

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.

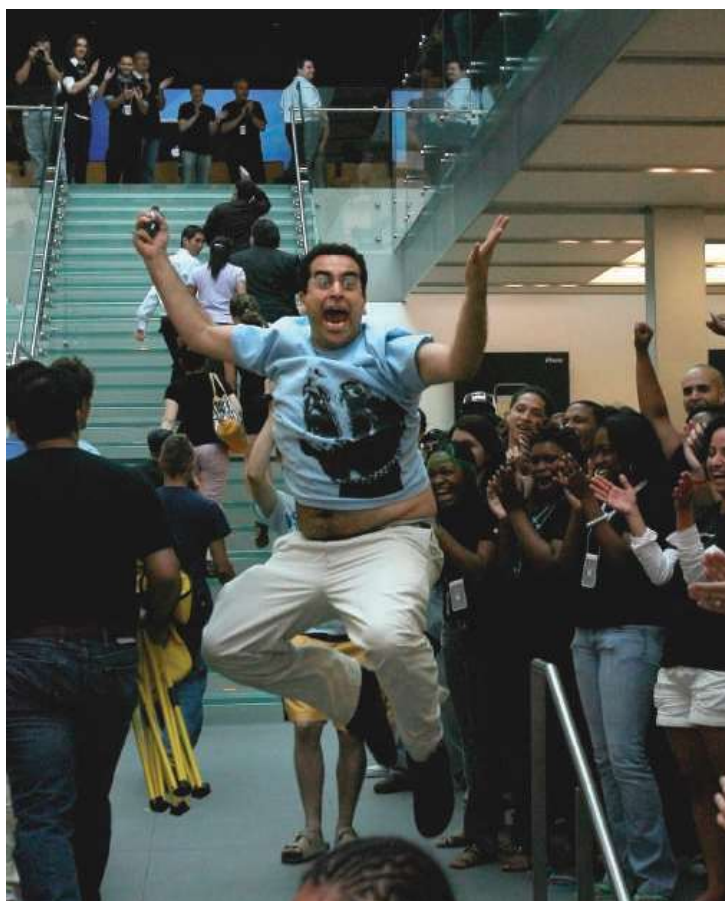
But the notion of escaping into a “state of nature” would not actually appeal to most people if they thought about what it would be like. The average life span in the American colonies was less than thirty years and didn’t get much over forty years for settlers on the frontier during the 1800s.⁵ In today’s 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 land-locked 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.

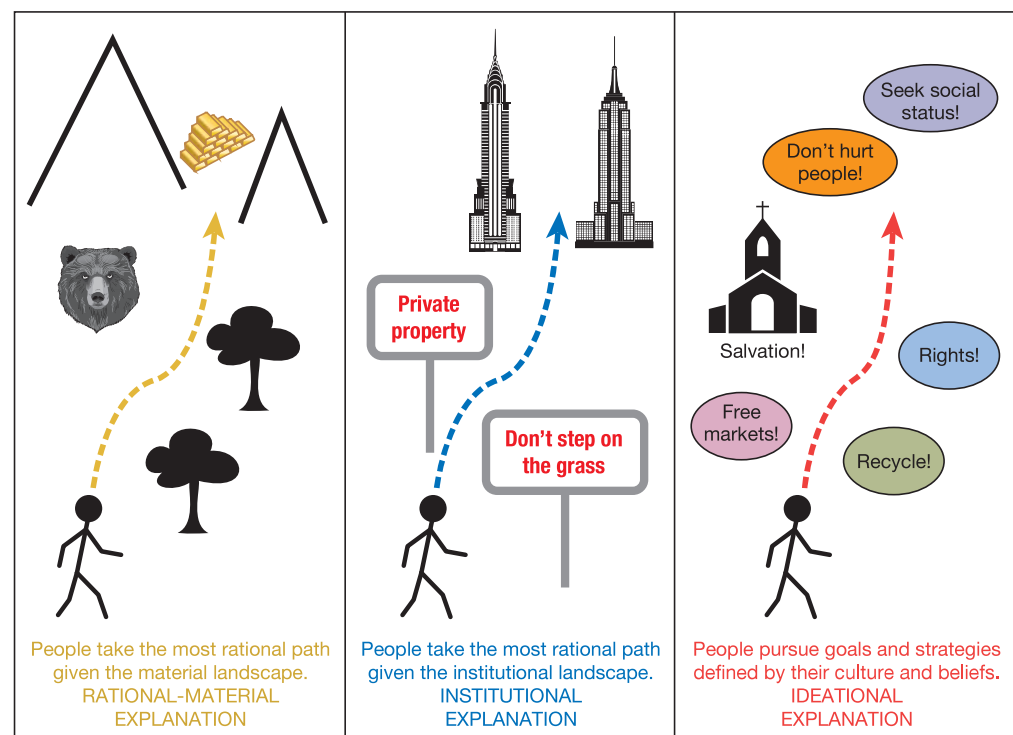
You may not have much experience, however, with explaining politics. For most people, it is challenging enough to keep a descriptive eye on political events and an engaged eye on how events relate to their ideological views; explaining *why* things are happening is hard even to imagine. Since explanation 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.

