

INTRODUCTION TO POLITICAL SCIENCE

How to Think for Yourself about Politics



CRAIG PARSONS

Introduction to Political Science

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How to Think for Yourself
about Politics

Craig Parsons
University of Oregon

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Preface

Politics pervades every aspect of our lives as human beings. As Aristotle said, we are “political animals.” Unfortunately, many people aren’t very comfortable with that status. They wish they could avoid politics, often because they find it threatening and hard to understand: a shifting, conflictual space of complex ideas and hidden agendas. This book is designed to help students become more comfortable political animals. It does so by helping them to become conscious critical thinkers about a wide range of political topics. It teaches them how—not what—to think about politics.

The first step to that goal is to recognize that avoiding politics makes no sense. *Politics* is just a word for processes of collective decision making among people, and unless we live alone on a desert island, those processes always surround us. As a rough analogy, politics is an inescapable aspect of our lives like physical health. Our health can be good or bad, but having “no” health makes no sense. Politics too can be good or bad in many ways, but it cannot simply go away. We cannot live among other human beings without being bound up in processes of collective decision making. Just as neglecting our health can only have bad consequences, so avoiding politics can only bring us missed opportunities and subjugation to other people.

The second step to that goal is to identify a set of tools that students can use to sharpen their own political thinking. This is very hard for most people to do without help, because politics *is* a shifting, often-conflictual space of complex ideas and possibly hidden agendas. The set of tools must be diverse—students need to try their hands at many cuts into politics—but also organized and bounded, so that the new student is not overwhelmed.

In other words, what students need to make politics their own is a structured sense of political alternatives. Alternatives are the foundation of all critical thinking; we cannot argue coherently for or against one view without knowing something about others. For critical thinking about politics

in particular, we must be aware of three kinds of alternatives:

- Alternative arrangements of political *practice*: how is politics organized and experienced differently around the world?
- Alternative beliefs in political *ideologies*: what are different views of the good and the bad in politics?
- Alternative logics of political *explanations*: what different kinds of stories can we tell about why people act politically as they do?

For these alternatives to coalesce into a tool kit that students can take away from their studies, they must be presented in systematic and cumulative ways, especially with respect to ideologies and explanations. Though the options in political practices vary widely from topic to topic—the possibilities in representation form one menu, for example, while the choices in economic policies form another—our major ideologies and the major logics of explanation in political science stretch across these areas. The core organization of this book, then, is to apply a recurring set of major ideologies and explanatory approaches as we survey political arrangements and practices across space and time: the state, forms of government, participation, representation, policymaking, political economy and development, authoritarianism and democratization, war and terrorism, and the trends of globalization.

The key strengths of this organization are that it is simultaneously more structured and more open-ended than any other introductory text on politics:

- The largest part of each chapter covers practices “on the ground” that form the empirical content of comparative politics, American politics, and international relations.
- Attention to contrasting political ideologies in every chapter creates connections to basic political theory.

- Short but substantive examples of alternative explanations in every chapter offer an accessible entry point into theoretical debates across the empirical subfields.
- Across the whole book, a consistent emphasis on alternatives within all these spaces promotes awareness of our diverse world, of our diverse discipline, and of students' freedom and responsibility to figure out what they think about politics.

The book also includes other structured and cumulative supports for learning:

- Each chapter invites students to consider how to evaluate explanations with cross-case (quantitative) and within-case (qualitative) methodological approaches and evidence.
- Evocative photos, charts, and graphic figures strengthen the text with anchors for visual learning.
- Explicit learning objectives head each section and lead students into review questions, journal-writing assignments, and end-of-chapter summaries.

Finally, it is important that this framework responds not just to pedagogical challenges but to broader challenges of our era as well. In a time of low trust in government and rising distaste for politics, we must invite students to engage these subjects in a way that is both supportive and open-minded. In a period when political science has diversified to the point that some faculty members question any connection to their colleagues, we need a coherent but ecumenical introductory frame that emphasizes both our unity and our diversity as a field. My hope is that this book realizes these immodest goals to some small degree.

