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It Isn't Rocket Science, but . . .

This book pretends to be modest, but it really isn't. Although the prose will be sprinkled with qualification and "on the one hand this, but on the other hand that," I shall in fact be describing a sea change in the study of politics. Since the end of World War II, changes in political studies have been numerous and many-splendored, but I shall concentrate on two of the most significant shifts of emphasis—from describing to explaining, and from judging to analyzing.

A Science of Politics?

Consider this illustration. We are all familiar with reproaches in the popular press and in everyday coffee-break conversations about *politicians*. Their sins are routinely depicted; their persons are often held in contempt; and their actions are regularly alleged to border on the venal, the immoral, and the disgusting. In nearly every culture, politicians are taken as scoundrels of one sort or another—sometimes charming, even enchanting; necessary evils at best, but scoundrels nonetheless.[1] These characterizations, in both oral and tabloid traditions, are rich in description and unforgiving in judgment.

[1] Why else was *Profiles in Courage*, John F. Kennedy's book about politicians who sacrificed their own personal well-being for a greater good, so short?

Rarely, however, are they more than exercises in storytelling and hand-wringing.

Political science at the end of World War II was much more than this. It consisted, first and foremost, of detailed contemporary description and political history writing. Any of the major books on the U.S. Congress, for example, was both a compendium of facts about current legislative practice and an account of how that practice had evolved over the entire history of the institution. The same could be said about scholarly tomes on political parties, elections, the presidency, the courts, interest groups, state and local institutions—in short, about studies of nearly every facet of American political life. The anthropologist Clifford Geertz refers to this mode of analysis as *thick description.*[2] Thick description is typically careful, detailed to a fault, and comprehensive, in contrast to "mere" storytelling. But it is also indiscriminate, and the accumulation of detail does not always add up to much more than a pile of facts.[3]

Postwar political science is also more than normative hand-wringing. The evaluative emphasis of postwar political science consisted chiefly of reformist sentiments. Thus, in the very same thickly descriptive books on Congress there typically were objections to the overbearing nature of the Speaker of the House, concerns about the dominance of congressional committees, and general unhappiness with the antidemocratic nature of the filibuster in the Senate, the inordinate influence of lobbyists, and the intolerance of the majority party for diversity of opinion within its ranks (not to speak of the outright

[2] Thick description and political history writing, it should be added, were not unique to the study of *American* politics of the time; they were the primary methods of political analysis of politics in nearly every country in the world.

[3] This is true of quantitative data as well as of qualitative facts. A detailed census of some particular population is just a bunch of numbers until it is analyzed. The numbers do not speak for themselves. Indeed, a humorist once described statistics as a tool of analysis in which the numbers are grabbed by the throat and beseeched, "Speak to me! Speak to me!"

contempt of the majority for opinions of the minority party). Reforms were advocated to cure the legislature of these ills.

But in these descriptions, judgments, and reform suggestions, attention was given by scholars and commentators neither to explaining the evils they described nor to defending how their alleged reforms would play out. A codification of historical minutiae about congressional committees, for example, was not accompanied by any consideration of *why* committees were used in legislatures in the first place. That is, why is there a division of labor in legislative bodies, and why does it take the particular form that it does? Likewise, the advocates of reform for various disapproved-of practices paid scant attention to *why* these practices existed in the first place, why an existing legislature would be moved to adopt the proposed reform, *why* the proposed reform would cure the problems, and *why* the reformed institutional arrangement would itself not be subject to further tinkering (or even regression to its pre-reform condition).

In short, the political science that a college student at the end of World War II might have encountered was primarily *descriptive* and *judgmental.* It was much less oriented toward *explanation* and *analysis.* Over the next twenty years, political scientists got even better at description. They learned data-collection skills, more precise measurement, and statistical techniques allowing more precise inferences about causal relationships. But it was not until the 1960s that systematic attention began to focus on questions of "why." "Why?" is the principal interrogative of science; answers to it are explanations, and getting to explanations requires analysis.

The transformation of the study of politics from stories and anecdotes, first to thick description and history writing, then to systematic measurement, and more recently to explanation and analysis, constitutes significant movement along a scientific trajectory. Stories and anecdotes are part of an oral tradition most commonly found in the communities of journalists,

public-affairs commentators, and politics junkies. There is often little presumption of anything more than the wisdom that attaches (sometimes) to those who accumulate juicy detail. While almost everything is anecdotal and idiosyncratic for the storyteller, those who measure carefully and describe systematically are engaged in activity essential to the conduct of scientific inquiry. From systematic description comes the possibility of identifying empirical regularities. This requires separating wheat from chaff, so to speak, but this cannot be done until measurement and description have been carefully conducted.

