What Is Politics?

by David E. Cantacho

The major objectives of this essay are to define and characterize politics. I offer a working definition of politics, meant to be expanded through other essays in this volume, by lectures, and class discussions. The political variable is central to the study of complex phenomena, but politics should not be separated from historical, economic, sociological, cultural, and social inquiries. That is to say, students of politics should be studying complex political, economic, and social phenomena according to an interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary approach.

Politics; Defined

The two most popular definitions of politics are offered by Harold Lasswell and David Easton. Politics refers to that set of social structures and processes by which humans resolve their conflicting interests without having to be in a constant Hobbesian "state of war." At its most elementary level, the study of politics is concerned with the processes that determine "who gets what, when, and how."[1] David Easton suggests that politics is the "authoritative allocation of values for society."[2] These two views of politics provide valuable insights into the study of power and when taken together they serve as the basis for a central premise of the first two essays in this reader

> Politics involves power when it is viewed as a process where political actors compete against each other over limited resources; and, as a result of this competition, there are clear winners and losers. Thus, conflict is a fundamental condition of politics. Power relationships exist when there is conflict over resource allocations, procedural rules and regulations, and values.

Harold Lasswell has broken down politics into four related parts: 1) who acts, 2) what is being sought, 3) when (the empirical context), and 4) how (process). This view identifies the actors who pursue the rewards and benefits of political participation. The attention given to the political process helps answer significant questions: How do actors accomplish their political objectives? How do groups or individuals acquire rewards? How do actors lose out in their pursuit of rewards? The special attention given to the processes of politics helps in identifying the competition among actors as well as the historical development of that competition.

Easton points out that order is a necessary condition of society. As such, people within a political system authorize government (or its public officials) to manage conflict in society. Government, then, is given legitimacy and authority to manage the affairs of its citizens through the "social contract" entered into by individuals of a political community. The management of conflict is accomplished primarily through a system of rewards and punishments, or by rules that provide an orderly manner by which political actors can interact with each other. Witness, for example, the valuable guidance provided by constitutions in the U.S. political process. Government, in its provision of social order, is responsible for carrying out the function of making sure that human behavior is kept within the parameters of "the accepted way of doing things."

An important way government maintains the social order is by its provision of collective goods and services. The provision of collective goods and services means that government provides those rewards and benefits demanded or needed by the public at large and in some instances by private individuals.[3] This capacity to provide collective goods and services also implies that government has the capacity to withhold rewards and benefits. A collective or "public" good, in its most simple form, is defined as a good that is provided for by the public sector as distinguished from the private sector (or the marketplace). According to John Mikesell and Mancur Olson, the main reason for government's provision of a public good is because of "market failures," or the unprofitable and inexorably high cost to private business involved in providing a public good. National defense is an ideal example. Also important are the two distinguishing qualities of public goods: nonexclusion and non-

exhaustion. Nonexclusion means that once a public good is provided, it is available to everyone whether or not they contributed to the provision of that good. Nonexhaustion means that one person's use of the good does not preclude anyone else from the concurrent full use of the same good. National defense, again, illustrates these qualities: though one need not contribute taxes to pay for national defense, that individual is not excluded from the protection afforded by a large standing army; and, in times of war, for example, one citizen's "use" of national defense does not deprive another's "use" of that protection. While the discussion is not as thorough as the analyses by Mikesell and Olson, the point to be made is that government has a limited set of public goods and services at its disposal. Public officials, therefore, must contend with "limited resources" in making their public policy decisions. A condition of "limited resources," like the economic condition of "scarcity," exists when wants exceed available goods and services.

Government does not have the necessary resources at its disposal in providing collective goods and services; only an infinite amount of resources for government could allow government to meet all the demands made upon it. Thus, the role of government in managing the political process becomes problematic because wants inevitably exceed the available goods and services that government possesses.

This discussion suggests that the role of government is to carry out two necessarily crucial functions for society: 1) the provision of social order, and 2) the provision of public goods and services. These functions are not mutually exclusive. Used in combination, they reinforce each other in effectively meeting the ends of the state: the provision of goods and services essential to maintain the social order. Government's role becomes especially important when considering the notion of *limited resources.* Indeed, it can be argued that government exists to decide (authoritatively) how these limited resources (values) are to be allocated for society so that order is maintained. Since there is not enough of what people want for everyone, each public policy decision requires that some groups and individuals sacrifice what is wanted. In determining the winners and losers involved in the competition over limited resources, government takes on a special significance because it is dictating power relations in society.