Whatever political scientists call their arguments, their views sort into three main kinds of stories used to explain politics. Once you get some sense of these three ways of thinking about how politics works—three basic views that prompt you to question, “Is *that* what is going on here?”—you have the main tools that political scientists apply to any political situation. When you are comfortable with these tools, you can get a little fancier: there are variations on each kind of story, and the three stories can be combined in interesting ways. But even if you go no further than the simple versions of the main options, you will be much better equipped to understand politics and think critically about it.

These three explanatory options are built around simple thoughts (see Figure 1-1). When we see someone making certain political choices, one possible explanation is that he or she is doing what anyone else would do if placed in the same place in the material landscape. Consider the figure on the left: given a forest on one side, predators on another, and rumors about gold mines through the mountain pass ahead, any rational person would head for the hills. On the other hand, his or her choices might actually be more like the figure in the middle, who is channeled in certain ways by the rules and organizations that people have built. Human-made rules and structures, often called “institutions,” create obstacle courses of incentives that reward or punish us

Figure 1-1 Three Ways to Explain What People Do in Politics



for acting in certain ways. The third major possibility is that his or her political choices are motivated and shaped by his or her culture and beliefs, like the figure on the right. This last kind of explanation suggests that a person might do many different things in his or her material or institutional surroundings, and what really shapes a person's choices is how he or she *interprets* what he or she wants and how to get it.

To introduce these three explanatory approaches more concretely, let's return to a real-world example that came up at the beginning of the chapter. From October 1 to October 16, 2013, the U.S. federal government closed. The shutdown followed a fight between Republicans in Congress, who wanted to cut government spending and roll back some government programs, and President Obama and his Democratic allies, who largely sought to defend current government operations. When previous deals on government spending ran out on October 1 and the two sides failed to agree on a new deal, the government had to close its doors. About 800,000 government workers were told not to come to work. Millions of private sector contractors stopped work on government-funded projects. Many businesses suffered because they depend on government services: Airlines could not put new planes in service because the Federal Aviation Administration could not certify they were safe. Crab fisherman faced losses because no one could issue permits to start their season. Experimental treatments for kids with cancer were put on hold. By some estimates, \$3.1 billion evaporated from the economy overall and longer-term effects were much more costly.¹⁰ Why? Why did American leaders shut down the U.S. government?

Alternative 1—Rational-Material Explanation: A Clash of Interests

The simplest story about the 2013 shutdown describes it as a clash between different groups in American society pursuing their own advantage. In this view, the standoff basically reflected a divide between wealthier and poorer Americans. The rich generally prefer to cut government spending because they pay the lion's share of taxes and do not need most of the services government provides. After all, they have the money to buy what they need. The poor generally prefer to expand government spending because they benefit from government services and can allow the rich to pay for most of it. Political groups have emerged to represent this split—Republicans speaking mainly for the rich, Democrats mainly for the poor—but the real conflict is not between politicians. It is between groups of people who hold different positions in the economy: in the 2012 election that preceded the shutdown fight, 60 percent of people with income under \$50,000 voted for the Democratic candidate (Obama), but 54 percent of people with income over \$100,000 voted for the Republican candidate (Mitt Romney).¹¹ Each of these groups is just pursuing the most rational

strategy given their position in the landscape of resources. This contest between rich and poor has always shaped American politics, but the division has become sharper in recent years as the wealthiest Americans have gained a larger share of wealth. When the need for new budgetary legislation came up in October 2013, the two sides dug in their heels to force the other side to concede more on future government spending.