It is empirical regularities, especially those that are robust in the sense that they seem to recur often and under a variety of different circumstances, that pique our curiosity. Why do incumbent legislators seem to get reelected so frequently (known as the "incumbency effect")? In modern democracies, why do countries that use proportional representation have so many political parties, while those that use alternative voting arrangements (for example, district-based systems in which the candidate with the most votes is elected) have fewer parties (known as Duverger's Law)? Why do democratic states rarely go to war against other democracies (known as the "democratic peace" hypothesis)? Why have the countries of the Pacific Rim developed their economies more successfully than those of Africa or Latin America in the absence of resource advantages or other conspicuous differences?

Obviously I will not answer here the wide range of questions associated with the empirical regularities identified by a generation of careful measurement and description. But I will definitely focus quite intently on the "why" questions and on how to think through to answers. This is one of the major ways political science is practiced in the twenty-first century, and is a harbinger of a maturing social science. Political science isn't rocket science, but an emphasis on explanation and analysis moves it closer in form to the physical and natural sciences than was the case in an earlier era.

Models and Theories

Let's pause now and see where we are heading. The main purpose of this book is not to expose students to specific details about political life—details you undoubtedly study in other courses in history, political science, and sociology—but rather to introduce you to some theoretical tools you will find useful in making sense of these details. We will be intent especially on becoming acquainted with elementary *models*. These are stylizations meant to approximate in very crude fashion some real situation. Models are purposely stripped-down versions of the real thing. Events in the real world are complex bundles of characteristics, often far too complicated to understand directly. We depend on a stylized model to provide us with insights and guidance that will shape our analysis of these events.[4]

In the next chapter, for example, we construct a simple model of human choice. It contains no more than a shadow of any real flesh-and-blood human being. Instead, in an utterly simple way, it considers a person exclusively in terms of the things he or she wants and the things he or she believes. We want to get a feel for how a person makes choices when confronted with alternatives. Since political behavior is often about making choices, our model will provide us with hunches and intuitions about how a generic or representative individual confronts these circumstances in the abstract.

In Chapters 3 and 4, to take another example, we expand our focus from the individual to a group of individuals. Although politics is often about making choices, only in the world of Robinson Crusoe do individuals make choices entirely in isolation from others, and that is hardly a very political sit-

[4] I have described here how I use the term *model* in this book. A model of something is (or should be) recognizable as a highly stylized simplification of the real thing. A sphere to represent a planet or the nucleus of an atom is a good example.

uation. We thus expand upon our elementary model of individual choice by constructing a more elaborate model of a group decision setting. In the remaining chapters of Part II, we embellish this group setting, taking into account more and more features of the decision-making context. Our model starts out being simple but begins to take on, a step at a time, some of the complexity of real groups and the decisions they confront. Along the way our intuitions about "how the world really works" become increasingly sophisticated.

Part III requires some new, but still basic, models. Whereas the groups we study in Part II make their decisions, at least part of the time, by voting (we may think of these groups as committees or legislative bodies), other kinds of groups operate in different ways. A group of farmers, for instance, faced with the problem of a mosquito-infested marsh adjacent to their respective properties, may decide to cooperate with one another in order to rid themselves of the nuisance. The question that arises here is why any farmer would cooperate. If the others manage to eradicate the mosquito population, then the noncooperator benefits as well (and doesn't have to pay any of the costs, to boot); if, on the other hand, the others don't manage to solve the problem, then only if the one presently not cooperating would make a difference would he or she bear any of the cost (and maybe not even then). The issue to be studied here hinges less on how the group makes decisions—whether by voting or by some other method—and more on the mechanisms by which these individuals capture the dividends of cooperation by creating the group in the first place. We need a model that allows us to study the logic of participation and collective action. I elaborate on this in the chapters of Part III.

I endeavor throughout these parts of the book to enliven things a bit with cases in point drawn from the real world. Sometimes the cases are simply concrete instances of what we're talking about. Thus, in Chapter 2, I illustrate the role of uncertainty in individual choice by talking briefly about the

risky career choices of politicians. On other occasions, I play a bit fast and loose with history in order to give an account of some real historical occurrence to illustrate an important idea. Thus, in Chapter 3, I provide some concrete examples of the manipulation of group choices by looking at how the strategic maneuverings of congressional leaders influenced tax policy during the Civil War, the Great Depression, and the Reagan years. These cases would hardly pass a historian's muster, since I have quite consciously abbreviated the presentation and stripped the stories of all but what is essential to illustrate a specific theoretical point. Remember, it is not thick description we're after but theoretical principles.

