions of American Indians.) What corrupted humans, said Rousseau, was society itself. The famous words at the beginning of his *Social Contract*: "Man is born free but everywhere is in chains."

But society can be drastically improved, argued Rousseau, leading to human freedom. A just society would be a voluntary community with a will of its own, the **general will**—what everyone wants over and above the "particular wills" of individuals and interest groups. In such communities, humans gain dignity and freedom. Societies make people, not the other way around. If people are bad, it is because society made them that way (a view held by many today). A good society, on the other hand, can "force men to be free" if they misbehave. Many see the roots of totalitarianism in Rousseau: the imagined perfect society; the general will, which the

Zeitgeist German for "spirit of the times"; Hegel's theory that each epoch has a distinctive spirit, which moves history along.

proletariat Marx's name for the industrial working class.

bourgeois Adjective, originally French for city dweller; later and current, middle class in general. Noun: *bourgeoisie*.

dictator claims to know; and the breaking of those who do not cooperate. Happily, the U.S. Founding Fathers were uninfluenced by Rousseau, but the architects of the French Revolution believed passionately in him, which perhaps explains why it ended badly.

Most of the U.S. Founding Fathers had studied Hobbes and Locke, whose influence is obvious. What is the Constitution but a social contract? Much of the Declaration of Independence reads as if it had been cribbed from Locke, which it had, by Jefferson. Please do not say political theories have no influence.

Marxist Theories

Another political theory that made a big difference was Marxism. A German living in London, Karl Marx, who was trained in Hegelian philosophy, produced an exceedingly complex theory consisting of at least three interrelated elements: a theory of economics, a theory of social class, and a theory of history. Like Hegel, Marx argued that things do not happen by accident; everything has a cause. Hegel posited the underlying cause that moves history forward as spiritual, specifically the **Zeitgeist**, the spirit of the times. Marx found the great underlying cause in economics.

Economics Marx concentrated on the "surplus value"—what we call profit. Workers produce things but get paid only a fraction of the value of what they produce. The capitalist owners skim off the rest, the surplus value. The working class—what Marx called the **proletariat**—is paid too little to buy all the products the workers have made, resulting in repeated overproduction, which leads to depressions. Eventually, argued Marx, there will be a depression so big the capitalist system will collapse.

Social Class Every society divides into two classes: a small class of those who own the means of production and a large class of those who work for the small class. Society is run according to the dictates of the upper class, which sets up the laws, arts, and styles needed to maintain itself in power. (Marx influenced the theory of elites, discussed in Chapter 6.) Most laws concern property rights, noted Marx, because the **bourgeoisie** (the capitalists) are obsessed with hanging on to their property, which, according to Marx, is nothing but skimmed-off surplus value anyway. If the country goes to war, said Marx, it is not because the common people wish it but because the ruling bourgeoisie needs a war for economic gain. The proletariat, in fact, has no country; proletarians are international, all suffering under the heel of the capitalists.

History Putting together his economic and social-class theories, Marx explained historical changes. When the underlying economic basis of society gets out of kilter with the structure that the dominant class has established

superstructure Marx's term for everything that is built on top of the economy (laws, art, politics, etc.).

leftist Favors social and economic change to uplift poor.

(its laws, institutions, businesses, and so on), the system collapses, as in the French Revolution. Prior to 1789, France's ruling class was the feudal nobility. This system was from the Middle Ages, based on hereditary ownership of great estates worked by peasants, on laws stressing the inheritance of these estates and the titles that went with them, and on chivalry and honor. All were part and parcel of a feudal society. But the economic basis changed. Ownership of land and feudal values eroded with the rise of manufacturing, which brought a new class, the urban capitalists (or bourgeoisie), whose way of life and economy were quite different. By the late eighteenth century, France had an economy based on manufacturing but was still dominated by the feudal aristocrats of the past. The system was out of kilter: The economic basis had moved ahead, but the class **superstructure** had stayed behind. In 1789, the superstructure came down with a crash, and the bourgeoisie took over with its new capitalist and liberal values of a free market, individual gain, and legal (but not material) equality.