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Pearson is pleased to offer several resources to qualified adopters of *Introduction to Political Science* and their students that will make teaching and learning from this text even more effective. Several of the supplements for this book are available at the Instructor Resource Center (IRC), an online hub that allows instructors to quickly download book-specific supplements. Please visit the IRC welcome page at www.pearsonhighered.com/irc to register for access.

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First published by Rand McNally in 1923, *Goode's World Atlas* has set the standard for college reference atlases. It features hundreds of physical, political, and thematic maps as well as graphs, tables, and a pronouncing index.

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Craig Parsons

About the Author

Craig Parsons is a professor of political science and a specialist in comparative European politics at the University of Oregon. After growing up in Chico, California, he earned degrees from Stanford University, Sciences Po Paris, and the University of California, Berkeley. His authored or edited books include *A Certain Idea of Europe* (Cornell University Press, 2003), *The State of the European Union: With US or Against US* (Oxford University Press, 2005), *Immigration and the Transformation of Europe* (Cambridge University Press, 2006), *How to Map Arguments in Political Science* (Oxford University Press, 2007), and *Constructing the International Economy* (Cornell University Press, 2010). He has also published many articles and book chapters on the European Union, national-level European politics, the U.S. Congress, and a variety of theoretical and methodological issues in political science.

Chapter 1

Introduction



A young woman from Alexandria, Virginia, protests in front of the U.S. Congress on September 30, 2013, the day before the federal government shut down because politicians could not agree on the budget.



Learning Objectives

- 1.1** Define “politics” and explain why it is an inescapable part of human existence.
- 1.2** Explain the difference between the descriptive study of politics, normative engagement with political ideologies, and the focus of political science on explaining politics.
- 1.3** Summarize the logic of the three main approaches to explaining political action and recognize the logics in examples of explanatory arguments.
- 1.4** Identify the three main methods that political scientists use to test and support their explanations.
- 1.5** Identify the main subfields in the study of politics.

Introduction: Is Politics to Blame?

When Barack Obama began his first term as forty-fourth president of the United States back in 2009, he called for a new spirit of cooperation in Washington, D.C. “I don’t expect a hundred percent agreement from my Republican colleagues,” said the new Democratic president, “but I do hope that we can all put politics aside and do the American people’s business right now.” Looking back at the end of his second term, we know these hopes were dashed. Through the Obama era, Democrats and Republicans have disagreed more sharply than ever on just about everything.

Or almost everything. One thing they agree on is that *politics* causes many of America’s problems. Republican leaders like 2012 presidential candidate Mitt Romney, Speaker of the House John Boehner, or Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell have constantly accused Obama of “playing politics” with the economy, the war in Afghanistan, and other issues.¹ In a rally at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., in summer 2010, conservative media personality Glenn Beck—one of Obama’s fiercest critics—argued that civil rights and other important issues had to be taken back “from politics” to get the United States on the right track.² Obama replied with some of the same antipolitics rhetoric. As a budget impasse headed into a two-week shutdown of the federal government in October 2013, Obama railed at Republicans in Congress, telling a crowd in Missouri, “They’re not focused on you. They’re focused on politics.”³

Many citizens saw the 2013 government shutdown in the same light. “It’s all about politics, and to me that’s very frustrating,” one resident of Reno, Nevada, told his local newspaper. “It’s just about politicians jockeying for position to advance their own agendas in the future,” added another. “That’s all it is.”⁴ Like the young Virginian who marched in front of Congress with a placard begging leaders to “Stop Acting Like Spoiled Brats,” these Americans were perplexed and annoyed at how their representatives seemed unable to work together.

