[redacted]

## 1.2 Public Policy, Public Interest, and Power

### LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Define public policy, public interest, and power.
- Define sovereignty.
- Distinguish among the terms country, state, nation, and nation-state.
- Define political conflict.
- Define the status quo.
- Identify three bargaining outcomes.

Public policy is one of the main products of politics. Public policy includes all the decisions governments make to influence behavior. When a legislature enacts legislation, an executive issues an order, or a court announces a ruling, they are all making **public policy**.

In making public policy, political actors typically invoke the **public interest** (also called the common good or the general welfare). The public interest is an amorphous concept, although it is generally defined as the well-being of the public.[18] It is invisible to our senses, and it is possible to maintain that it does not exist because there is no interest (or good or welfare) beyond what individuals want for themselves.

Those who claim to seek the public interest typically believe that it is not just what people want, however, but what they *should* want. It would not be in the public interest, in this view, to create a society in which those in **power** can exploit others or one that legitimizes cruelty, even if a majority of the population wanted these things. It is in the public interest to create a good society, one with social justice, in which the government serves the people. Such a society would provide for the common good and promote the general welfare.

Power, a fundamentally important term in the study of politics, can be defined as the ability to compel someone to do something that they would not otherwise choose to do.[19] Those with power are the ones who get to make public policy. Power cannot be counted, weighed, or photographed. Though it is invisible, the accoutrements of power—for example, being addressed as president of the United States or having people salute you—can often be seen. Some people have a lot of power, while others have very little. Power is not a constant force, as politicians sometimes increase their power, while at other times their power slips away. Power is, in part, a matter of belief: if you believe someone has power over you, they do, at least to the extent that you do what they want.


**FIGURE 1.6** Upon his arrival in Israel, Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro was greeted with many accoutrements of power, including military presence, flags, and a red carpet. (credit: "31/03/2019 Cerimônia Oficial de chegada" by Palácio do Planalto/Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

The highest form of power is called **sovereign** power. If no other entity (person or institution) has authority over a state, that state is said to have sovereignty, and the supreme authority in that state is called the sovereign.[20] In many countries, the sovereign is the highest-ranking individual leader, such as the queen or king. In the United States and in other democracies, the people are sovereign, not their elected officials. The people elect their leaders, and the people can unseat them either by selecting others in the next election or by removing them—for example, through impeachment, a legal process for removing elected officials from their posts for misconduct.

The power of any governmental institution depends on the *de jure* and *de facto* rules of the country. In Saudi Arabia, for example, the Consultative Assembly has neither the power to pass nor to enforce laws. Its members are appointed by the king, who is an absolute monarch (the sovereign), and he can remove them at his pleasure.[21] In the United States, as discussed in Chapter 9: Legislatures, the Congress has substantial powers: only it can approve the spending of governmental money or declare war. The president can veto legislation approved by Congress, but Congress has the power to override a president's veto.

## Government and the Legitimate Use of Power

The **government** is the most important institution in any discussion of politics because it is the only one with legal, legitimate authority to use coercive power to compel behavior within a defined geographic area.

The government of a place typically exercises its powers over individuals who live within its borders or who are otherwise subject to its laws (for example, a citizen of the country who is currently living abroad). If you break your family's rules, your family can punish you, but only your government can imprison you for breaking government laws. Your church may ask you to contribute money, but only the government can compel you to pay taxes. Your business can encourage you to uphold their rules and fight for their interests, but only the government can require you to serve in the military and sit on juries.

A government is one of the four elements that, along with territory, population, and sovereignty, make up a state (or its synonym, country). The United States is a state, and so are the individual territories, from Alabama to Wyoming, within it. Afghanistan and Zimbabwe are states too, as are all the other 190 some countries between them alphabetically.[22] *State* has other meanings that are also relevant to politics and political science. For example, a country might be called a police state. In a police state, the government uses force, often imposed by the military or the secret police, to repress dissent and maintain order. In a welfare state, the government provides extensive social benefits like child care, education, housing, and pensions. Countries are

more or less police and welfare states, as all countries use a police force to maintain order and all countries offer their citizens some social benefits.

North Korea, where the government monitors virtually every aspect of life and imprisons or executes those who oppose its leaders, is perhaps the most extreme example of a police state. Nordic countries, including Denmark, Finland, Norway, Iceland, and Sweden, are generally considered to be the most generous welfare states.