The capitalists did a good job, Marx had to admit. They industrialized and modernized much of the globe. They put out incredible new products and inventions. But they too are doomed, Marx wrote, because the faster they transform the economy, the more it gets out of kilter with the capitalist superstructure, just as the previous feudal society was left behind by a changing economy. This leads us back to Marx's theory of surplus value and recurring economic depressions. Eventually, reasoned Marx, the economy will be so far out of kilter from the bourgeois setup that it too will collapse. Socialism, predicted Marx, will come next, and we should aid in its coming. Marx was partly a theorist and partly an ideologist. We will consider Marxism as ideology in the next chapter.

Marxism, as applied in the Soviet Union and other Communist countries, led to tyranny and failure, but, as a system of analysis, Marxism is still interesting and useful. Social class is important in structuring political views—but never uniformly. For example, many working-class people are conservative, and many middle-class intellectuals are liberals or **leftists**. Economic interest groups still ride high and—by means of freely spending on election campaigns—often get their way in laws, policies, and tax breaks. They seldom get all they want, however, as they are opposed by other interest groups. Marx's enduring contributions are (1) his understanding that societies are never fully unified and peaceful but always riven with conflict and (2) that we must ask "Who benefits?" in any political controversy.

One of the enduring problems and weaknesses of Marx is that capitalism, contrary to his prediction, has not collapsed. Marx thought the Paris Commune of 1870–1871 was the first proletarian uprising. (It was not.) True, capitalism has gone through some major depressions, in the 1890s and 1930s and a big scare in 2008–2009, but it has always bounced back.

Marx erred in at least a couple of ways. First, he failed to understand the flexible, adaptive nature of capitalism. Old industries fade, and new ones rise.

institutions The formal structures of government, such as the U.S. Congress.

positivism Theory that society can be studied scientifically and incrementally improved with the knowledge gained.

Imagine trying to explain Bill Gates and the computer software industry to people in the 1960s. They wouldn't believe you. Capitalism rarely gets stuck at one stage; it is the system of constant change. Second, Marx failed to understand that capitalism is not just one system; it is many. U.S., French, Singaporean, and Japanese capitalisms are distinct from each other. Marx's simplified notions of capitalism illustrate what happens when theory is placed in the service of ideology: Unquestioning followers believe it too literally.

Institutional Theories

From the nineteenth century through the middle of the twentieth century, American thinkers focused on **institutions**, the formal structures of government. This showed the influence of law on the development of political science in the United States. Woodrow Wilson, for example, was a lawyer (albeit unsuccessful) before he became a political scientist; he concentrated on perfecting the institutions of government. Constitutions were a favorite subject for political scientists of this period, for they assumed that what was on paper was how the institutions worked in practice. The rise of the Soviet, Italian, and German dictatorships shook this belief. The constitution of Germany's Weimar Republic (1919–1933) looked fine on paper; experts had drafted it. Under stress it collapsed, for Germans of that time did not have the necessary experience with or commitment to democracy. Likewise, the Stalin constitution of 1936 made the Soviet Union look like a perfect democracy, but it functioned as a dictatorship.

CONTEMPORARY THEORIES

Some thinkers of classic bent dismiss contemporary theories as trivial, obvious, superficial, or simply restatements of classic ideas. One such scholar sniffed that everything he learned from modern theories could be written on the inside of a matchbook cover. We need not be so harsh. Contemporary—meaning post–World War II—theories have made some contributions. Even when they ultimately fail and are abandoned, they leave a residue of interesting questions. True, compared to classic theories, most are pretty thin stuff.