Think for a moment about the logic of this explanation. It starts by picturing a real landscape of material resources. Across this landscape, people occupy different positions. Each person controls a certain amount of wealth and some control sources of wealth, such as possessing an oil well, a farm, or a business. From their economic position, people rationally develop certain **interests**, or courses of action from which they will benefit. Those holding considerable wealth have interests in doing what they can to keep it; those without much wealth have interests in looking for ways to gain more. From these starting points, everyone chooses the most reasonable (or rational) strategy. The shutdown was a clash of such underlying interests.

A good label for this kind of explanatory story is a *rational-material explanation*. It explains what people do in politics as a rational reaction to the material landscape around them. Who the people are, or what they believe, does not

interests

In political science, the courses of action that most clearly benefit someone given his or her position in the world.



Protesters associated with the "Occupy Wall Street" movement demonstrate outside the Business Council of New York State to make their point that U.S. politics is a clash between the very rich (the "1 percent" of Americans with the greatest wealth) and the rest of society.

matter much in this kind of story. Everyone is perceived as roughly sharing the same basic goals of personal comfort, security, and control of their surrounding environment, and their choices reflect the obstacles or incentives they encounter. Anybody else would do the same in their position.

We can also imagine the same basic kind of logic applying to many non-economic issues. To explain why certain people launch a war, for example, we could examine where they stood relative to tangible security threats, how much military power they held, and why their overall position in the distribution of military resources made war their best, most rational option.

This kind of story suggests that when we look at any political situation, we should ask:

1. Where do people stand in terms of controlling such tangible material resources as sources of wealth or military power?
2. How does that shape of the material landscape make certain choices beneficial and certain choices costly for specific people, depending on where they are positioned within it?
3. For each person (or similarly positioned group of people) in the story, can we imagine that anybody in the same material position would have responded similarly?

Alternative 2—Institutional Explanation: Playing by the Rules of the Game

A very different kind of story explains the shutdown as a product of American political institutions. As one political blogger put it, “It’s the Constitution’s fault . . . don’t just blame Boehner or Obama or [Republican senator] Ted Cruz. Don’t hate the players. Hate the game—and think about how to change the rule-book.”¹² In this view, the contending interests in American society led to an impasse due to the institutional rules inherited from the past. While many democracies in the world have only a single election to connect citizens to their government, the U.S. federal government has three. The president, the majority in the House of Representatives, and the majority in the Senate can all claim to represent the majority of Americans, but through different kinds of elections held at different times during the voting cycle. The authors of the U.S. Constitution deliberately set these bodies to counterbalance each other, hoping to limit abuses of power by any one of them. A downside of such rules is that they encourage aggressive bargaining when competing political parties control these bodies. Stalemates and last-minute deals are common as all sides hope the others will blink first. Worsening this dynamic are unusually frequent elections—the House is the only major assembly in the world elected every two years—which makes politicians on all sides especially eager to appear to be winning the battle all the time.

This story's logic focuses our attention not on an underlying landscape of resources but on the *rules* of politics. It does not dispute that there are competing interests in society, but suggests that their interactions take very different political forms depending on how institutions organize them. The underlying logic depicts the Constitution as creating an obstacle course that channels citizens and politicians to pursue their interests in certain ways. This kind of explanation agrees with the rational-material story that people are basically rational: the Republicans and Democrats arrived at the shutdown because they were pursuing the most rational strategies available to them within the constitutional rulebook. But whereas a rational-material story analyzes political action as a raw contest between underlying interests in which all that matters is the players and their relative resources, an institutional story portrays their interaction as heavily shaped by the inherited rules of the game.

