



# Civics Mosaic:

## Comparing Political Systems

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*Comparing political systems around the world*

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Aim at an exact Knowledge of the Nature, End, and Means of Government.

Compare the different forms of it with each other and each of them with their

Effects on the public and private Happiness.

—John Adams, 1759

## Lesson 2: What is Politics?

### Purpose of Lesson

Understanding what politics is and why it is a universal human activity has been a challenge to thinkers from the time of the ancient Greeks to the present day. This lesson introduces you to how people across time and cultures have attempted to define, assess, or characterize politics and politicians.

After completing this lesson, you will be able to:

- Discuss various conceptions of politics and identify the major characteristics and purposes of politics.
- Examine the extent to which politics is an inherent part of the human condition.
- Analyze attitudes toward politics and explore the potential causes of them.

### Terms to Know

coercion	political animal
compromise	political solution
decision-making	political trust
empirical studies	politics
polis	public
political actors	

### Where Does Politics Happen?

Although there is general agreement that politics is an enduring and universal aspect of life in human societies, there is no single, agreed-upon definition of politics. In fact, the definition of politics is highly contested today.

Some contend that politics is restricted to activities that involve government. They would probably concur with a definition like the following one or with slight variations of it.

*Politics: the art or science concerned with guiding and influencing government policy and with winning and holding control over government.*<sup>1</sup>

Other authorities take a much broader view of politics. They understand politics as the means by which decisions are made and carried into effect in all human social units and institutions. Politics, they insist, encompasses the total complex of

relations between people living in society.

Politics, they explain, takes place in governmental units; but it also takes place in families, labor unions, schools, sports, religious groups, and in every other non-governmental association. If one accepts this more expansive interpretation of what is political, then politics is everywhere and everyone is engaged in politics, whether or not he or she realizes it.

### How Has Politics Been Described?

Over the course of time, scholars, politicians, and writers in many countries had tried to capture the essence of politics in a variety of succinct characterizations. Otto von Bismarck, chancellor of the German Empire (1871-1890) and architect of German unification, defined politics as “the art of the possible.” He also insisted “politics is not a science but an art.”

Two rather caustic characterizations of politics have come from scholars Harold Lasswell, a noted American psychologist who studied politics, and Bertrand de Jouvenal, an influential French philosopher. Lasswell summed up what he thought of politics in the title of his book, *Politics: Who Gets What, When and How* (1936). De Jouvenal, thinking primarily of the role of individuals, described politics as “man moving man.”

Perhaps the shortest and most memorable, if inelegant, characterization of politics has come from a fictional character known as Mr. Dooley. The brainchild of journalist Finley Peter Dunne, Mr. Dooley epitomized the unsophisticated but worldly-wise common man. Scorning scholarly and convoluted explanations, Mr. Dooley said that “politics ain’t bean-bag.” What he meant was that politics is no children’s game.

On the contrary, politics is a complex and demanding activity. That complex and demanding human activity involves the making of decisions about public issues. Because people disagree, sometimes strongly, about the urgency of public issues and what, if anything, should be done about them, what we call “politics” comes into play. When people negotiate, compromise, or conciliate with one another so that an official,

<sup>1</sup> Merriam’s Collegiate Dictionary, 10<sup>th</sup> edition.

binding decision can be reached, they are engaged in politics.

### What Do You Think?

1. Evaluate the argument that politics is present in all human social units and institutions. What evidence could be offered to support or to contravene that argument?
2. Do you think Bismarck was correct when he described politics as an art not a science? Why do you think he called politics “the art of the possible”?
3. Is Lasswell’s characterization of politics as “Who gets what, when, and how” a gross oversimplification? Why or why not?