So should we see “politics” as the problem in our society? Both leaders and citizens use the word to evoke an image of infighting and counterproductive power struggles. Seen from this angle, “politics” rears its ugly head when the rightful concerns of citizens get turned over to “politicians.” These political creatures focus mainly on power, the perks of office, and media attention. They whip up unnecessary fights that derail the practical solution of real problems. Healthy people who want to live productive lives, meanwhile, try to avoid active engagement with the nasty political realm. A good life in a good society would be as free of politics as possible—right?

Wrong. The hunger for power, infighting, and media flash are certainly parts of the political scene, but they are not the essence of politics. In fact, politics is an essential part of your everyday life. Rather than seeing it as a separate arena to be blamed for unwelcome intrusions into your affairs, think of it like other basic and inescapable parts of human existence, such as health or interpersonal relationships. You can have good health or good relationships; you can have bad health or bad relationships. Neither is ever perfect; both are partly out of your control. But both are always basic parts of your life. The same is true of politics. To reject it, as the antipolitics rhetoric suggests, is to turn your back on conscious thinking about what you believe, the problems and

challenges you face, and how you and others might solve them. It also discourages you from putting any effort into understanding the political world around you: a complex context, and not always pretty, but one that shapes almost every facet of your life whether you recognize it or not.

To do well in your own life, you must reclaim politics as an essential part of it. This book will help you do so. ■

Seeing Politics in the World

1.1 Define “politics” and explain why it is an inescapable part of human existence.

To reclaim politics, we must first define it. *Politics is the making of collective decisions*. It is what happens, in some shape or form, when people engage with each other to govern their interactions. Unless you live alone on a desert island, you are part of many political arenas. Family members make collective decisions about how to support each other’s lives, like paying for a college education and what is expected in return. In a sports team, club, religious organization, or even an informal circle of friends, you are part of ongoing negotiations about what the group does together. In any job, you are part of an organization or network of people who must coordinate and govern themselves to produce results. And then, of course, there is the most explicit level of politics—what the term “politics” makes us think of most—which is government. In and around government, people interact to make collective decisions about infrastructure like roads, airports, and irrigation; a system of laws, courts, and police to maintain social order; the provision of education, medicine, and hospitals; foreign relations in trade, diplomacy, and defense; safety regulations for food, cars, or toys; rules for institutions that support a sophisticated economy, such as banking or insurance; and many other things that affect our lives. Even beyond the level of national government, your life is affected by global politics in international trade, cooperation, and conflict.

You might quickly object: “I may be surrounded by all these political processes, but that does not mean I should not try to escape them!” You may not feel like you are significantly involved in most levels of collective decision making—especially not the large-scale politics of the U.S. government or the wider world. But let’s consider what “escaping politics” would actually mean.

Why Escaping Politics Is a Dead End

Most collective decision making in and around your life is certainly not entirely open, equal, and participatory. Whether the context is your family, your university, your town, or the corridors of power in Washington, D.C., some people usually play a bigger role in collective decision making than others. Many people

state of nature

An imagined time prior to the development of society or politics.

feel like they have some of the smaller roles, which is one reason why they long for a world “without politics.” They imagine that if they could just make all of their own decisions, they would feel less excluded or controlled by others. This kind of liberated life is what political philosophers like Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) envisioned the “**state of nature**” to be—that is, the human condition in an imaginary time before the emergence of oppressive social organization and government.

Few Americans realize it, but this longing for a state-of-nature world without politics is even more powerful in the United States than in most other countries. This country was founded by people who left a Europe governed by kings and queens and sailed far away in pursuit of various goals: religious freedom and political liberty, in many cases, but also land and personal opportunity. Most of the founders saw overly powerful governments as the big problem in politics, and looked for ways in which a new U.S. constitution might bolster individual rights, lessen the scope of centralized decision making, and “check and balance” the collective decision making they considered unavoidable. Settlers colonized vast territories that were sparsely populated and rich in resources, leading them to believe that a tough individual or family could thrive largely on their own on that frontier. From these origins came a political discourse that criticized government and politics for obstructing and intruding on our individual pursuit of happiness and that idealized a state-of-nature existence without governmental restraints.