A good label for this kind of explanatory story is an *institutional explanation*. "Institutions" are the rules and organizations that people build to guide their interactions. An institutional story explains people's actions by pointing to the institutional obstacle course that surrounds them. An institutional story is not totally incompatible with a rational-material story: material positions might influence the basic agendas that people pursue in the institutional game. But a strong institutional story suggests that politics is even more heavily shaped by the institutional obstacle course than by underlying material interests. If the U.S. Constitution were different, this logic suggests, Democrats and Republicans might never have had this kind of fight.

In general, the institutional approach suggests that we think of politics as a game where everyone does what is best for him or her, given the rules. In any political situation we should ask:

1. How are the institutional rules of politics set up?
2. How does that obstacle course of rules make some choices beneficial and some choices costly for people, depending on where they stand within the institutional game?
3. For each person (or group of people) in the story, can we imagine that anybody would have responded similarly if placed in the same position in institutional rules?

Alternative 3—Ideational Explanation: Beliefs and "Culture Wars"

The third major kind of story we hear about what caused the shutdown focuses not on material clashes or institutional games, but on contending ideologies. One strength of this version is that it echoes what politicians say about their own choices. For example, neither Boehner nor Obama would ever present himself as just a mouthpiece for the rich and poor or as a simple player in an institutional game. Instead, each sees himself as a passionate champion of certain political principles.

Though we should take much of what politicians say with a grain of salt, their self-images may contain a grain of truth.

One political blogger argues that the shutdown was a “culture war” rather than an economic battle, pointing out that the main Republican demands leading to the shutdown were not about big-ticket government spending.¹³ Rather, the Republicans sought first and foremost to delay implementation of Obama’s Affordable Care Act—that is, the “Obamacare” reform in health insurance—which they saw as symbolic of all that is wrong with the President’s agenda. They also tried to cut back other programs whose social goals they disliked. Even the purely economic elements of their conflict over cutting versus spending arguably resembled a battle of ideologies rather than a clash of material interests. Whether cuts in government spending are truly good for the economy—and good for rich people in particular—is something economic experts debate endlessly. On the other side, it is also debatable whether many government spending programs ultimately serve the interests of the poor. Rather than clearly reflecting the “real” interests of the rich or the poor, or an unavoidable clash of strategies in an institutional game, the real story of the shutdown may lie more in the distinctive ideologies around which these American parties are built. A battle of ideas between the Democrats’ “liberal” and the Republicans’ “conservative” ideology ultimately caused the shutdown.

The logic of this story differs strikingly from the previous two alternatives because it contests that there is a clear-cut landscape within which rational people identify straightforward interests. Of course material constraints may



This car, decorated with extreme political messages in Washington, D.C., suggests very directly that politics is about sharply clashing ideologies and values. Though more mainstream politics are often phrased in less openly ideological terms, they may also be shaped and driven mainly by clashing beliefs.

be fairly clear (that is, some people are richer than others), but that does not necessarily dictate what people do politically. This logic also suggests that institutional rules may be interpreted in a variety of ways. So although the U.S. Constitution creates three centers of authority, this arrangement might work well except when players take up polarized ideologies. The main source of this political fight, then, was people's beliefs—not just the obvious strategies within material conditions or institutional rules.

A good label for this kind of explanatory story is an *ideational explanation*.¹⁴ It explains what people do by pointing to the ideas or beliefs through which they interpret the world around them. In contrast to both rational-material and institutional stories, it suggests that not everyone sees the same situations in the same ways—and so how people *interpret* things matters even more for politics than how the material landscape or the institutional obstacle course is shaped around them. This kind of story suggests that when we look at any political situation, we should ask:

1. What are the particular core beliefs of the key players?
2. Do they seem to interpret their goals, capabilities, and environment in certain ways that others do not?
3. How do their particular ideas lead them to see some choices as beneficial or morally right, and other choices as disadvantageous or morally wrong?

