

GOVERNMENT AND POLITICS

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Summary

Despite attempts by theorists to define precisely terms used in the study of politics, in everyday political discourse different people use political terms, including “politics” itself, in different ways. The different conceptions, since they affect people’s attitude and behavior, are a part of politics. But in studying it, which of the various meanings ascribed to a word is to be adopted and for what reason—and, in the first place, whether words used in everyday political discourse or those foreign to it are to be employed—are major problems that need to be addressed. Another set of problems someone studying politics faces has to do with “facts.” Typically, important political facts require certain rules accepted by members of a community to exist. Because of this, what the facts are becomes ambiguous under certain circumstances. Furthermore, in the context of explaining political phenomena, what fact is to be explained is never a given. What is to be explained needs to be chosen from among a variety of alternatives, and the choice needs to be justified.

Whatever the choices one makes with regard to multifaceted words and facts in studying politics, the study is likely to involve some reference to corporate actors and power. A corporate actor is an actor that is composed of individuals but transcends them; a change in membership does not necessarily lead to a change in its identity. It is not a natural entity, but constituted by members of a community. Corporate acts and

responsibility are distinct from acts performed by and responsibility borne by the members of the corporate actor. Another important entity in politics is power. In everyday political discourse, power is often understood as simultaneously a thing-like and an abstract entity. Closely related to such an understanding is the notion that power is a mysterious, inscrutable, and dangerous entity. But an analysis of statements involving power reveals that they can be reduced to conditional (if–then) statements. Such an analysis may be effective in dispelling the notion that power is mysterious and dangerous. Being attentive to everyday political understanding is important, but that does not preclude being critical of it and acting to improve it.

1. Introduction

There are various issues humankind faces today. How to achieve peace, eradicate poverty, and attain sustainable development are among the most important. But such issues are only resolvable through politics, at the local, regional, national, transnational, and international level. Thus for anyone interested in coping with the major issues confronting peoples throughout the world, an accurate understanding of politics is essential. But an attempt at understanding politics is hindered by important difficulties that are frequently overlooked.

One difficulty derives from the fact (itself a difficult word, as will be shown below) that people do not look at politics in the same way they look at, for example, trees. What someone observes and explains and/or evaluates is partly constituted by the observer himself or herself. To take one example, “Political party A used its power to attain its objectives” may seem a simple statement of fact. That it is not becomes immediately clear if the sentence is compared with “Individual B used a knife to cut bread.” Both the individual and the knife are tangible and observable. But the party is not; only its members are. Power, too, is neither tangible nor observable. Who used what, according to the statement on party A? To answer this question, without personifying (which means regarding something as a person) the party and without resorting to treating power as a thing, the social construction of “corporate actor” and “power” needs to be examined. In the absence of recognition of the fact that certain basic entities in the political process, such as corporate actors and power, are socially constituted, politics would seem elusive.

Furthermore, even if one is clear about the entities involved in the political process, the key words one uses to understand politics are likely to be ambiguous or controversial. In the example above, what does “political” in “political party” mean? A lot has been written on the question, but theorists have never agreed on a definitive answer. And even if semantic problems are somehow settled, one ignores questions concerning “facts” at one’s peril. According to the conventional understanding of “fact,” it is something unproblematic that is or ought to be accepted by any reasonable person (although there may be difficulty in identifying it in concrete cases owing to, for instance, lack of information or access to it). What is considered problematical is how to explain or evaluate the fact, or how to make predictions based on it. Some types of fact that are important in understanding politics, however, are closely intertwined with certain rules that are adopted by a community. As will be discussed below, the stance one takes toward such rules affects the identification of facts. Hence the identifying of

“facts” itself becomes a major problem in the study of politics: a fact for one person, who accepts certain rules, may not count as a fact for another, who either is not aware of the rules or rejects being bound by them.

The aim of this essay is to point to some of the important problems involved in the study of politics. The first section is an overview of some of the influential conceptions of “politics” that have been provided by theorists. The section shows that the words “politics” and “political” have been ascribed widely varying meanings. The second section identifies some of the problems a person faces in studying politics. (The reference to “studying” politics does not assume any particular approach. Any inquiry into politics, either by academics or non-academics, counts as a study of it.) The first part of the section starts with the discussion of “cluster concepts.” It emphasizes the importance of recognizing the multifacetedness of concepts such as “politics,” as well as “liberalism” and “democracy.” The second part of the section deals with “facts.” It first discusses the nature of “institutional facts” and the implications this has for the study of politics. It then goes on to note the importance, in explaining a political phenomenon, of making clear what is to be explained. The kinds of choice that need to be made in positing what is to be explained are pointed out. The third section is a discussion of two important entities involved in the political process: corporate actors and power. In the first part of the section, the nature of corporate actors is explicated, and their actions and the responsibility they bear for the consequences of their actions are examined by reference to certain rules adopted by a community. In the second part of the section, talk involving power is analyzed as reducible to conditional or hypothetical statements, and the implication such an analysis has for the taking of political action is pointed out.

In short, the essay will start with a brief survey of various conceptions of “politics.” It will then consider problems involved in the study of politics. Some observations will be offered in the third section about important political entities such as corporate actors and power.

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Biographical Sketches

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