

## **POLITICAL FACETS OF CONFLICT**

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### **Summary**

Politics plays a role in the solution to the problem of social dilemmas and other mixed-motive games. Alliances are formed within parties, between parties, and between parties and the population so as to govern for the public good overall. Within this, there are many unique phenomena arising from the large population sizes involved, the size and importance of the resources at stake, the different and contradictory strategies promoted by different groups, and the historical allocations of resources to the population. The development of systems to organize large populations is one of the wonders of the human world, and is usually traced historically through changes in the resources produced or changes in the way people are organized, although both are describing the same events. Systems of voting and leadership patterns are outlined, as well as the paradox of Arrow's Theorem.

### **1. Introduction**

The largest common type of alliance is the political or state unit. While there are some more inclusive alliances—pacts between states, the United Nations, global environment groups, and multinational organizations—these all usually form around a center based in a state or political unit. Political alliances are not only states, but can be tight political groups based around a group of communities. Furthermore, democratic states have multiple political parties that form an alliance within themselves and oppose other

parties, but which form an alliance with the whole country about how to govern the resources and people.

The whole analysis of such political units and their conflicts follows the same patterns we have seen in previous chapters but has different properties because of the size and scope of the unit. The political alliances reduce conflict by having power to organize people, and in return they share and develop resources for the people under their control. This is no different in principle to the family alliance (unit) or community alliance, except that, as we would expect, both how they work and the constraints are very different. But the method of analysis is the same and can help us to think through the dynamics of different sized units.

As can already be seen, there are several sources of conflict with political units:

- There is the question of how to select or elect those who are in charge of the group or who organize the group. Who has authority to do what?
- There is the question of how resources are developed and maintained; how to organize the communities to produce those resources
- There is the question of how to allocate the collective resources that have been accumulated by the whole unit.

Note again that these are the same questions for families and communities, but the scale of population involved makes the reality very different and the strategies people pursue also very different. Things you can do strategically with a family cannot be done on a state or national scale.

There is also another question of how the strategies for handling political conflicts adapt and stabilize over time, and the follow-on effects that this has. This will be covered in a chapter on institutions (see *Institutional Facets of Conflict*).

Before writing about the three main topics, it is well to point out the relationships between the three; they are not independent. How a group is selected to govern or organize the community will usually depend upon their methods of social organization and how they anticipate (or proclaim) allocating community resources. This forms the basis of election promises and pledges in democratic countries with formally elected political parties. Those contending for office agree to work through legislative methods to govern, will make promises about developing and maintaining resources, and will make even more pledges about the use of common resources. The latter could include promises of tax cuts, which amount to reducing common-pool resources and leaving those resources in the hands of individuals or small groups.

## **2. Historical Reconstructions of the Development of Political Systems**

Social scientists have interpreted the entire development of human societies in terms of the formation and change in political systems. This has been done in many ways, but they all have a main focus on either *population* or *resources*. As should be clear by now, these two are so intertwined that they cannot be separated as determinants of human practices, so we need to treat them together. The big questions of human society for

social scientists have therefore been:

*Population Focus:* How have we as a species solved the social problems of socially controlling an ever-increasing population?

*Resource Focus:* How have we as a species solved the problems of increasing our food supplies and being protected against resource shortages?

These are the two ways of looking at history that we can categorize as having their theoretical foundations in either resources or in population. They typically categorize human evolution in terms of stages of either population groupings or resource utilization, depending upon their focus as described above. The first is typically called functional, the second structural:

*Evolution of Populations:* These approaches trace the types of population organization, from *family level* to *local groups* to *regional politics*.

*Evolution of Resources:* These approaches trace the means of subsistence (resources) from *hunting and gathering* through to *agriculture* (agrarian) through to *industrial and modern* societies.

All of the authors who write along these lines appreciate the role of other approaches, and recognize the fact that you cannot really separate them, but their categorizations are typically based around one or other of the two major foci. The types of possible social groups depend upon the types of potential subsistence and the types of subsistence depend upon the size and stratification of the social group. Population and resources are always interdependent and there is no structure without function and vice versa.

To give an example, we will briefly look at the outline of Johnson and Earle. Remember that the two questions are: how an increasing population is socially organized and how resources are increased or protected. Johnson and Earle look at several non-western groups, for which there is a lot of research evidence. They suggest a pattern, although there are exceptions as they are keen to point out. In the beginning there were the family groups, which can also be differentiated in a number of ways although Johnson and Earle focus on the resource and social organization differences of whether the family groups had domesticated animals or not. This is a good example of how populations ramify into social organization (politics) and politics ramify back into populations. Having domesticated animals means that they need looking after, and the people become tied to the animals. Roving animals (horses) will be different from grazing animals (cows) for example, and will affect whether the group moves or not (nomadic), the size of the population that can be sustained, the division of labor, whether there can be central control over resources, and whether splits can occur. Further, the resources in the populated area will impact on each of these factors.

It should be clear that there is a huge complexity in how all these factors work together. Any change in one factor will change most of the others, which is why almost every group is different despite the bigger patterns that can be found.

In Johnson and Earle's scheme, family groups gave way to local collections of families

that were run either without an executive control (acephalous) or with a "Big Man" in charge (for limited periods). With more people able to be commandeered into collective resource development, resource production grew. Local groups then grew as agricultural production grew and several forms of regional groupings developed, from chiefdoms to large nation-states. Johnson and Earle give detailed examples of each of these categories.