The terms *country*, *state*, *nation*, and *nation-state* are sometimes used synonymously, but they are not at all identical. A **country** is a defined geographic territory with a sovereign government. The term **state** is often used to refer to a smaller area within a country, as in the case of the individual American states, which all together make up the United States of America, the country. The term *state* can also be used to refer to an entire country. For example, India is a state. A **nation**, in contrast, refers to a population connected by history, culture, and beliefs that generally lives in a specific area, such as Kurdistan in the Middle East, where the Kurdish are the dominant ethnic group even though they do not have a country to call their own.[23] A nation that also is a country is sometimes called a *nation-state*. The United States, France, Pakistan, China, and many others are generally considered simultaneously to be countries, states, nations, and nation-states.

A government has **authority** when those subject to its power recognize that power. In a class, you accept your teacher's power to give assignments and assign grades—or, at least, your school recognizes these powers. Authority is generally limited to specific circumstances and places where the authority is said to have jurisdiction. As a condition for passing this course, your teacher can require you to read this book but not to do their laundry. Your government can require you to pay your taxes—it has this authority—but it cannot require you to do things that are unlawful.[24]

When authority is used in ways that are consistent with the duties or rules of the institution, that authority is said to be **legitimate**. If a police officer pulls your car over because you are speeding, that is a legitimate use of authority; if that officer pulls you over because you are "driving while black," that would be an illegitimate use.[25]

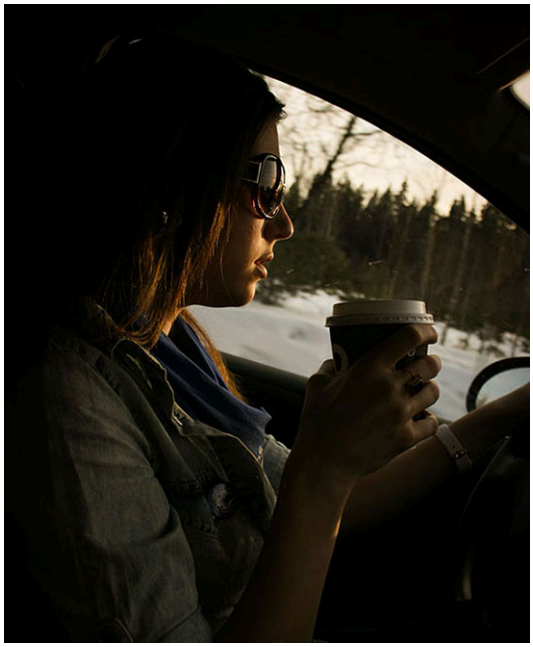

**FIGURE 1.7** Pulling over drivers because of their skin color is an illegitimate use of governmental authority. (credit: "Ride" by Krista Baltroka/Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

In politics, there is a continual struggle over which uses of authority are legitimate and which are not, and, as discussed in Chapter 13: Governing Regimes, governments resolve these conflicts in different ways depending

on how democratic they are. What can a government compel you to do, allow you to do, or prohibit you from doing? One possible answer is that if a government enacts a policy in accordance with its own rules, then that policy is legitimate. In this view, individuals could enslave others so long as governmental policy allowed this practice, as some countries have. Another answer is that some policies, such as slavery, are fundamentally illegitimate, even if they are lawfully enacted.

## Conflict and Bargaining

Disagreement—that is, **conflict**—is fundamental to politics for two primary reasons. As long as there is desire and people want things they do not have, there will be conflict. Millions of people lack clean air, access to potable water, and even basic necessities such as food and shelter. Scarcity is not limited to human needs. Even if every family in the world was wealthy enough to buy as big a mansion as (they thought) they wanted, differences would still exist that would make some people want what others have—say a better view, a bigger lot, or proximity to certain amenities.

In addition to desire, conflict will always exist because people have differing beliefs and preferences—that is, differing values. Should abortion be legal? A spectrum of passionate views on the subject exists, and there is no way one political decision will satisfy all individuals at every point along that spectrum. Should governments spend taxpayer money on bike trails, mass transportation, or roads? The answer might not be a matter of deep belief, but it still elicits differing preferences. Again, no one political action is likely to satisfy everyone.

Throughout history, the resolution of conflicts has often involved brute force. Violence can resolve conflicts, at least temporarily, with the strong getting what they want through brutality.

Politics is the process for resolving conflicts over scarce resources and differing values without resorting to violence. When violence is used to solve disputes, it represents the failure of politics, or at least the deep frustration of those whose aspirations are thwarted by politics. Politics can determine how scarce resources will be allocated and which values will prevail. Through political processes, a country can decide whether abortions will be allowed in all cases, some cases, or no cases. This does not mean that everyone will now agree on whether the policy is good or not; politics can resolve issues, but it cannot eliminate the underlying conflicts that cause them.