### Is Man a “Political Animal”?

Is politics an integral and inescapable fact of life for human beings? Aristotle (384-322 B.C.), the famed Greek philosopher, entertained that question in his classic work, *Politics*. His answer was in the affirmative. He declared, “man is by nature a political animal.” Then he went on to clarify that assertion. Aristotle wrote:

*It is thus clear that man is a political animal, in a higher degree than bees or other gregarious animals. Nature, according to our theory, makes nothing in vain; and man alone of the animals is furnished with the faculty of language. The mere making of sounds serves to indicate pleasure and pain, and is thus a faculty that belongs to animals in general: their nature enables them to attain the point at which they have perceptions of pleasure and pain, and can signify those perceptions to one another. But language serves to declare what is advantageous and what is the reverse, and it is the peculiarity of man, in comparison with other animals, that he alone possesses a perception of good and evil, of the just and the unjust, and other similar qualities....*

*The man who is isolated, who is unable to share in the benefits of political association, or has no need to share because he is already self-sufficient, is no part of the polis, and must therefore be either a beast or a god.<sup>2</sup>*

Aristotle attached great importance to language and its importance to political life in the *polis* as one’s country was called. It is interesting to note

how many words we use today to describe the places or activities in which human beings engage in politics are derived from the Greek word *polis*. Among the words in current usage are politics, political, policy, and polity.

### Can Politics Solve the Problem of Order?

One of the major problems for people everywhere and throughout time has been how to live together peaceably given the fact that they have desires and goals which may be at variance with one another. Bernard Crick, a noted political theorist from Great Britain, addressed that problem in his *In Defence of Politics* (1962). He said, those activities which we call politics are important because they are means “by which differing interests within a given unit of rule are conciliated by giving them a share in power in proportion to their importance to the welfare and survival of the whole community.” He saw politics as “that solution to the problem of order which chooses conciliation rather than violence and coercion.”<sup>3</sup>

Crick and many others, who have come to accept his views, believe that politics is—or can and should be—a means of resolving conflict by negotiation, compromise, and conciliation. If, however, competing interests or groups are to be conciliated, then political power must be widely dispersed throughout society. At the same time, Crick believed that political power must be apportioned in accord with the importance of each interest or group to the well being of the community as a whole. As a result, politics may not produce ideal or utopian solutions to contentious issues. Even so, most people would agree that it is better for people to air their differences and to debate the merits of their positions so that they can come to an agreeable compromise than it is for them to come to blows. That is why a compromised or conciliated response to a problem is called a “political solution.”

Political solutions stand in contrast to military solutions, and political solutions are generally preferred. However, there will always be those who look to win political battles by whatever means necessary, including violence. Dictators V. I. Lenin in the Soviet Union, Mao Zedong in China, and others have openly asserted that political power comes from “the barrel of a gun.”

<sup>2</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, Book I, ch. 2, translated by Ernest Barker (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 11.

<sup>3</sup> Bernard Crick, *In Defence of Politics* (Harmondsworth and New York: Penguin, 1983), p. 123.

### What Do You Think?

1. Aristotle claimed that a man who isolated himself could not “share in the benefits of political association.” What do you think those benefits might be? Why can they not be obtained in isolation?
2. Aristotle wrote that man alone among all animals possesses a perception of good and evil and of the just and the unjust. Do you think such perception is innate or learned? If it is learned, how is it acquired?
3. Aristotle believed that man’s ability to use language made politics possible. Do those with a better command of language control politics? Why?
4. Do you agree or disagree with Bernard Crick that power should be widely shared and apportioned in accord with the importance of each interest to the well-being of the community as a whole? Why?

### What Are Common Characteristics of Politics?

There are some common characteristics of politics that can be identified, despite so many differences of opinion. First, politics is a social activity; it is not a solitary pursuit. Politics implies the interaction of human beings.

A second commonality is that politics arises from differences among people. Because people have diverse wants, needs, opinions, interests, and goals, they will be in competition or contention with one another. Societies need a means for peacefully accommodating or resolving those differences. Politics is such a means.

A third common feature of politics is decision-making. Politics involves the making of a collective decision and the attempts to influence that decision. This decision-making process involves the processes of negotiating, bargaining, compromising, or conciliating. Usually, that decision is regarded as binding upon the group.