But the notion of escaping into a “state of nature” would not actually appeal to most people if they thought about what it would be like. The average life span in the American colonies was less than thirty years and didn’t get much over forty years for settlers on the frontier during the 1800s.⁵ In today’s world, not many people ship themselves off to desert islands or the Alaskan wilderness for obvious reasons: life is not easy without a fair number of other people to ease the burden of getting clean water, growing food, building shelter, making clothing, or caring for those who are ill. Nor would most people want to forgo all the things previously mentioned that you can gain as part of a larger society: law and order, education, roads and other infrastructure, and so on, not to mention the opportunities for trade that bring you iPhones, mountain bikes, movies, extra-soft toilet paper, haircuts, and a million other products and services.

Maintaining access to the benefits of modern life involves collective decision making to organize and govern society. Once you are in a social context, even if you feel like you have been assigned a bit part in a production dominated by others, attempts to “escape” collective decision making tend to lead to two kinds of bad outcomes. One is that other people become even more dominant because you have left the field to them. The other is that things just fall apart and the benefits of interacting begin to disappear. This can happen at any level of collective decision making, from your family on up to the U.S. government and beyond. If you feel powerless in your family and try to escape its collective decision-making process, you find yourself with a family that dissolves

or is dominated all the more by other family members. By not engaging with the governance of your club or religious group, you arrive at similar results. The same is true of the big institutions of government: pursue the fantasy of a world without politics and you do not end up “free” from politics and government; you end up with *worse* politics and government. As one saying goes, “Just because you do not take an interest in politics does not mean politics won’t take an interest in you.”⁶

The interpretation of U.S. history suggested by an antipolitics state-of-nature discourse is similarly misleading. In many ways, it gets the story backward. The Founding Fathers did not try to escape politics. They were political thinkers who proclaimed loudly and clearly that they sought consciously to engage politics in a whole new way. They tried very deliberately and carefully to build a different *kind* of collective decision making—a different sort of politics—where individuals could have greater liberty and equality. They saw that individual freedom is not what is left when you take away politics and government; to the contrary, they needed to construct a kind of collective decision making that supported individual freedom.

To see this fundamental point in a more concrete way, speculate for a moment on why life in Arizona is so different from life in Afghanistan. Afghanistan is one of the poorest, most insecure countries in the world. Though it has hugely promising resources, its government is barely able to hold an election or administer basic services to most of its territory. Arizona’s geography is no more hospitable than central Asia. Like the least-fertile parts of Afghanistan, it has a mostly desert landscape with little water and no coastline. But life in these places is radically different: Arizonans are 100 times richer on average than Afghans. According to various measures of individual freedom around the world, like those from the Heritage Foundation⁷ or Freedom House,⁸ Arizona, like the United States in general, scores at the top while Afghanistan scores near the bottom. While Afghanistan is one of the largest sources of refugees fleeing to other countries, people are literally dying to get into Arizona across the Mexican



A New Yorker jumps for joy as he enters the Soho Apple Store to purchase the first iPhone in 2007. Think about the many features of an orderly society that are visible in the background—security, wealth, health, education, technology, and so on—that allow him to spend hours in line to get a new cell phone.



The U.S.–Mexico border fence near Nogales, Arizona, forces migrants to find less fortified openings into the United States. Roughly 100–200 die every year from the heat while attempting to cross long stretches of desert.

border.⁹ It is rather obvious that the difference between the two is not that Arizona represents a state of nature with “less” politics and government. In most ways that we can measure, Arizona is much “more” controlled by a coherent politics and government than Afghanistan. But “less” and “more” are not the right terms because no one would dispute that Afghanistan has exceedingly complex politics. A better way to capture the fates of these two landlocked zones is that their radically different kinds of collective decision making have given their citizens radically different life experiences. The differences, good and bad, lie in the *kind* of politics, not in the presence or absence of politics.