Almost everything said and written about the 2013 government shutdown invokes one of these explanations or a combination of them. That is no accident. The same is true of almost everything written on any political event. In short, these are the three main ways to explain why people take certain political actions.

There is, admittedly, one complication to this simple set of explanations. A fourth option exists for certain kinds of political actions. When we are interested directly in individual-level political choices—such as how citizens vote, or how individual leaders make foreign policy decisions—we can also imagine explanations built on individual *psychology*. How you vote might be influenced by more than just your material positioning, the institutional rules around you, or the beliefs that you have been taught. You might also vote in certain ways because of how you are hard-wired: the genetically inherited, psychological makeup of your individual brain.¹⁵ The psychological version of explanation is an important emerging strand of political science. It applies more narrowly than the other three alternatives because hard-wired psychology does not vary across *groups* of people in the way that the material landscape, institutions, or ideas can; we know that in terms of genetics and hard-wired psychology, human populations overall are very similar. Many of the key questions we ask about politics are about differences across groups of people—about varying political views and practices across regions, countries, social classes, and so on—and it is not plausible to answer these questions by suggesting that these populations have different hard-wired psychology. When we look at individual-level variation in political choices, though, psychological explanation often comes in as another option.

But in most of this book, we will focus on the three most common approaches. To grasp them more concretely, try your hand at applying them to an explanatory question: why is the United States the wealthiest, most powerful big country in the world? (Only some rather exceptional, small countries are richer on average: oil-rich Qatar and Norway, and the banking city-state of Luxembourg.) This question asks about differences across large groups, so it does not make much sense to speculate that U.S. citizens have their own kind of psychological makeup. They are human beings like everyone else. That leaves three possible options: rational-material, institutional, and ideational explanations. See if you can connect the right labels to these stories:

1. The United States is wealthy and powerful mainly because Americans came to believe in limited government and “the American dream,” which unleashed competition, entrepreneurship, and innovation.
2. The United States is wealthy and powerful mainly because the Founding Fathers designed a brilliant constitution with rules that balanced political conflicts, encouraged stable government, and so built a strong platform for economic growth.
3. The United States is wealthy and powerful mainly because its early European settlers (and later inhabitants) enjoyed exceptional resources, a temperate climate, and few nearby competing populations.

Hopefully, it is already easy for you to see that the first story is an ideational explanation, the second is an institutional explanation, and the third is a rational-material explanation.

As you read through this book, you will encounter many more examples that show how these three alternatives help us to hypothesize plausible explanatory stories about why people act politically as they do. Use the following three questions to analyze any political situation:

- What is the MATERIAL landscape around the players and how does it set constraints and incentives that encourage certain actions?
- What are the INSTITUTIONAL rules and organizations around the players, and how do they set constraints and incentives that encourage certain actions?
- Which IDEAS, beliefs, or culture do the players hold that lead them to interpret their options and choices in certain ways?

It takes practice to become comfortable posing these three questions about real-world political examples and brainstorming your answers to them. You will get that practice throughout the book. At this point, though, you can already see how the questions help cut through even the messiest political situation. Even when people’s political choices seem hard to understand at first glance—say, joining the Nazis in Germany in the 1930s, becoming a suicide bomber in Pakistan today, or (closer to home) when uninsured poor people oppose government health care programs—these three questions give you a starting point to imagine

what lay behind their actions. These questions break down any political situation around you, from local politics to conflict and cooperation at the global level.

Just as important, these three questions encourage you to consider alternatives to any one view you hear. If someone complains that the government was shut down due to the sheer craziness of Republicans in the House of Representatives, you can say, “Wait a minute: that’s not obvious. What about the material interests of the groups the Republicans and Obama were representing, or the institutional rules of U.S. politics that might have caused an impasse even given other ideological views?” And vice versa: whichever story you hear, the other questions suggest how to think critically about what it might be missing. Table 1-1 summarizes these alternatives and offers another example: different explanations of why an American citizen would vote for Republican or Democratic representatives.