In recent decades the world has gotten richer and more peaceful.[26] That does not mean conflict is disappearing; several countries are experiencing open military conflict, and many other countries are experiencing high levels of violence. Even in countries without open, violent conflict, political polarization is increasing.[27] Political polarization occurs when groups—political parties as well as ethnic or religious groups—become divided ("polarized") in ways that increase cohesion within the groups and also increase suspicion and distrust across the groups. The United States today is more polarized than it has been in many years.[28] The greater the polarization, the greater the difficulty of resolving conflicts: polarization is a risk to peaceful politics.

How does politics resolve conflicts? Most often, through **bargaining**. When parties involved in a conflict engage in negotiations concerning the **status quo**—that is, the existing set of circumstances involved in the conflict—they are bargaining. Political bargaining determines whether existing rules and reality will be changed.

**FIGURE 1.8** Bargaining at the market is like bargaining in politics: each participant wants a solution that benefits themselves. (credit: "Learning to Haggle at the Nubian Market" by Bonnie Ann Cain-Wood/Flickr, CC BY 2.0)

In political bargaining, there are three likely outcomes. The first is that those bargaining simply cannot come to any agreement. When this happens, and it often does, the status quo prevails. Negotiations are almost certain to collapse when those bargaining are unwilling to give an inch because they have diametrically opposed goals. If one side seeks to raise taxes, for example, and the other to lower them, then there is no deal that would be acceptable to both sides. In this situation, those who favor the status quo are the winners, so those who favor the status quo have reason to prevent the negotiations from succeeding.

This point bears repeating. Although you might see a world full of problems that obviously need to be fixed, you should always assume that there are those who benefit from the current circumstances who will work to thwart change. This bias in favor of the status quo is one of the reasons political change is often so difficult to achieve. Think of it this way: bargaining seeks to change the rules, and there are almost certainly those who benefit from those rules and want to keep them.

[redacted]

A second possibility involves **compromise**, in which the various participants in a conflict give ground on what they seek in order to arrive at an agreement. Compromise is most likely to occur when those bargaining generally agree on the goals but have disagreements on the specific details. If some countries seek to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to limit global climate change while other countries seek faster economic growth that increases their emissions, the participants are seeking different goals and compromise is unlikely. However, if all countries want to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, they are in general agreement about their goals. In this case, compromise is more likely. If no country has the power unilaterally to set emission limits, the countries may have motivation to split the difference. If your country wants to lower emissions by 10 percent and my country wants to lower them by 5 percent, the two countries might make a deal and lower them by 7.5 percent. Each country gets part, but not all, of what they want.

A third outcome results from what is called logrolling. If you have something I want and I have something you want, we each have something with which to bargain. For example, suppose you have a peach and an apple, as do I. We each like both fruits and want more of both—there is scarcity. But you really like apples and I really like peaches. Through logrolling, I give you my apple, and in exchange you give me your peach. This is not a perfect solution, as we both wanted more apples *and* more peaches. But in the end we each are better off than we were before the bargaining.

The outcome of political negotiations depends again on the core principles of politics discussed earlier—the rules governing the negotiation, the reality at the time of the negotiation, and the strategic choices those involved in the negotiation make.

Political negotiations are often a combination of high-minded principles and skullduggery. Negotiators will seek to persuade others and, if persuasion does not work, sometimes to bully or buy them. If any participants in a negotiation have the power to force the others to give ground, they very likely will use it.

If the status quo prevails, those participants who sought change may be seen as weak and be blamed for their failure. If compromises are achieved, participants may be criticized for "selling out"—for compromising not only their policies but also their principles. Logrolling can create the impression of impropriety, of corrupt dealmaking, or of unseemly quid pro quo, as in "you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours."

Yet each outcome has an alternative explanation. If the status quo prevails, those who defended it will laud their accomplishments. When compromises succeed, each side can claim that "it is better to get half a loaf of bread than no loaf at all." After a successful logroll, the negotiators can say, "We got what we valued most." Negotiations can produce winners and losers, but they can also produce outcomes that leave the participants at least relatively satisfied with the outcomes.

If all political power were concentrated in a single person, with the government proceeding by *fiat*, or command, and the supreme leader giving the orders, bargaining might seem unnecessary. Yet even in totalitarian countries the supreme leader will have advisors, and those advisors will negotiate among themselves and the ruler as they seek to influence how power is used.