

Individuals

Is Politics Really About People?

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Introduction

In the Introduction to this volume we learned that the concepts and ideas which are at the heart of political study are themselves intellectual battlegrounds. Key terms like 'power' and 'freedom' are linguistic and often moral minefields over which the student of politics has to pass with great care, and it is easy to confuse or else conflate the normative with the empirical, or to transgress seeming rules about the basis of scientific inquiry. So in the study of politics very little can be taken for granted, and this caveat extends to what we study and how we study it.

In this chapter we will begin our examination of the nature of political inquiry and the scope and content of politics by looking at the place of the individual in political life. The term 'individual' is in common use, so much so that we tend to take its meaning for granted. We are all individuals in the sense that we are single human animals, but while this is a necessary starting point for analysis, it is not sufficient to explain the importance of the concept in much political and social science. The idea of the individual and the quality of individuality suggest uniqueness and originality. Each of us is unique in certain definable ways but, perhaps more significantly, in undefinable ways too. What makes each of us different is very hard to explain, despite a great deal of research into what contributes to the making of an individual's 'personality'. A good deal of scientific (and not so scientific) debate has centred on whether personality is innate (genetic) or made through social intercourse and social learning. The important point for our purposes lies not so much in explanations of individuality, but in the status ascribed to the individual in political

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