

POLI 111: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY OF POLITICAL SCIENCE

Session 1–The Scope of Politics

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2014/2015 – 2016/2017

SESSION OVERVIEW

When you were offered Political Science, your friends may have asked you several questions some of which may have included whether you want to form a political party after your course. This question is normally posed because of the bad name usually associated with the word Politics.

The intention here is to introduce you to the subject matter of Political Science while dealing with the misconceptions often associated with Politics.

Understanding of this session will help you fully understand other Political Science courses effectively as you move up the educational ladder.

In order to put the issues in their proper context, examples will be drawn from the global as well as Ghanaian settings.

Session Outline

The key topics to be covered in the session are as follows:

- Topic One- Notions of Politics
- Topic Two- Definition of Politics
- Topic Three- Features of Politics
- Topic Four- The Purpose of Politics

Reading List

- Magstadt T.M. & Schotten P. M. (1996). *Understanding Politics: Ideas, Institutions, and Issues*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Oscar H.I. (1991). *Political Science: An Introduction*. London: Chandle Publishing Company.
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Topic One

NOTIONS OF POLITICS



Introduction

- The word politics is so widely used that it sometimes loses its meaning
- Politics is interesting because people disagree on so many things:
 - how they should live
 - how decisions should be taken
 - how the resources of the state should be distributed
 - how power should be distributed etc

Two Contending of Politics

- There are two basic notions of politics
- Those who maintain that politics is an ennobling activity
- Those who contend it is an activity that must be discouraged
- Both views are necessary for analytical purposes
- Politics is the vehicle for addressing the well being of society as undermining the interest of the masses
- It therefore requires the cooperation of individuals within given environment to put politics to good use

Sample Question

- Select one of the notions of politics you are more inclined towards and provide four reasons why you prefer that notion
- How realistic is your response to the politics in Ghana?



Topic Two

DEFINITION OF POLITICS



Problems with Defining Politics

- Political issues often generate the strongest emotions, attachments and sometimes actions
- Many people follow closely the daily information about politics, hold their own opinion about it, argue vehemently about it, and participate in it
- Others literally run away from it and in extreme circumstances, some die for it
- Everyone has some general understanding of politics however, when you probe further to find out the specific meaning of politics, you get so many definitions that you tend to be confused



Problems with Defining Politics (cont'd)

- Two main reasons explain the problems associated with attempts at clarifying the meaning of politics
- First, in everyday language, the word politics has attracted a lot of interpretations and meanings
- It is unfortunate that very few people come to politics without bias
- Many people think that students and teachers of politics are biased and even find it very difficult to approach the study of politics in an impartial and objective way

Problems with Defining Politics (cont'd)

- It is the notion that politics is a dirty word which makes this activity unattractive to people who may not want to soil their hands
- Some have argued that politics means “government,” while others think that it is the “art of compromise.” Yet others believe that it is “manipulation” or the “struggle for advantage.” A United States historian, Henry Adams even characterized politics as “the systematic organization of hatred”

Problems with Defining Politics (cont'd)

- The second problem that like other concepts in the social sciences, even very respected authorities cannot agree on what the subject is all about
- The confusion is evident in the number of definitions offered by various scholars
- Basically people adopt definitions that suit them and their study. Some even adopt definitions based on their past experiences.
- Generally politics is defined in varied ways such as:
 - The exercise of authority
 - The exercise of power
 - The making of collective decisions
 - The allocation of scarce resources
 - The practice of deception and manipulation
 - The conduct of non-violent war

Heywood's Definition of Politics

- Andrew Heywood defined politics in the broadest sense to include “the activities through which people make, preserve and amend the general rules under which people live.” To Heywood, even though politics is an academic subject, it is clearly the study of that activity which impinges on the making of collective decisions for the society
- This definition is quite broad as it comprises most, if not all of the differing definitions
- However, problem arises when an attempt is made to unpack the definition or it is refined

Harold Lasswell's Definition of Politics

- According to Harold Lasswell, politics is concerned with “who gets what when and how in society”
- Lasswell saw politics as the distribution of the good things of life that people value and desire
- In the distribution of the resources of the state, some people get more than others, some get none, some get it sooner than others, some later, etc
- How they get it also varies; some get it fairly, some unfairly because of who they are, who they know or what they already have
- Implicit in all of these is the ultimate question: That is not just who gets what, when and how, but also why and perhaps who pays?
- The first part of the question (who gets what, when and how?) relates to ideas and values that are spread throughout a particular state
- The second part of the question (why and who pays?) relate very much to the concept of power

David Easton's Definition of Politics

- Easton has also defined politics as “authoritative allocation of values or resources”
- According to him, politics involves the various processes through which government responds to the new and wide demands from the larger society by allocating benefits, rewards or penalties
- Easton's definition of politics is very important for political scientists in the sense that it puts emphasis on political activities rather than institutions
- It is true that authoritative allocation of values (public policy) is something people desire in the state
- According to Easton, public policy is authoritative when the people for whom it is intended or who are the direct beneficiaries consider that they must or ought to obey it. In short, they consider it binding