Behavioralism

The Communist and Fascist dictatorships and World War II forced political scientists to reexamine their institutional focus, and many set to work to discover how politics really worked, not how it was supposed to work. Postwar American political scientists here followed in the tradition of the early nineteenth-century French philosopher Auguste Comte, who developed the doctrine of **positivism**, the application of natural science methods to the study of society. Comtean positivism was an optimistic philosophy, holding that as we accumulate valid data by means of scientific observation—without speculation or intuition—we will perfect a science of

society and with it improve society. Psychologists are perhaps the most deeply imbued with this approach. **Behavioralists**, as they are called, claim to concentrate on actual behavior as opposed to thoughts or feelings.

behavioralism The empirical study of actual human behavior rather than abstract or speculative theories.

postbehavioral Synthesis of traditional, behavioral, and other techniques in the study of politics.

Beginning in the 1950s, behaviorally inclined political scientists accumulated statistics from elections, public opinion surveys, votes in legislatures, and anything else they could hang a number on. Behavioralists made some remarkable contributions to political science, shooting down some long-held but unexamined assumptions and giving political theory an empirical basis. Behavioral studies were especially good in examining the "social bases" of politics, the attitudes and values of average citizens, which go a long way toward making the system function the way it does. Their best work has been on voting patterns, for it is here they can get lots of valid data.

During the 1960s, the behavioral school established itself and won over much of the field. In the late 1960s, however, behavioralism came under heavy attack, and not just by rear-guard traditionalists. Many younger political scientists, some of them influenced by the radicalism of the anti–Vietnam War movement, complained that the behavioral approach was static, conservative, loaded with its practitioners' values, and irrelevant to the urgent tasks at hand. Far from being "scientific" and "value-free," behavioralists often defined the current situation in the United States as the norm and anything different as deviant. Gabriel Almond (1911–2002) and Sidney Verba (1932–) found that Americans embody all the good, "participant" virtues of the "civic culture." By examining only what exists at a given moment, behavioralists neglected the possibility of change; their studies may be time-bound. Behavioralists have an unstated preference for the status quo; they like to examine established democratic systems, for that is where their methodological tools work best. People in police states or civil conflicts know that honestly stating their opinions could get them jailed or killed, so they voice the "correct" viewpoint.

Perhaps the most damaging criticism, though, was that the behavioralists focused on relatively minor topics and steered clear of the big questions of politics. Behavioralists can tell us, for example, what percentage of Detroit blue-collar Catholics vote Democratic, but they tell us nothing about what this means for the quality of Detroit's governance or the kinds of decisions elected officials will make. There is no necessary connection between how citizens vote and what comes out of government. Critics charged that behavioral studies were often irrelevant.

By 1969, many political scientists had to admit that there was something to the criticism of what had earlier been called the "behavioral revolution." Some called the newer movement **postbehavioral**, a synthesis of traditional and behavioral approaches. Postbehavioralists recognize that facts and values are tied together. They are willing to use both the qualitative data of the traditionalists and the quantitative data of the behavioralists. They look at history and institutions as well as public opinion and rational-choice theory. They are not afraid of numbers and happily use correlations, graphs, and percentages to make their cases. If you look around your political science department, you are apt to find traditional, behavioral, and postbehavioral viewpoints among the professors—or even within the same professor.

Systems Theory

A major postwar invention was the "political systems" model devised by David Easton (1917–), which contributed to our understanding of politics by simplifying reality but in some cases departed from reality. The idea of looking at complex entities as systems originated in biology. Living entities are complex and highly integrated. The heart, lungs, blood, digestive tract, and brain perform their functions in such a way as to keep the animal alive. Take away one organ, and the animal dies. Damage one organ, and the other components of the system alter their function to compensate and keep the animal alive. The crux of systems thinking is this: You cannot change just one component, because that changes all the others.

thesis A main idea or claim, to be proved by evidence.

Political systems thinkers argued that the politics of a given country work as a feedback loop, a bit like a biological system. According to the Easton model (Figure 2.3), citizens' demands, "inputs," are recognized by the government decision makers, who process them into authoritative decisions and actions, "outputs." These outputs have an impact on the social, economic, and political environment that

HOW TO . . . ■ MAKE THESIS STATEMENTS

You are assigned a paper in political science. Begin it with a clear, punchy **thesis**, a first sentence giving your main idea or claim, the thing you are going to prove. A thesis that cannot be proved with empirical evidence is just speculation, not solid research. An initial attempt at a thesis is a *hypothesis* (discussed on page 14). If your evidence does not support your thesis, discard or change it. Your thesis paragraph should be about as long as this one.