Table 1-1 Summarizing Alternative Explanatory Approaches

Explanatory Approach	Core Hypothesis	Why is politics different in different places and times?	EXAMPLE	
			Why does a U.S. citizen vote for the Republican Party instead of the Democrats?	Why would this person ever change how he or she votes?
Rationalist-Materialist	People choose the most advantageous actions given their position in the material landscape.	All people are rational and similar, but their material surroundings vary.	Republican Party policies bring him or her more tangible benefits than Democratic policies.	Republicans or Democrats change policies that affect this person, or the person changes his or her own position (moving to a new place, becoming more wealthy, etc.).
Institutionalist	People choose the most advantageous actions given their position in an obstacle course of organizations and rules.	All people are rational and similar, but the organizations and rules around them vary.	The Republicans are better organized in this person’s community and dominate the media and opportunities in local organizations.	The Democrats strengthen their organization in this person’s community, get better media access, and perhaps offer him or her new social or career opportunities.
Ideational	People act in accordance with beliefs about how the world works and what is right.	People have different beliefs about how the world works and what is right.	This person grew up with family and friends who taught him or her that Republican values are good.	This person is exposed to new friends or ideas, or a dynamic new leader makes the Democrats appeal to him or her.
and a fourth option when explaining individual choices:				
Psychological	People have certain genetic, hard-wired personalities and dispositions.	People’s personalities vary: having more or less empathy for others, favoring strong authority or not, and so on.	This person’s personality inclines him or her to favor tough law and order and the “self-made man”—classic Republican themes.	Change is unlikely, but age or evolving mental health—or getting hit on the head—might alter his or her hard-wired dispositions.

Alternative Methods to Test and Support Explanations

1.4 Identify the three main methods that political scientists use to test and support their explanations.

Because political scientists often disagree about which of these three explanatory approaches captures any particular piece of the political world, their daily work is heavily concerned with testing and supporting these alternative views against each other. That is, the three explanatory approaches form the main substance of their debates. At the same time, though, they also have debates about the best **methods** to evaluate their hypotheses and adjudicate between explanatory approaches.

Methods are the sets of tools that scientists use to identify, collect, and interpret evidence for their explanatory hypotheses. These tools determine the process of doing political science research. Methods are a complex subject in their own right but receive only modest attention in this book because the substance of politics and political science comes first: before you can consider the virtues of methodological tools, you first must be able to describe different political arrangements and imagine explanations for them. Still, a quick introduction here gives you basic ways to look for evidence for different explanatory stories as we move along. Political scientists organize their search for evidence mainly through three kinds of methods: quantitative methods, qualitative methods, and methods that explore artificial parallels to real political situations.

methods

The ways in which scientists test or support their hypotheses.

Quantitative Methods: Sorting “Cross-Case” Patterns

One way of evaluating an explanatory claim is to use **quantitative methods** to see how it relates to patterns across similar political cases. For example, we might hypothesize that the United States has enjoyed a relatively stable democracy because it has long been relatively wealthy. That claim would imply a broader rationalist-materialist theory that economic growth encourages democracy. The logic might be that economic growth tends to generate more wealthy businesspeople who desire the liberty to make and spend money as they please, so growth leads to more support for political democracy. To seek evidence for this explanatory theory, we might make a database where we score all countries on how democratic and how economically developed they were in every year since 1800. The more we see a **correlation** between democracy and a certain level of wealth—with democracy showing up in all (or almost all) wealthy countries and not showing up (or very rarely) in poorer ones—the more we feel confident about our explanatory hypothesis. Many explanatory claims about politics can be evaluated with similar cross-case quantitative methods. To get

quantitative methods

Ways to evaluate hypotheses that look for patterns in data, represented as numbers, across a large number of cases.

correlation

A patterned relationship between things that arise and change together.

at complex correlations, though, we need to study statistics that help us sort through patterns that are not obvious at first glance.

Qualitative Methods: “Within-Case” Detective Work

qualitative methods

Ways to evaluate hypotheses that trace evidence for how an outcome came about in particular cases.