Government's sanctioning of power relations in society is a result of its role in managing conflict in society. Government upholds and justifies traditional modes of behavior and an established pattern of authority in assuring that human behavior is kept within the parameters of "the accepted way of doing things.** It does so by determining who gets what. It can be argued, moreover, that public policy decisions aimed at resolving political conflicts over resource allocations, procedural rules and regulations, and values will mostly favor traditional and established patterns of "doing things." [On this point of view, see the article in this book: "Assessing Public Policy: Politics and Values."]

The maintenance of the status quo also suggests that human behavior is significantly shaped by the institutional and procedural parameters of a society. In other words, politics is culturally bound to the extent that a "dominant" ideology dictates political thinking and behavior. By *ideology* is meant a coherent set of values, beliefs, attitudes, and norms. The *dominance of this* ideology can be measured, in part, by what socializing institutions (schools and the media) teach and the number of people in a society accepting what is taught as "truth" or political "reality." It is fair to say, for example, that most U.S. citizens believe in the value of capitalism. Accordingly, most of us attempt to obtain a formal education so as to get a good job with high income which let's us acquire the material goods of U.S. capitalist society.

In summary, an important factor in understanding political development and behavior is the institutional framework of United States society. Because institutions are bound by fixed parameters and rules, they add concreteness to the abstract nature of ideology. For example, uneven degrees of socialization [see the article in this book: "Socialization, Assimilation, and Social Control: The Exercise of Power*! among members of a political community explain, in part, the wide range of political behavior found in that community. But generally, individuals engaged in mainstream politics are not likely to upset established power relations because their political behavior is within the parameters of the accepted rules. This view of the institutional framework significantly shaping political behavior is best explained by briefly considering the concept of *power,* which will be done in a later section.

The Characteristics off Politics

The discussion above suggests that politics can be described and explained by certain characteristics. What follows is not an exhaustive list; it is meant to start the discussion around a working definition of politics. Politics can be characterized, in part, by:

1) authority,
2) legitimacy,
3) values,
4) allocation,
5) actors,
6) action,
7) self-interest,
8) rewards and benefits,
9) limited resources,
10) conflict and competition,
11) winners and losers,
12) on-going process,
13) rationality,
14) complexity,
15) conservatism, and
16) power.

Although characteristics of politics have been listed, the question remains: What is politics? Here, the attempt is to discuss how the political process actually operates rather than to make judgments of how it should work. In this attempt, it is suggested that politics can be seen as a game. Like all games, politics has a playing field, players, rules, strategies, and winners and losers.[4]

First, politics must be viewed in a much broader sense than typically is the case. John Harrigan is correct in pointing out the meaningless of politics if one thinks of it as candidate A (governor or student-body president) winning an election over candidate B.[5] Harrigan explains that thinking of politics in a narrow way "makes it difficult to conceive of politics as conflict and compromise between social groups

over the directions of society."[6] Harrigan further suggests the close examination of: 1) decisions of government that allocate the scarce resources of society, and 2) the broader social and economic forces that push government to act in certain ways. Drawing from Easton and Lasswell, Harrigan defines politics as:

> . . . the valuable resources of society are allocated for purposes that society in general considers legitimate and authoritative. Politics is the conflict over the public decisions that results in public policies that allocate benefits, goods, services, and other values in society.[7]

What then of the game analogy in understanding and characterizing politics? As suggested above, at the heart of the political game is power. Indeed, power is the ultimate reward that can be earned from active political participation, advantageous use of resources, and effective strategic maneuvering. "In politics, players seldom seek power simply for its own sake. Instead, they value power as a means to an end-namely, influencing the outcome of the game in a desired direction. Power in politics is valuable not so much for what it is as for what it can do."[8]

In the political game, power is the limited resource that is rationally sought and fought over. Note that a winning record likely will lead to greater and bigger victories-witness the great franchises in sports history: New York Yankees, Dallas Cowboys, Boston Celtics, and so forth. But winners must continuously expend resources to keep winning; conversely, losers must seek out resources to place them in a better position for winning. In the end, there is only one trophy that commemorates the "world" champions in baseball, football, basketball, etc.

This sports example helps depict the game of politics. Politics is hard-hitting and oftentimes unpleasant. Yet, players (actors) choose to play (action-oriented) for specific monetary and status symbols (self-interest); abide by an agreed-upon set of rules (constitutions); attempt to manipulate those rules (competition); follow the direction of referees (government officials and bodies); seek out but one trophy (limited rewards and benefits) throughout a season (on-going process) through a strategic game plan (rationality); and, in the end, either win or lose.

Politics and Power

The discussion thus far is suggesting that politics and power are related concepts. Let's delineate this relationship by defining political power.