The simplest thesis is that something is (or is not) happening: "More and more interest groups set up shop in Washington." Avoid trivial theses, anything well-known or established: "The president is inaugurated on January 20 following the election." An interesting thesis explains how one thing relates to another: "White Protestant males vote strongly Republican." Gathering examples or case studies (see page 14) is often the initial step to developing a thesis. If you take the six counties in your state with the highest Obama vote, what generalizations can you make about them? Do not gently introduce your thesis (save that for your English class); move directly into it. A thesis is more definite than what the paper is "about." You left that behind in high school.

Indirect
Television has a big impact on politics, and many critics feel that it is not always a good impact.

Direct
U.S. television advertising makes viewers cynical and indifferent and leads to low voter turnout.

Unprovable
Democracy is government of the people, by people, and for the people.

Provable
Better-off countries tend to be democracies, poor countries not.

Trivial
Tea Party supporters were unhappy with both of the main parties.

Nontrivial
Tea Party supporters were mostly Republican voters angry over Obama's programs.

Vague
This paper is about U.S. policy toward Iran over three decades.

Clear
U.S. policy toward Iran failed to notice rising discontent against the shah.

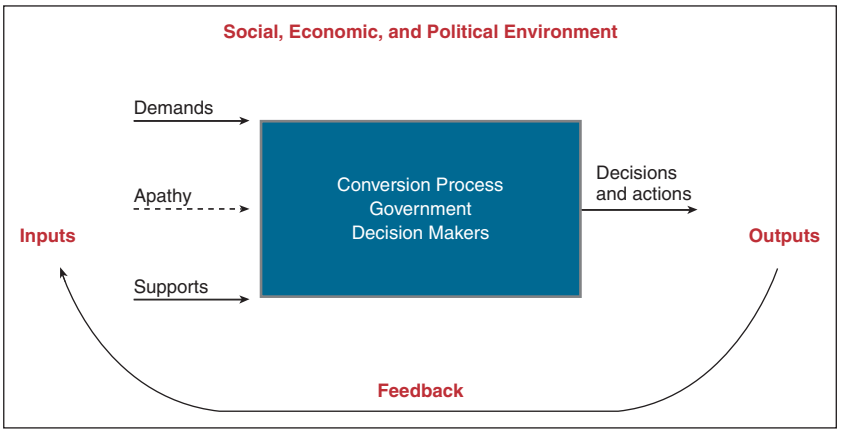


Figure 2.3
A model of the political system.

(*Adapted from David Easton*, A Systems Analysis of Political Life. *Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965, p. 32.*)

the citizens may or may not like. The citizens express their demands anew—this is the crucial "feedback" link of the system—which may modify the earlier decision. Precisely what goes on in the "conversion process" was left opaque, a "black box."

In some cases, the political systems approach fits reality. During the Vietnam War, feedback on the military draft was very negative. The Nixon administration defused youthful anger by ending the draft in 1973 and changing to an all-volunteer army. Recent lavish bonuses for executives of failed big companies—at that time propped up with billions of federal dollars—brought rage from citizens and Congress. The Obama administration saw healthcare reform as important and necessary, but roughly half the U.S. population opposed it, a point the Republicans used in the 2010 elections. In the 1980s, the socialist economics of French President François Mitterrand produced inflation and unemployment. The French people, especially the business community, complained loudly, and Mitterrand altered his policy away from socialism and back to capitalism. In these cases, the feedback loop worked.

But in other cases, the systems model falls flat. Would Hitler's Germany or Stalin's Russia really fit the systems model? How much attention do dictatorships pay to citizens' demands? To be sure, there is always some input and feedback. Hitler's generals tried to assassinate him—a type of feedback. Workers in Communist systems had an impact on government policy by not working much. They demanded more consumer goods and, by not exerting themselves, communicated this desire to the regime. Sooner or later the regime had to reform. All over the Soviet bloc, workers used to chuckle: "They pretend to pay us, and we pretend to work." In the USSR, (botched) reform came with the Gorbachev regime—and it led to system collapse.