These stripped-down historical cases come close to transforming a specific model into a *theory* of something real. A theory, as I plan to use the term, is an embellishment of a model in which features that are abstract in the model are made more concrete and specific in the theory. To move from an abstract formulation of group choice to a more concrete application involving a specific group (the U.S. Congress) at a specific time (1862 or 1932 or 1986) on a specific issue (raising national revenue) requires us to nail our colors to the mast on a whole variety of matters. What is the specific size of the group? How many members does it take to pass a motion? Can the motion be amended? Who gets to make motions? If a motion is defeated, can a new proposal be made? A theory, then, is a specialized elaboration of a model intended for a specific application.[5]

We get even closer to theory in the chapters of Part IV. There we look at institutions, often in the abstract but occasionally in specific detail. The discussion of legislatures and their relationships with bureaucratic agents, for example, is

[5] *Model* and *theory* are terms used in various ways depending upon which philosopher of science you wish to consult. Since there is no uniformity of usage, I can do no more than state clearly my own practice, in no sense claiming superiority or seeking converts.

based on the conduct of intergovernmental relations between the U.S. Congress and its committees on the one hand, and between Congress and executive branch officials and regulatory bodies on the other. Likewise, the discussion of cabinet government is based on real-world experiences, mostly in continental Europe, with multiparty parliaments and coalition governments.

In this new edition, I have added two features that bring some of the abstraction associated with models and theories a bit more to life. The first is *problem sets and discussion questions*. In most chapters, I provide a series of problems or questions to give the reader some experience at putting the principles of the chapter to work—sometimes on real-life matters, other times on interesting puzzles of a more abstract quality.[6] The second is the *Experimental Corner* sections. In many of the chapters, I describe in some detail a social science experiment, drawn from the new but growing literature in experimental economics and political science, that seeks either to discover how real people (e.g., college sophomores) behave, or to test some proposed theory about individual or group behavior against data generated experimentally. I hope you find that these additions enrich the chapters of this book.

Politics

Now that you know where I'm heading, it's time to get on. My purpose in writing this book is to provide some tools to enable you to conduct your own analysis of the political events that affect your life. I believe that an understanding and application of the concepts contained in this book will help you to predict and explain political events. My job is to present the concepts clearly and to communicate how they can be applied

[6] An answer key is provided to instructors at wwnorton.com/nrl.

to real-world situations. Your job is to engage the material, understand the concepts, observe how they may be applied to real-world situations, and try them out in coming to terms with events in your own life and the world around you. If we do our respective jobs properly, I think you will begin to see the world differently. You will understand why certain groups have difficulty cooperating or reaching decisions. You will understand why people grumble about problems but don't do anything to solve them. You will understand why political candidates and political leaders do some of the crazy things they do. And you will begin to appreciate why some problems may be solvable and others not. In short, you will be able to analyze politics.

I haven't yet hazarded a definition of exactly what I am analyzing when I analyze politics. As a final preliminary, then, I need to demarcate our subject somewhat. In one of the most famous definitions, David Easton defined *politics* as "the authoritative allocation of values for a society."[7] This useful definition has been around for more than fifty years, but it leaves out more than I would like. Imagine an exhausted breadwinner returning home worn out by a dreary day of "office politics." There is nothing "authoritative" about, say, the fact that Smith was trying to impress the boss in order to improve his chances of getting the regional manager post that would soon be opening up. Moreover, the intrigues of the workplace surely do not embrace the allocation of values for an entire society. Office politics, university politics, church politics, union politics, clubhouse politics, family politics, and many other instances besides, all seem to involve what, in ordinary parlance, I include under the rubric of "politics," yet seemingly are excluded by Easton's definition. For the purposes of our discussion, I will take politics to be utterly indistinguishable from the phenomena of group life generally. It consists of indi-

[7] David Easton, *The Political System* (New York: Knopf, 1953).

viduals interacting, maneuvering, dissembling, strategizing, cooperating, and much else besides, as they pursue whatever it is they pursue in group life.

One of the real benefits of attaching politics to all facets of group life is to demystify politics. Our enterprise concerns not only the "capital P" politics that takes place in the White House, the Kremlin, 10 Downing Street, Capitol Hill, Whitehall, the Supreme Court, and other places of official activity. It also includes the "small p" politics of the workplace, the faculty meeting, the student government committee, the union hall, the kitchen table, the corporate boardroom, the gathering of church elders, and other less formal group settings. This hardly defines our subject comprehensively, but I am content to leave it at this. If you can live with this bit of ambiguity, then I invite you to read on.