Another way of evaluating an explanatory claim is to use **qualitative methods** to dig deeply into one or a few cases to see how well the claim fits with observable processes. To consider the economic growth/democracy hypothesis, we could look in detail at the United States and one or two other countries to trace the processes by which economic growth might have encouraged democracy. *Within* these cases, did more people call for democracy as their wealth rose over time? Did the champions of democracy emerge mostly in towns or cities where economic growth was especially advanced? Unlike quantitative methods, which try to grasp thin data about a large number of cases, these methods try to analyze richer, more complex data about one case or a small number of them. Qualitative methods instruct us to analyze the context and internal story of each case, and often to interpret how the people in the case saw their own actions. Rather than trying to get the bird’s-eye view of correlations, this strategy is like detective work, looking for the smoking gun, the trail of blood, or whatever else we suspect led to the “crime” that interests us. Instead of requiring us to learn statistics, this kind of qualitative work on political processes may push us to delve deeply into history and culture, and perhaps to learn other languages to do research on the ground in other countries.

game theory

The mathematical study of strategic decision making that explores how people would logically respond if placed in certain game situations.

Game Theory, Simulations, and Experiments: Exploring Artificial Environments

computer simulations

The computer-based study of how people might act if placed in certain situations that can be modeled with computer programming.

A third way to evaluate an explanatory claim is to construct an artificial context in which we can explore whether real-world people might indeed act in line with our explanatory hypotheses. One useful tool is **game theory**, in which we chart out strategic interactions by considering how a rational person might respond to other players’ moves in an imaginary game with some features of real political settings. When these games become very complex, scholars often turn to **computer simulations** to play out how people might act in a modeled world, a bit like the classic video game *Sim City*. Researchers typically run many versions of the simulation while altering certain parameters—like the rate of economic growth in the growth/democracy example, or such conditions as the level of education—and then analyze which version of the simulation seems to best match real-world patterns. In principle, we can take the best-matched model as a reasonable theoretical approximation of real-world relationships. **Experiments** do something similar in artificial environments with real people.

experiments

In political science, the method of manipulating people’s behavior to see how they react and then drawing conclusions about how people might act more generally.

For a simple example that might speak to the wealth/democracy relationship, we could put 100 college students in a room and tell them they must decide to allocate a pool of money. They must work out together whether they will allocate the money through a single leader or by a majority vote. We run the experiment several times with different levels of money, and perhaps with more and less equal initial distributions of money across the players, to see which kind of economic distribution seems most favorable to broad support for democracy. To employ these methods, we may need to study game-theoretic mathematics, experimental design, psychology, or computer programming.

Each method has its own strengths and weaknesses (see Table 1-2). Quantitative methods give us the broadest pictures of patterns in politics. They usually require that our information about each case be reduced to clearly measurable numbers, however, and such a thinned-down focus on certain numbers may blind us to context and complications deeper in the cases. Qualitative methods give us the most concrete pictures of how political action takes place. They usually require focusing on only a very small number of cases, however—we never have the time and resources to gather rich data about everything—which may blind us to the ways in which any given case fits with broader patterns. Experiments and simulations push us to develop the most explicit, logically derived versions of our theories. Yet they always confront questions about how much their simulated examples tell us about real-world situations: college students might make certain choices in an experimental game, but do the implications transfer well to how people act in real life? Given these different strengths and weaknesses, most political scientists today agree that the best research generally uses *multiple methods* that evaluate alternative arguments in different ways.

Table 1-2 Strengths and Weaknesses of Methods for Testing and Supporting Explanations

	Logic	Main Process	Strength	Weakness
Quantitative Methods	Gather data across many cases to see what varies with what	Statistical analysis: use math to sort out correlations	Broad perspective on many cases	Cases reduced to thin data, may miss context and complexity
Qualitative Methods	Gather many kinds of data within one or a few cases to see what followed from what	Process tracing: follow trails of possible causes like a detective	Deep perspective on one or a few cases, sensitivity to context	May miss broader relationships if too focused on oddities of one case
Artificial Environments (game theory, simulations, experiments)	Create a simplified model of a situation to highlight its logic and dynamics	Use equations, computer programs, or lab subjects to explore relationships	Highly explicit and direct focus on the relationships that most interest the researcher	May not be sure how much artificial findings apply to real cases

Later chapters in this textbook touch on qualitative- and quantitative-style methods to test and support explanatory alternatives. Exploration of artificial environments is also a substantial part of political science today, but because it requires learning more about formal theorizing than this book can provide, we leave it to future steps in your studies.