How could the systems model explain the Vietnam War? Did Americans demand that the administration send half-a-million troops to fight there? No, nearly the opposite: Lyndon Johnson won overwhelmingly in 1964 on an antiwar platform.

The systems model does show how discontent with the war ruined Johnson's popularity so that he did not seek reelection in 1968. The feedback loop did go into effect but only years after the decision for war had been made. Could the systems model explain the Watergate scandal? Did U.S. citizens demand that President Nixon have the Democratic headquarters bugged? No, but once details about the cover-up started leaking in 1973, the feedback loop went into effect, putting pressure on the House of Representatives to form an impeachment panel.

Plainly, there are some problems with the systems model, and they seem to be in the "black box" of the conversion process. Much happens in the mechanism of government that is not initiated by and has little to do with the wishes of citizens. The American people were little concerned about the health effects of smoking. Only the analyses of medical statisticians, which revealed a strong link between smoking and lung cancer, prodded Congress into requiring warning labels on cigarette packs and ending television advertising of cigarettes. It was a handful of specialists in the federal bureaucracy who got the anticigarette campaign going, not the masses of citizens.

The systems model is essentially static, biased toward the status quo, and unable to handle upheaval. This is one reason political scientists were surprised at the collapse of the Soviet Union. "Systems" are not supposed to collapse; they are supposed to continually self-correct.

We can modify the systems model to better reflect reality. By diagramming it as in Figure 2.4, we logically change little. We have the same feedback loop: outputs turning into inputs. But by putting the "conversion process" of government first, we suggested that it—rather than the citizenry—originates most decisions. The public reacts only later. That would be the case with the Iraq War: strong support in 2003 but disillusion and discontent by 2006.

Next, we add something that Easton himself later suggested. Inside the "black box," a lot more happens than simply the processing of outside demands. Pressures from the various parts of government—government talking mostly to itself and short-circuiting the feedback loop—are what Easton called "withinputs." These two alterations, of course, make our model more complicated, but this reflects the complicated nature of reality. The systems model, like all models in political science, must be taken with a grain of salt.

KEY CONCEPTS ■ MODELS: SIMPLIFYING REALITY

A model is a simplified picture of reality that social scientists develop to order data, to theorize, and to predict. A good model fits reality but simplifies it, because a model that is as complex as the real world would be of no help. In simplifying reality, however, models run the risk of oversimplifying. The real problem is the finite capacity of the human mind. We cannot factor in all the information available at once; we must select which points are important and ignore the rest. But when we do this, we may drain the blood out of the study of politics and overlook key points. Accordingly, as we encounter models of politics—and perhaps as we devise our own—pause a moment to ask if the model departs too much from reality. If it does, discard or alter the model. Do not disregard reality because it does not fit the model.

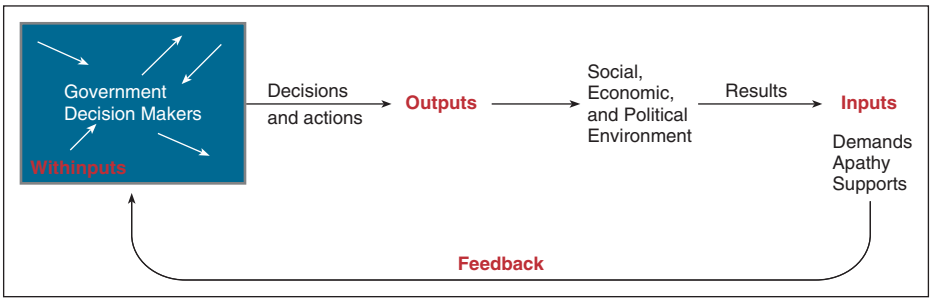


Figure 2.4
A modified model of the political system.