> ***Political power*** **refers to the ability and capacity of a political actor to influence government's allocation of scarce resources for society. To the extent that an actor can influence government in its public policy choices, that actor is said to have power.**

> ***Power is*** **defined as "the ability of A to somehow affect the behavior of B"." A is viewed as an actor exerting or imposing its preference over B, another political actor.**

Political power is fist of all contextual, or bound by certain policy parameters. For example, defense contractors exert substantial influence over the choices made by military or defense policy makers (the Defense Department and the Pentagon), but have very little or almost no influence in other policy areas, including school desegregation, immigration laws, American Indian gaming, and so forth. Since politics requires strategic thinking and behavior, political actors must distinguish between the context or policy area in which they may have a significant influence and those in which their influence is minimal.

Political power is second of all structured. Herein lies the view of the institutional framework significantly shaping political behavior. Another way of understanding this aspect of politics is to view politics as biased. To view politics as biased is not to say that elected and other government officials set out to deliberately harm people. Politics is biased according to what Lasswell has proposed: the political process determines *who* gets *what* resources, *when* they get those scarce resources, and *how* they get them. Important questions arise here, including: 1) who benefits the most from what government does and does not do?; 2) who suffers the most from government actions?; and, 3) why is this case?

In other words, some actors are consistently more powerful than other actors. Because of the bias of political institutions to respond to group behavior, the least powerful are unorganized groups and people who do not politically participate or otherwise engage the political process. University students are notorious passive actors. They do not even vote in student elections, much less in mayoral or gubernatorial elections. Faculty, on the other hand, typically are organized into a Faculty Senate that often sends representatives to the state capitol to serve as liaisons or lobbyists between the faculty and state legislators. Consequently, student tuition keeps increasing and many of those tuition dollars are used to increase faculty salaries.

Third of all, there is no clear distinction between political power and private power. This is to say, private actions sometimes carry public ramifications. Environmental policy serves as a good example of this third aspect of political power. Deforestation, the greenhouse effect, ozone depletion, acid rain, air and water pollution, pesticide use, cleanup of hazardous waste dumps, and transportation of nuclear waste are issues of concern. These are issues created through private actions but which must receive the attention of government. The agencies which regulate the industries and people causing these environmental problems cost money; money (scarce resources) which must be directed away from other programs which might serve a wider *public interest* There is, then, no action that is exclusively private nor one that is purely public.

Characteristics and Nature of Power

This section identifies characteristics of power crucial for understanding the concept of politics. Because power and politics are related concepts, the characteristics of power closely resemble those of politics.

First, power is manifested in the institutional framework that significantly shapes human behavior. Thus, power is political, economic, social, religious, racial and ethnic, and sexual in nature. In short, power is culturally bound.

Because power exists when there is conflict, power is, second of all, competitive in nature.

Thirdly, power is relational in that there will be the powerful and the powerless. However, power relationships are in a continuous state of flux. Winners and losers may change places over time. This state of flux suggests that power is characterized by action. Even non-decisions, that imply a passive role of decision-makers, illustrate the "active" nature of power. Stated differently, the "exercise" of power may mean doing nothing about a real or perceived problem.

Fourthly, power originates from dependencies, and characterizes the relations between groups and individuals; that is, intrinsic needs create power. If B needs A more than A needs B, if A can help B reach desirable goals but B cannot help A in the same way, B will accord A power; B will accord A the right to ask A for a favor when the occasion arises. A, then, not only has power over B, but also possesses the authority to make certain decisions. If B finds A's demands excessive, B will say that A is exercising too much power; but if A's demands are acceptable and customary, B will regard them as legitimate. Dependency is an important attribute of power.

The active dimension of power and the notion of dependency suggest a fifth characteristic of power, its rationality. By rational is meant that political actors will strategically think out their problems in their quest for power. Political activity by the powerless, for example, is a calculated expenditure of energy, time, risks, "costs," and so forth. Those in positions of power will deal with political mobilization in their own deliberate and calculated fashion. Basically, political actors act in the most efficient manner possible given their limited capabilities. As a pragmatic matter, acting efficiently implies that whenever the cost of attaining power rises in terms of effort, time, risks, money, and the like, political actors seek to attain less of that goal; whenever the cost of attaining power falls, political actors seek to attain more of it. To identify the nature of power is to identify its rationality. Important, too, is the issue of whether rationality can be "shaped;" an issue to be raised in subsequent essays found in this textbook.