Finally, the subject of those decisions concerns public issues and public activities. “Public” issues affect society in whole or in part in contrast to issues affecting one’s private life or personal activities.

### How Do Attitudes Toward Politics Vary?

Attitudes toward politics and politicians have varied widely across time and cultures. As early as the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Henry Carey, an English songwriter, composed a paean (a song of joyful praise) to his sovereign:

*God save our gracious king!*

*Long live our noble king!*

*God save the king!*

Then Carey added a second verse in which he scolded members of Parliament:

*Confound their politics,*

*Frustrate their knavish tricks.*

As practicing politicians, American presidents have expressed opposing opinions about politics. Thomas Jefferson wrote that “Politics is such a torment that I would advise everyone I love not to mix with it.” On the other hand, Dwight David Eisenhower believed that “Politics ought to be the part time profession of every citizen.” John F. Kennedy’s opinion was that “The political world is stimulating. It’s the most interesting thing you can do.”

In addition to being interesting, politics has been praised as a pinnacle of human achievement. Scottish novelist John Buchan (1875-1940) claimed that “Public life is regarded as the crown of a career.... It is the worthiest ambition. Politics is still the greatest and most honorable adventure.” The writer Frederick Scott Oliver (1864-1934) agreed with Buchan. He concluded, “With all the temptations and degradations that beset it, politics is still the noblest career any man can choose.... If the conscience of an honest man lays down stern rules, so also does the art of politics.”

### What Does Research Reveal About Support for Political Actors?

In addition to the opinions expressed by individuals in the preceding paragraphs, recent empirical studies of support for political actors shed light on how people generally feel about politics. A network of international scholars conducted “a world-wide audit of public support for representative democracies at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.”<sup>4</sup> One area they focused on was support for political actors or how people generally regard politicians as a class. This is most com-

<sup>4</sup> Pippa Norris, ed., *Critical Citizens: Global Support for Democratic Government* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 20.

monly measured by generalized trust for politicians and public officials and by evaluations of the performance of particular presidents, prime ministers, party leaders, and representatives monitored in regular public opinion polls.

What did their cross-national findings about trust in politicians from 14 nations reveal? There is “clear evidence of a general erosion in support for politicians in most advanced industrial democracies.” Declining trust is most marked in the United States. There is also strong evidence of decline in Canada, Finland and Sweden. Long-term trends point to deepening erosion in political confidence in Austria and Germany. Shorter time trends for Australia, Britain, Ireland, Italy, and Japan also point to growing public disenchantment with politics and politicians.

The sharpest deviation from the pattern of declining trust is in the Netherlands. Norway and Denmark also display more confidence in politics and politicians. However, the overall pattern across the 14 nations surveyed is one of spreading public distrust of politicians.

### **Reviewing and Using the Lesson**

1. If you were asked to explain what politics is, how would you define or describe it?
2. Identify and evaluate the costs and benefits of politics.
3. Think of some of the great political compromises that have been made in the history of the world. On balance which of those have proved to be wise political solutions? Which unwise? What evidence can you offer in support of your judgments?
4. In your opinion what accounts for the overall pattern of declining public trust of politicians worldwide? What might be done to restore that trust?
5. Consult recent public opinion polls and/or letters to editor in local newspapers to assess the level of trust of politicians in your country or community. To what extent do people trust political actors in your country or community?
6. Think of some of the troubled areas of the world today where nations are in conflict. What is at issue in those areas? What means are being employed in an effort to reach a political solution?
7. How do individuals learn political knowledge and attitudes? What are the benefits and limitations of these sources of civic development?
8. What is your view of politics? Are your views more like those of Thomas Jefferson or more like those of John F. Kennedy and Frederick Scott Oliver?
9. Conduct an informal survey in your school to determine the prevailing political attitudes of your peers. Do your classmates trust politicians? Do they believe government is responsive to their needs? How might you explain your findings?