Modernization Theory

Modernization theory, a broad-brush term, is rooted in Hegel, who argued two centuries ago that all facets of society—the economic, cultural, and political—hang together as a package, which changes and moves all societies in the same direction. Hegel thought the underlying cause of this process was spiritual, but Marx argued that it was economic: "Steam engines and dynamos bring their own philosophy with them." You cannot have a feudal society with a modern economy, at least not for long. Max Weber argued that the cause was cultural, specifically, the rise of Protestantism. Others have emphasized the growth of education, communications, and the middle class, but all agree it happens as a package. Today's modernization theorists see the process as complex, multicausal, and little amenable to outside guidance. We do not develop countries; they develop themselves, a point neglected in Iraq.

gross domestic product (GDP) Sum total of goods and services produced in a given country in one year, often expressed per capita (GDPpc) by dividing population into GDP.

Most agree on the importance of industrialization. As a country industrializes, its economy, culture, communications, and politics also change. Giving new life to this theory was the remarkable second chapter of Seymour Martin Lipset's 1960 *Political Man*. Lipset classified countries as either "stable democracies" (such as Canada and Norway) or "unstable democracies and dictatorships" (such as Spain and Yugoslavia). With few exceptions, the stable democracies had more wealth, industry, radios, doctors, cars, education, and urban dwellers than the unstable democracies and dictatorships. In a word, they were more industrialized. And Lipset supplied an explanation: Industrialized countries have large middle classes, and they are the basis of democracy. Lipset combined Marx with Aristotle (see the quote from Aristotle earlier in this chapter).

More recent research tends to confirm a relationship between level of economic development and democracy. There is a dividing line between poor and middle-income countries, but it is not airtight. Lands with a per capita **gross domestic product (GDP)** of less than $5,000 are rarely democracies. If they attempt to found a democracy, it often fails, usually by military coup. Countries with a per capita GDP of more than $8,000, however, are mostly democracies. When they establish a democracy, it usually lasts. When South Korea and Taiwan were poor, they were dictatorships. As

they industrialized, their middle classes and education levels grew, and by the 1990s both had turned into democracies. Much U.S. thinking on China is based on these hopeful examples. China's rapid economic growth suggests that it could soon become a middle-income country and hence be ripe for democracy. However, economic growth is rarely smooth, and China is a huge, complex nation ruled by a Communist Party that refuses to relinquish power. When Mexico topped $8,000 per cap, it was ready for its first democratic election, that of Vicente Fox in 2000. There is an interesting exception to this wealth-democracy connection: India, still with a per capita GDP of under $3,000, was founded and stayed democratic, likely the result of the age and authority of its founding Congress Party. For every theory, there are counterexamples.

Modernization theory also has some insights into the turmoil and instability that afflict many developing countries. It is because they modernize just one or two facets—often their economy and military—and leave the rest—such as religion and social structure—traditional. The two conflict; the traditional sectors resent and oppose the modern sectors. This helps explain the upsurge of Islamic fundamentalism in Iran, Egypt, Algeria, and Saudi Arabia. One must also note the high unemployment in these lands. If modernization theory is correct, if and when they reach middle-income levels, they should stabilize and democratize.

Rational-Choice Theory

In the 1970s, a new approach invented by mathematicians rapidly grew in political science—rational-choice theory. Rational-choice theorists argue that one

Shoppers in an upscale Beijing mall could watch 2010 World Cup soccer on a giant screen. Will China's rapid economic growth lead it to democracy? (AFP/Getty Images)

paradigm A model or way of doing research accepted by a discipline.

can generally predict political behavior by knowing the interests of the actors involved because they rationally choose to maximize their interests. As U.S. presidential candidates take positions on issues, they calculate what will give them the best payoff. They might think, "Many people oppose the war in Iraq, but many also demand strong leadership on defense. I'd better just criticize 'mistakes' in Iraq while at the same time demand strong 'national security.'" The waffle is not indecision but calculation, argue rational-choice theorists.