A first step to reclaiming politics, then, is to see that wherever there is human interaction, there are inescapable processes of collective decision making. Politics is essential to construct the kind of safe and comfortable life that most people pursue, no matter how much we might daydream of an adventurous, autonomous existence in a state of nature. Once you recognize the presence and impact of politics in the world, you can begin to organize it, analyze it, and understand how it matters to you. And to see and understand politics around you, you need to grasp concepts from political science and political philosophy.

From Politics to Political Ideologies and Political Science

1.2 Explain the difference between the descriptive study of politics, normative engagement with political ideologies, and the focus of political science on explaining politics.

Like health, relationships, and other essential parts of life, politics is often messy and complicated. Even if the antipolitics rhetoric is wrong to equate politics with “fighting for the sake of fighting,” people in politics *do* argue and disagree. These disputes, whether in your family, on talk radio, in the White House, or at the United Nations, often lead people to “spin” things to fit their views. Sometimes consciously and sometimes unconsciously, they selectively use information to

support their side. Overall, it may seem like there is no truth at all to be found in politics. How, you might wonder, can you study such a free-for-all collection of disagreements and spin?

It may also seem that no one can help answer that question, since even the experts on politics cannot agree on what to think about it. Although politics is a domain as essential as health, you can rely more heavily on your doctor for concrete guidance because doctors have a fairly strong consensus about how to cure an infection, set a broken bone, or deal with asthma. By contrast, experts on politics do not have much of a strong or specific consensus on anything. Political experts debate a set of strongly different views of how to understand the political world.

It is in that set of strongly different views, though, that the study of politics offers the way forward. To reclaim politics, you must become a critical thinker: someone who can understand, criticize, and defend certain views about the political world against others. *The foundation of all independent, critical thinking is the ability to imagine alternative points of view.* Once you can imagine a few different viewpoints, you can choose one or more of them and defend your choices intelligently. Studying the main views of politics thus gives you the crucial tools to reclaim politics. It will not tell you exactly *what* to think about politics—you will still have to make your own choices—but it will teach you *how* to think and talk about politics in a useful, engaged, and critical way.

The study of politics helps you become a critical thinker by imagining political alternatives from three angles:

1. First, it can help you see some of the different ways of organizing and acting in politics. This is the challenge of **political description**, asking: what are some of the ways that people have set up and understood their political lives, whether locally, nationally, or globally? You need to describe some of the different kinds of governments, constitutions, political beliefs, political parties, public policies, and so on to be able to imagine what options exist for your political choices. Political practices around the world suggest a menu of possibilities against which to compare your own experiences.
2. Second, the study of politics can help you engage the good and bad aspects of the politics around you, and to think about your political values and goals. This is the challenge of **political philosophy**, the effort to evaluate the good or bad in political life. It centers on **normative** ideas about how the political world *ought* to be, though it also builds in **analytic** or explanatory concepts about how we think it actually *is*. In everyday politics, the alternatives of political philosophy manifest themselves as **political ideologies** that structure our debates. By learning about different ideologies and the philosophical ideas behind them, you gain a set of alternatives to inform your choices.
3. Third, the study of politics can help you explain why you and people around you have ended up with certain options on the menu of political

political description

The task of grasping how political life and action are organized.

political philosophy

The project of evaluating the good and bad in politics, addressing both how politics works and how it should work.

normative argument

Argument about how things ought to be, not about how they are.

analytic argument

Argument about how things are or how they change, not about how they ought to be.

political ideologies

The versions of political philosophies that people use to organize political debates and action, like liberalism or conservatism.

political science

The systematic effort to explain why politics works as it does.

possibilities. This is the challenge of **political science**, the systematic effort to explain why politics works as it does. Explanation is the heart of what most experts on politics do, and they can provide you with useful ways to quickly, roughly imagine some alternative answers to “why” questions about politics. When political scientists look at any political situation (in your family, university, town, state, the United States, globally, and so on), they pose the same set of basic questions about why people might be acting and speaking the way they are. These questions are rooted in different views of the core of political action: different fundamental stories we can imagine about why we see certain patterns of collective decision making in the world. Though political scientists rarely agree fully on which story is right about any situation, they share this basic set of options for thinking about what lies behind political action. You can learn to use these tools to translate the messy-looking world of politics into a small, organized set of “why” possibilities.

