

Political Institutions

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Politics: Outline

- Politics
- Authority and its types
- Government and its types
- Theories of politics

Politics

- Politics is always about POWER and AUTHORITY
- To exist, every society must have a system of leadership. Some people must have power over others.
- Weber pointed out, we perceive power as either legitimate or illegitimate.
- *Legitimate power is called **authority***. This is power that people accept as right.
- In contrast, *illegitimate power—called **coercion***—is power that people do not accept as just.

Authority and Legitimate Violence

- If someone owes you \$100, you cannot take the money by force, much less imprison that person. The state, in contrast, can.
- The state claims both the exclusive right to use violence and the right to punish everyone else who uses violence.
- The ultimate proof of the state's authority is that you cannot kill someone because he or she has done something that you consider absolutely horrible—but the state can.
- *“Violence is the ultimate foundation of any political order.”*

Types of Authority

- Traditional Authority
- Rational-Legal or Bureaucratic Authority
- Charismatic Authority

Traditional Authority

- It is based on custom.
- It is the hallmark of tribal groups: custom dictates basic relationships.
- For example, birth into a particular family makes an individual the chief, king, or queen. This is the right way to determine who rules because “We’ve always done it this way.”
- Although traditional authority declines with industrialization, it never dies out.
- Even though we live in a postindustrial society, parents continue to exercise authority over their children *because parents* always have had such authority.

Rational-Legal Authority

- It is based not on custom but on written rules.
- *Rational means reasonable, and legal means part of law.* Thus rational–legal refers to matters that have been agreed to by *reasonable people and written into law* (or regulations of some sort).
- The matters that are agreed to may be as broad as a constitution that specifies the rights of all members of a society or as narrow as a contract between two individuals.

Cont.

- It is also called bureaucratic authority.
- Authority comes from the *position that someone holds, not from* the person who holds that position.
- Everyone—no matter how high the office held—is subject to the organization's written rules.
- In governments based on traditional authority, the ruler's word may be law; but in those based on rational–legal authority, the ruler's word is subject to the law.

Charismatic Authority

- *Charisma is a Greek word that means a gift freely and graciously given.*
- People are drawn to a charismatic individual because they believe that individual has been touched by God or has been endowed by nature with exceptional qualities.
- Their authority resides in their ability to attract followers, which is often based on their sense of a special mission or calling. Not tied to tradition or the regulation of law, charismatic leaders pose a threat to the established political order.

Cont.

- Following their personal inclination, charismatic leaders can inspire followers to disregard—or even to overthrow—traditional and rational–legal authorities.
- The armies did not follow Joan of Arc because it was the custom to do so, as in traditional authority. Nor because she held a position defined by written rules, as in rational–legal authority. Instead, people followed her because they were attracted by her outstanding traits. They saw her as a messenger of God, fighting on the side of justice, and they accepted her leadership because of these appealing qualities.

Charismatic Leaders in History



Transfer of Authority: Charisma?

- The orderly transfer of authority from one leader to another is crucial for social stability.
- Under traditional authority, people know who is next in line. Under rational–legal authority, people might not know who the next leader will be, but they do know how that person will be selected.
- Charismatic authority has no rules of succession, making it less stable than either traditional or rational–legal authority. Because charismatic authority is built around a single individual, the death or incapacitation of a charismatic leader can mean a bitter struggle for succession.

- To avoid this, some charismatic leaders make arrangements for an orderly transition of power by appointing a successor. This step does not guarantee orderly succession, since the followers may not share the leader's confidence in the designated heir.
- A second strategy is to build an organization. As the organization develops rules or regulations, it transforms itself into a rational–legal organization. Weber used the term **routinization of charisma**.

Types of Government

- Monarchies: power to kings/queens
- Democracies: Power to people
 - Direct
 - Representative
- Dictatorships: power to one individual
- Oligarchies: Power to a group

Theories of Politics

- Functionalist theories
- Conflict theories: the power elite

The Functionalist Perspective

- The state has arisen out of the basic needs of the social group. To protect themselves from oppressors, people formed a government and gave it the monopoly on violence.
- The risk is that the state can turn that force against its own citizens. To return to the example used earlier, state has a tendency to become muggers.
- Thus, people must find a balance between having no government—which would lead to **anarchy**, a condition of disorder and violence—and having a government that protects them from violence, but that also may turn against them.
- When functioning well, then, the state is a balanced system that protects its citizens both from one another *and from* government.

The US Case: Pluralism

- Pluralism is a diffusion of power among many special-interest groups
- This prevents any one group from gaining control of the government and using it to oppress the people.
- To keep the government from coming under the control of any one group, the founders of the United States set up three branches of government: the executive branch (the president), the judiciary branch (the courts), and the legislative branch (the Senate and House of Representatives).
- Each is sworn to uphold the Constitution, which guarantees rights to citizens, and each can nullify the actions of the other two.
- This system, known as checks and balances, was designed to ensure that no one branch of government dominates the others.

Conflict theories: the power elite

- Sociologist C. Wright Mills (1956) took the position that the country's (USA) most important matters are not decided by lobbyists or even by Congress. Rather, the decisions that have the greatest impact on the lives of Americans—and people across the globe—are made by a **power elite**.
- The power elite consists of the top leaders of the largest corporations, the most powerful generals and admirals of the armed forces, and certain elite politicians—the president, the president's cabinet, and senior members of Congress who chair the major committees.
- It is they who wield power, who make the decisions that direct the country and shake the world.
- We should not think of the power elite (or ruling class) as some secret group that meets to agree on specific matters. Rather, the group's unity springs from the members having similar backgrounds and orientations to life.

Which View Is Right?

- The functionalist and conflict views of power in U.S. society cannot be reconciled.
- Either competing interests block any single group from being dominant, as functionalists assert, or a power elite oversees the major decisions of the United States, as conflict theorists maintain.