Rational-choice theorists enrage some other political scientists. One study of Japanese bureaucrats claimed you need not study Japan's language, culture, or history. All you needed to know was what their career advantages were to predict how they would decide issues. A noted U.S. specialist on Japan blew his stack at such glib, superficial shortcuts and denounced rational-choice theory. More modest rational-choice theorists immersed themselves in Hungary's language and culture but still concluded that Hungarian political parties, in cobbling together an extremely complex voting system, were making rational choices to give themselves a presumed edge in parliamentary seats.

Many rational-choice theorists backed down from some of their more know-it-all positions. Some now call themselves "neoinstitutionalists" (see following section) because all their rational choices are made within one or another institutional context—the U.S. Congress, for example. Rational-choice theory did not establish itself as the dominant **paradigm**—no theory has, and none is likely to—but it contributed a lot by reminding us that politicians are consummate opportunists, a point many other theories forget.

KEY CONCEPTS ■ POLITICS AS A GAME

Some rational-choice thinkers subscribed to a branch of mathematics called game theory, setting up political decisions as if they were table games. A Cuban missile crisis "game" might have several people play President Kennedy, who must weigh the probable payoffs of bombing or not bombing Cuba. Others might play Khrushchev, who has to weigh toughing it out or backing down. Seeing how the players interact gives us insights and warnings of what can go wrong in crisis decision making. If you "game out" the 1962 Cuban missile crisis and find that three games out of ten end in World War III, you have the makings of an article of great interest.

Game theorists argue that constructing the proper game explains why policy outcomes are often unforeseen but not accidental. Games can show how decision makers think. We learn how their choices are never easy or simple. Games can even be mathematized and fed into computers. The great weakness of game theory is that it depends on correctly estimating the "payoffs" decision makers can expect, and these are only approximations arrived at by examining the historical record. We know how the Cuban missile crisis came out; therefore, we adjust our game so it comes out the same way. In effect, game theory is only another way to systematize and clarify history (not a bad thing).

New Institutionalism

In the 1970s, political science began to rediscover institutions and, in the 1980s, proclaimed the "New Institutionalism." Its crux is that government structures—legislatures, parties, bureaucracies, and so on—take on lives of their own and shape the behavior and attitudes of the people who live within and benefit from them. Institutions are not simply the reflections of social forces. (Our discussion at the beginning of this chapter, on the importance of structures, is a neoinstitutionalist argument.) Legislators, for example, behave as they do largely because of rules laid down long ago and reinforced over the decades. Once you know these complex rules, some unwritten, you can see how politicians logically try to maximize their advantage under them, much as you can often predict when a baseball batter will bunt. It is not a mystery but the logic of the game they are playing. The preservation and enhancement of the institution becomes one of politicians' major goals. Thus, institutions, even if outmoded or ineffective, tend to rumble on. The Communist parties of the Soviet bloc were corrupt and ineffective, but they endured because they guaranteed the jobs and perquisites of their members.

The new institutionalism is a sound approach and popular in current research, and with it political science comes full circle, back to where it was before World War II, with some interesting new insights. It is, however, likely not the last model we shall see, for we will never have a paradigm that can consistently explain and predict political actions. Every couple of decades, political science comes up with a new paradigm—usually one borrowed from another discipline—that attracts much excitement and attention. Its proponents exaggerate its ability to explain or predict. Upon examination and criticism, the model usually fades and is replaced by another trend. Political science tends to get caught up in trends. After a few iterations of this cycle, we learn to expect no breakthrough theories. Politics is slippery and not easily confined to our mental constructs. By acknowledging this, we open our minds to the richness, complexity, and drama of political life.

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KEY TERMS

behavioralism (p. 29)
bourgeois (p. 26)
civil society (p. 25)
descriptive (p. 23)
general will (p. 25)
gross domestic product (GDP) (p. 33)
institutions (p. 28)
leftist (p. 27)
normative (p. 23)
paradigm (p. 35)
positivism (p. 28)
postbehavioral (p. 29)
proletariat (p. 26)
realism (p. 23)
social contract (p. 25)
state of nature (p. 25)
superstructure (p. 27)
thesis (p. 30)
Zeitgeist (p. 26)

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