Topic Three

FEATURES OF POLITICS



Politics as the Art of Government

- Politics is considered as the exercise of control within the society through the making and enforcement of collective decisions
- It is concerned with the art of government and the activities of the state
- This is perhaps the classical definition of politics which developed from the original meaning of the term in Ancient Greece
- Politics in its original sense is derived from the Greek word ‘polis’ meaning ‘city-state’
- Politics is a state bound activity
- In this view, politics is practiced in cabinet rooms, legislative chambers, government ministries, departments and agencies etc.
- The Greek concept of politics refers to a process by which men debate matters concerning the “polis”

Politics as Public Affairs

- Politics is associated with the conduct and the management of the affairs of the community rather than the private comments of the individual
- This view point is captured by Aristotle's statement that "man is a political animal." Thus man can realize his potentials in a political community
- Political theorists like Jean Jacque Rousseau and John Stuart Mill argued that politics is important since it helps in the promotion of the public good

Politics as Public Affairs (cont'd)

- According to J. J Rousseau, it is only through regular and consistent participation of the citizens in the affairs of the state that it can be bound by the 'general will'
- Liberals on the other hand, are of the view that the attempt at portraying politics as a public affairs amount to unnecessary interference in the affairs of the individual

Politics as Current Affairs

- Many students who offer political science as a subject start from the assumption that politics is about current affairs
- Most people conceive politics as the daily occurrences in the state
- Politics then involves statements made by politicians, foreign wars, commentaries in news papers, radio and television, electioneering campaigns, party politics, elections, activities of the legislature, the executive and the judiciary etc

Politics as Compromise and Consensus

- Politics is potentially seen as a means of resolving conflict by compromise, conciliation, consensus building and negotiation rather than through force and naked power
- Disagreements are common in human society. People disagree on the objectives to be set for the society and they also disagree about the means to achieve the objectives
- If there are no disagreements, there will be no need for politics
- The role of the politician therefore is to participate in the resolution of conflicts when they arise
- To Bernard Crick (2000), conflict is inevitable and so when social groups possess power, they must be conciliated and not crushed
- Crick therefore argued that politics is that solution to the problem of order which chooses conciliation rather than violence and coercion

Politics as Power

- This view sees politics at work in all social activities and every aspect of human existence
- Politics is associated with the production, distribution and the use of resources in the course of social existence
- Politics is about power (the ability to achieve a desired outcome through whatever means)
- This concept of politics is what has been neatly summed up by Harold Lasswell in his book Politics; who gets what, when and how? Wherever there is politics there is power
- Power is the most central concept in politics
- It is not surprising that the struggle in the state has to do with how power is distributed among groups and individuals
- It is normally political power which is used in the distribution of the scarce resources of the state

Topic Four

THE PURPOSE OF POLITICS



The Phenomenon of Conflict and Cooperation

- **Conflict** simply means competition between opposing forces, reflecting a diversity of opinions, preferences, needs or interests
- **Cooperation** on the other hand involves working together to achieve goals through collective action
- Politics is linked to the phenomena of conflict and cooperation
- The existence of rival opinions, different wants, competing needs and interests will necessarily guarantee disagreement about the rules under which the people live
- The existence of this diversity prompts people to know that in order to influence the rules or make sure that existing rules are upheld and they must be prepared to work with others
- It is in this light that Hannah Arendt defined political power as “acting in concert”



The Phenomenon of Conflict and Cooperation (cont'd)

- Even though politics involves the solution of problems in the society, not all problems are can be resolved
- It is in this connection that politics is sometimes thought of as the search for conflict resolution than its achievement
- The best justification for politics is the resolution of conflict with as disorder as possible
- Politics then, is about the resolution of disputes and conflicts. The existence of disputes and their resolution makes politics an inevitable phenomenon in human society
- Each resolution of a dispute or conflict results in new relationships between resources and expectations, and these in turn lead to more disputes and consequently more politics

The Making of Collective Decisions

- Politics involves the making of common decisions for a group(s) of people
- It embraces all activity that impinges on the making of binding decisions
- In the course of social existence some people must necessarily exercise power in making those decisions and this can range from influence to coercion
- In other words, some individuals in the group or the state exercise power over other members in order to make those decisions
- For a decision to be a political one, it has to affect the generality of the population or part of it

The Pursuit of the General Welfare of the People

- It is the aim of Politics to ensure that policies and programs formulated, adopted, and implemented benefit of the entire citizens
- It is therefore the objective of government to undertake the main responsibility providing for the social and economic security of the state's population (McLean, 1996:526)
- The government can also provide the atmosphere for business to thrive in order to complement its efforts

References

- Magstadt T.M. & Schotten P. M. (1996). *Understanding Politics: Ideas, Institutions, and Issues*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
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