There are some other common themes that occur, but again—with exceptions. The big pattern in human social history was that agriculture developed and intensified in conjunction with an increased population. This led to more *risk in production*, more *competition between groups*, more *demands for capital* to intensify the production, and more *resource deficiencies*. Chirot gives an example:

The settlement of people into compact villages and the occasional small town and their transformation into agriculturalists brought about enormous social changes. For one thing, it became possible to accumulate a surplus, to store cultivated grain from year to year if the crop was good. The almost simultaneous domestication of some animals for meat, milk, and hides also meant that there came to be a number of productive goods that could be accumulated, exchanged, or stolen. Prior to that, territories and resources could be fought over, but there were few if any goods to seize and accumulate as such.

These consequences led to two types of development: political and economic integration, and social stratification. For the first, the political networks became more cohesive, from a Big Man control to regional groupings. This helped risk management, trade and alliances, and the centralization of capital goods. The centralization and integration, however, meant that fewer people had more power, hence the development of more social stratifications. Elites were born. For example, central stores of food protected larger groups against risks in bad seasons or from pests, but this also meant that a few people controlled the central stores and derived more power this way. Political networks also gave some people more control, including control of capital goods and the trade networks.

This resulted in two generalized developments. The first was the increase in technology to solve problems raised by these larger trade and production groupings. Sometimes the technology was simple but the effects enormous—the invention of the moldboard plow had a huge effect on food production, for example – and sometimes it was more obvious, with developments in guns and ammunition, first to get food but later to control and threaten people. Eventually these technologies gave rise to enormous advances in the industrial and electronic revolutions, which have changed all aspects of our lives.

However, it was not only *resource technology* that developed. New ways to organize groups of people were also introduced that vastly changed what larger populations could do. In our terminology, this other side of the story can be called the development of *population technologies*, and rivals in importance the major effects of technological developments. This is often called *social capital*, since the setting up of organizational structures and institutions is analogous to material capital development.

To give the first of two examples, the development of discipline and drill practice in soldiers completely changed the balance of power in Europe and later in the colonial invasions and exploitation. Small changes in the way people worked as a group changed what that group could do, and small but disciplined groups accomplished much that a larger group could not. By conducting daily drills with armies, instead of letting the soldiers run against their enemies at will, the armies of Europe became infinitely more powerful than their rivals. There are preconditions for getting soldiers to obey commands to carry out drill practices, usually involving payments of money, but once they are in place the *social* capital of a finely tuned army is immense. Of course, over time the rivals learned to do the same, and there was an escalation in population technology just as there was in resource technologies.

This is how small countries such as England, Portugal, Spain and Holland were able to control large populations around the world in colonies, and these countries did so because this increased their resources. Huge quantities of raw and processed resources were brought from India, Australia, New Zealand, Africa, and South America back to Europe to support the standard of living of the populations there. To give an even larger-scale example of innovation in population technology, China between 200 B.C. and 300 A.D. created a powerful bureaucracy (a new form of *population technology*) that was able to organize many millions of people over a huge area. They invented several new techniques of organizing bureaucracies in order to do this: they used exams based on the Confucian Classics to select students; the bureaucrats were placed in a region of the country that was not their home region; and the bureaucrats were regularly rotated. You can probably guess some of the reasons behind these moves. Even dividing labor between people can gain much in the way of resource utilization, although perhaps at some cost to those people.

What is important to note from these examples is that in parallel with the technological inventions and intensification of resource production, there were equally important and far-reaching developments in how to organize or control people. These included control through political systems, economic systems, religious controls, legal proceedings, and developments in surveillance and policing people. New ways of talking about people were also produced and new methods of secrecy (see *Alliances: Sanctioning and Monitoring*).

**Analysis Lens:** Historically, one can focus on how populations increase and social organization changes to match, or one can focus on the production of resources and how this changes with that increase in population. In reality, both occur together. Not only are there important technological innovations through human history but there have also been many remarkable innovations in how socially to organize groups of people. To reduce conflict one can increase the production of resources but the population increase requires new ways of organizing people. Analysis must focus on both of these simultaneously. For any conflict, then, find out the resources, and how the people are controlled or organized (including self-organization) to cooperate without conflict. We must also remember that the modern state is only one form of political alliance and there are also family groups, local groups and communities, chiefdoms, states, and nation-states. Many aspects of these are treated in other chapters (see *Small Groups and Conflict, Conflict and Change Across Generations*).

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### **Biographical Sketch**

**Bernard Guerin** is Professor in psychology at the University of South Australia. Before this he studied at the University of Adelaide, took a Post-Doctoral Fellowship at the University of Brisbane, and taught at James Cook University in Townsville, Australia. His interests span the entire realm of social science, and he has been concerned for some years about the superficial barriers erected between the "different" social sciences. He has finished two new books: one on integrating the social sciences and one on practical interventions to change the behavior of both individuals and communities, again incorporating all social science approaches. He has published over 45 peer-reviewed papers, and has presented this integrative material on invited visits to Japan, Mexico, Brazil, Hungary, Sardinia, and across the United States. His two earlier books are *Social Facilitation* (CUP) and *Analyzing Social Behavior: Behavior Analysis and the Social Sciences* (Context Press).