A sixth characteristic of power suggests that political actors have a complex set of goals. Power may be the ultimate goal, but this set of complex goals may also include prestige, loyalty (to an ideology, institution, group, person), income, and security. This set of goals is not an all-

inclusive list and regardless of the particular goals involved, it is postulated that political actors are motivated by their own self-interest. One result of self-interest might be pure atomistic, egocentric behavior. Or, self-interest might lead to altruistic behavior in the sense that individuals will sometimes share rewards to achieve a greater "common good." Collective action efforts are illustrative of behavior motivated by self-interest. There is, then, a range of behavior motivated by self-interest that goes beyond traditional economic notions of self-interest.[9] It is the nature of the political actor to be self-interested, either to satisfy a purely atomistic or collective need.

Power, in the final analysis, is related to rewards, and it is therefore related to security. It is not power perse that matters, but relative power. Power differentiates the industrial magnate from an unemployed worker in a society with enormous income imbalances. On the other hand, in an egalitarian society, the "leader" may be easily recognized by minor differences of dress. Still, the appetite for power is not an appetite that operates in a vacuum. The most impressive display of officialdom has no value if no one can admire it. Power emerges in the relations of individuals with others. Power carries a human dimension; power is personal. It affects the human condition and human lives. Indeed, provide more security, and the quest for power may diminish.

All of this is to say, that power can be characterized by:

1) its institutional location,
2) relationships that can change,
3) "action" that many times explains changes or maintenance of power relations,
4) dependency of some political actors on other actors,
5) rationality,
6) its complexity,
7) its goal orientation,
8) the need for security, and
9) its personal, human quality.

In turn, the nature of power may be viewed as:

1) culturally bound,
2) conflictual,
3) relational,
4) dependent,
5) rational,
6) self-interested,
7) relative, and
8) political.

Conclusion

The point of this discussion is to offer the following premise: citizen participation in the governmental, political process is the cornerstone of democracy. But why should we care about politics? It is fair to say that the reader of this essay will most likely never become permanently rich nor for that matter permanently poor. A reasonable standard of life is practically guaranteed in U.S. democratic society. Yet, if an individual chooses not to take action, he or she likely will not benefit from government's distribution of authoritative values. This individual may be viewed as "powerless." More importantly, by politically participating, citizens learn to identify and interpret their own interests accurately and need not depend on the interpretations of others. Most importantly, one's direct experience with political participation will contribute to a healthy and rich democracy. Jean Jacques Rousseau, an eighteenth-century French philosopher, theorized about direct participation. Because they feel they have been able to participate authentically in the making of decisions that affect them, Rousseau theorized that citizens come to identify with the decisions taken and develop feelings of loyalty to the society. It is in this collective, direct experience with politics that the whole of society will be better represented and power more evenly distributed.

Democracy requires people to possess a political *consciousness.* Democracy requires the individual to transform himself or herself from a

passive citizen into an active, critically thinking, political actor. This transformation will require individuals to be conscious of history, and of complex political, economic, and social forces which are constantly influencing their thinking and behavior. Democracy requires conscious and intelligent behavior which guides the individual to discern between right and wrong. The moral conclusion should be that no individuals should carry an undue burden of hardship regardless of their gender, class, age, race, religion, sexual preference, and so forth.

What actions and practices improve democracy? What actions and practices improve both an individual's life as well as the welfare of the entire community? It is hoped that the answer points to individual initiative and responsibility. In political matters, a passive citizenry invites the abuse of power. Citizens have not been encouraged to use their own initiative and powers of decision-making. There is an irony here, indeed, a testament to the subtleties of power, for if they are not expected to use their decision-making powers, they carry no burden of responsibility to their community or society. This consequence is damaging to democracy. We must possess a political consciousness fundamentally informed by the concern for democracy, or justice for all.

There is a price to be paid for not caring; the quality of democracy is at stake.

Endnotes

I.Harold D. Lasswell, Politics; Who Gets What. When, and How? (New York: World Publishing Company, 1958).

2.David Easton, The Political System (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1953).

3.The economic concepts and definitions to be addressed in this section are borrowed from John L. Mikesell, Fiscal Administration; Analysis and Applications for the Public Sector (Chicago, Illinois: The Dorsey Press, 1986), particularly Mikesell's first chapter, "Fundamental Principles of Public Finance," pp. 1-21; and, Mancur Olson, The Logic of Collective Action; Public Goods and the Theory of Groups (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1971), particularly pp. 14-16 and pp. 36-43.

4.The discussion here is informed by Stephen E. Frantzich and Stephen L. Percy, American Government; The Political Game. (Madison, Wisconsin: Brown and Benchmark Publishers, 1994).

5.John J. Harrigan, Empty Dreams. Empty Pockets; Class and Bias in American Politics (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1993).

6-lbid., p. 26.

T.lbid.

8.lbid., p. 10.

9.See, for example, Olson, pp. 1-3.