Conclusion and Overview of Subfields in the Study of Politics

1.5 Identify the main subfields in the study of politics.

The approach taken here can be summarized in one sentence: to reclaim politics for yourself, you must learn to see, engage, and explain alternatives in the political world. This book teaches you these skills as it leads you through the main arenas of contemporary politics.

The next two chapters join this introduction to set the background for the tour. Chapter 2 offers a quick historical survey of the emergence of political science as a discipline. This short version of the overarching story of the study of politics introduces some key political concepts, like power and authority, and displays the conceptual roots of big political debates today. Chapter 3 charts the main political ideologies that are active in our world.

The remaining chapters then lead a tour through the main political frameworks of our world, covering ground from individual and local politics up to the politics of globalization. We begin with states (meaning countries) in Chapter 4—the most basic and powerful framework that organizes our political world. Chapter 5 considers the main types of governments that run states, from democracies to dictatorships. Chapter 6 drills down further to the roots of individual and collective action. Chapters 7 and 8 then explore the kind of government inhabited by most readers of this book—liberal democracy—with a focus on representation and policymaking. Chapters 9 and 10 look at the politics of economies, first in a general sense and then with specific attention to economic growth and development. Chapter 11 looks inside nondemocratic governments around the world and considers the prospects for democracy. Lastly, Chapters 12 and 13 move out to the broad arena of international relations, addressing first war and terrorism and then the globalization of economies and governance.

To relate this introduction to other classes you may take, it is helpful to see that this tour also exposes you to the main “subfields” in the study of politics. University courses and faculty in the United States are usually organized in three conceptual divisions:

1. *Comparative politics* focuses on similarities and differences across political arenas and issues around the world. These comparisons are often

between countries (comparing the power of legislatures in Japan and France, for example), but may also compare specific things like cities, regions, or economic sectors within a single country. This book often uses a comparative politics frame to help you see the varieties and common patterns of politics across countries or regions, most directly in Chapters 5 through 11.

2. *International relations (IR)* centers on the politics that operate around and between countries, like in war, international trade, international law, or international organizations. The foreign policies of national governments and relations between states is a major focus, but also important are such “transnational” actors as multinational firms; nongovernmental organizations, like Amnesty International; or some terrorist groups. IR topics appear most directly in Chapter 4 (States) and at the global level of Chapters 12 and 13.
3. *Political theory* is the label often given to political philosophy and the study of ideologies. Do not be misled by this label: theories that tell us abstractly what we should expect to see in the world are critical parts of every part of the study of politics, not just a feature of this subfield. However, this subfield does give special attention to distinctive kinds of theories. It centers more directly than the other subfields on normative theories of the good and the bad in political life, and their related political ideologies. Every chapter from 4 to 13 touches on political theory in the section that features ideological debates about the main issues in the chapter.

Lastly, your university has another major “subfield” that is justified not by conceptual divisions but by practical considerations. *American politics* is obviously of special practical importance in American universities, and receives a large share of courses and faculty research. In Canada there are more courses and specialists on Canadian politics, in Australia on Australian politics, and so on. In conceptual terms, these are just cases within comparative politics that get extra attention from their inhabitants, or cases within International Relations that get extra focus with respect to their foreign relations. Because most readers of this book live in the United States, American examples get an extra dose of attention throughout.

Once you have finished this tour, you will know the basics of all these subfields, some of which you may want to pursue further. More importantly, you will have skills to reclaim politics in general. You will be an active critical thinker who can dissect the political world and untangle the arguments that other people make about it. From your family, town, or university to the global arena, you will have the tools to engage in constructing the kind of politics that improves your life.

So let’s get started.