Familiarizing yourself with these three kinds of alternatives can be deeply empowering. In learning about political description, you get a more concrete sense of what your own life is like as you contrast it to other possibilities. In learning about political ideologies, you gain the ability to quickly brainstorm the alternatives to any single judgment that is put before you. If someone tries to persuade you of a view based in one ideological approach, quick consideration of some alternatives tells you what might be wrong or incomplete about the case they are making. In learning about political science explanations, you find that the same basic approaches can apply to any political context, from interacting with your family and friends up to issues in global politics. You become able to look at a newspaper (or website, or blog, or however you get information) and roughly, quickly grasp the main things that might be going on behind a story. Wherever you find yourself tangling with collective decision making—in the policies of your university or employer, at a school board meeting, as you think about military service or donating to charities, and of course as you consider voting choices or other engagement with government—you are able to look at the people around you and guess at what is animating their political choices.

In these ways, the study of politics can carry you beyond the narrow, distant way in which people often relate to their political surroundings. Without these tools, people often peer in on the political realm through a small window of selective, semiconscious views. A broader, more critical engagement with political alternatives may or may not lead you to change any views you hold today—perhaps it will just help you to better appreciate and defend your initial leanings—but it will remove the narrow window between you and politics. It will allow you to reclaim politics as a comprehensible part of your world and to empower yourself with a better understanding of the choices you can make.

In the next section, we explore three basic approaches to the least familiar challenge in reclaiming politics: explanation. For your critical thinking, it is just as important to tackle the two other kinds of challenges addressed in this book—describing the political world and engaging with political ideologies. But the core terrain of explanatory political science is likely to be especially new to you, so it calls for a bit of introduction.

Three Explanatory Approaches in Political Science

1.3 Summarize the logic of the three main approaches to explaining political action and recognize the logics in examples of explanatory arguments.

Everyone has at least some experience in seeing and describing politics around them. You have picked up a few descriptive facts about presidents, political parties, and other things in U.S. politics, and probably a smattering of facts about other places too. There is much more to learn about how to see the political world and its menu of alternatives, but the basic notion of seeing and describing it is not a foreign one.

Everyone has also been exposed a bit to engaging with political ideologies. You are aware that some political concepts sound good to you (perhaps democracy? Human rights? Liberty? Equality? Free markets?) and some bad (maybe dictatorship? Oppression? War? Exploitation?). You may attach good or bad judgments to “Republican” or “Democrat” and other labels. You will need a deeper and broader sense of alternative ideologies to arrive at well-informed engagement, but judging also comes fairly naturally to us all.

You may not have much experience, however, with explaining politics. For most people, it is challenging enough to keep a descriptive eye on political events and an engaged eye on how events relate to their ideological views; explaining *why* things are happening is hard even to imagine. Since explanation is the least familiar piece of the study of politics, and also because it is the core of the discipline of political science, this introductory chapter gives it some special attention.

Explanation also calls for special treatment because, at first glance, it is far from obvious to know how to organize political science into a small, useful set of explanatory alternatives. If you read a selection of what political scientists write, a simple set of approaches will not jump out at you. Instead, you find a long, confusing list of academic terms that political scientists use to label the stories they tell: “structural,” “institutional,” “rationalist,” “constructivist,” “realist,” “liberal,” “Marxist,” “functionalist,” and many others. Fortunately, though, only a few main explanatory traditions lie underneath all the labels.