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ANALYZING POLITICS

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- 1.1 Understand the importance of analytic thinking and removing emotions from political analysis.
- 1.2 Define politics and its importance in daily life.
- 1.3 Describe politics using the common elements and structures of a game.
- 1.4 Recognize strategic interactions when analyzing real-world events.
- 1.5 Explain how perceptions of outcomes in zero-sum terms influence interaction among political actors and the degrees of conflict among them.

What kind of world or local events have drawn your interest lately? Are you puzzled why SARS-CoV-2 (also known as COVID-19), first identified in Wuhan, China, in December 2019, spread worldwide, infecting hundreds of millions of people and claiming millions of lives? Have you wondered why government responses to the COVID-19 pandemic and the infection and death rates have varied significantly across countries? Do you wonder what caused the tragic death of George Floyd, a 46-year-old Black man, in the hands of police officers in Minneapolis, Minnesota? Why did this event, and not similar previous tragedies, trigger a resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States and other countries? Or are you concerned about the vulnerability of the electoral system to foreign influence and attacks?

Politics is present in all of these and other issues that impact our lives. Discussing and examining politics can be exciting, but its analysis requires a cool head. If done with logic and unbiased evidence, we can learn why political phenomena occur. Such knowledge is also useful for taking actions to solve problems we confront.

Take, for example, a topic that is critical for everyone: health care. A country's health care policies can literally be a life-or-death outcome for some. How should health care be provided? Some believe that health care should be an individual responsibility. Others believe that the government should guarantee it. Yet others believe in a mixed system where people could choose between government-provided and private health care systems. This example also leads us to wonder how societies come to terms with different opinions. Analyzing politics can help us explain why countries make different choices.

We study and attempt to understand politics because of its importance in our lives. This chapter will guide you in understanding that human political interactions have detectable patterns. We will also see how analytic frameworks using game analogies can help us identify those patterns and predict likely outcomes.

THINKING ANALYTICALLY

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

- 1.1** Understand the importance of analytic thinking and removing emotions from political analysis.

Prior to this course, your exposure to political discussion may have been largely at the emotional level. This happens when individuals exchange strongly held opinions with selected facts that may support their claims. Most political discussions center on topics about which individuals deeply care. Therefore, it is natural, and could be useful, that people use strong emotions when discussing politics. Doing so demonstrates passionate concern about what is “right” or “wrong” regarding how specific issues are dealt with. In many cases, seeing people care enough about an issue to discuss it is more appealing than people acting in an apathetic manner.

When you turn on the television, this is what you tend to see nowadays. Programs conveying news objectively without emotions have become rare. From CNN to MSNBC and Fox News, America’s major TV networks are broadcasting news talk shows in which the hosts passionately and emotionally discuss political, economic, and social issues using selective evidence. Many of these shows do not allow viewers to be neutral; the division of the good from the bad is clear and polarization is ubiquitous. Their mission is not an objective analysis but to convince people that their side is correct.

When emotions are the main factors involved, things can get tense if we disagree, or relaxed if we agree. Tension resulting from a heated disagreement can prevent people from resolving issues, which is the reason why people generally want to discuss politics in the first place. The analysis of politics attempts to emphasize, as much as possible, a logical discussion. In having such discussions, people can move toward some possible solutions that would promote the well-being of as many people as possible. Even if solutions obtained may not satisfy a majority of the people, open discussion and analysis of politics with cool heads are likely to help yield a solution with which everyone affected can, at minimum, live.

Analytic thinking is a process of solving problems by breaking down complexity into components and seeing how the parts fit together. The aim of analysts is to put the puzzle pieces together so that we can solve the problem at hand. As we will discuss further in Chapter 2, the process requires analysts to step outside of the problem and let the gathered information tell the story. Analysts ask questions like: What are the sources of the problem? What is the scope of the problem? Can we change the sources and scope of the problem to solve it? If so, how can we do this? Notice that each of these questions lacks emotional considerations. When analysts release emotional ties, answers that could be uncomfortable become acceptable.

Gathering of information also needs to be systematic. A common mistake is that individuals tend to jump to a conclusion based on a specific experience that happened to them or people close to them. Another common mistake is that people tend to only search for and accept “facts” that corroborate their beliefs and look away when they see contrary evidence. Systematic analysis of evidence—one where analysts collect and analyze all evidence in an objective manner—is necessary. A more objective and systematic inquiry increases the likelihood that the answers and solutions to problems will be effective.

Psychological experiments demonstrate that focusing on emotions—both positive and negative emotions—reduces the use of logic in making decisions. Removing emotions from analysis is important to accurately understand the problem at hand and come up with a helpful solution. Likewise, analyzing politics objectively does not make the study of politics boring. In fact, as we will see later in this chapter, many political scientists consider that politics and games have similar structures, and that analysis of politics is a fun and serious endeavor at the same time!

WHAT IS POLITICS?

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

1.2 Define politics and its importance in daily life.

Until now, we’ve discussed politics without defining what politics is. Some people think politics is about government and governance. Others consider politics as it pertains to power. Yet others view politics as being about the distribution of resources and how people relate to one another. American political scientist Harold Lasswell developed one of the most commonly used definitions of politics. According to Lasswell, **politics** is about “who gets what, when, and how” (Lasswell, 1936). In other words, politics is about how people distribute and obtain resources and power within a society and across countries.

If all people always attained whatever they wanted, whenever they wanted, and however they sought it, then we would not have politics. In reality, that is not the case. Therefore, questions related to politics are everywhere and important. Should the state provide health care services to its citizens, or should individuals be responsible for their own health care? How high should taxes be, and who should pay them? Who should own guns, and under what conditions can people justifiably use them? Should capital punishment be legal, and when is it allowable? Are resources available to some and not others based on race, ethnicity, gender, kinship, or religion? If this is the case, how does one end this practice? When should we go to war with another country? Moreover, if a war breaks out, who is going to fight? Should we erect tariffs on certain imports, and how high should the tariffs be? Or should we even trade internationally? Overall, who should make all these important decisions?

The study of politics involves understanding the mechanisms for making decisions about “who gets what, when, and how.” The rest of this chapter will start you down the path of analyzing politics by examining certain cases from recent history and some current affairs. You will see that the examples are very complex if you look at all the parts at once. However, after we break

them down using an analytic game-like framework, you will see noteworthy patterns and they become easier to understand.

POLITICS AS A GAME

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

1.3 Describe politics using the common elements and structures of a game.

Politics is structurally a lot like games. Games have a certain common structure. A game involves two or more players that interact to achieve one or more goals within a framework of rules. Players may have different preferences and have stakes in the outcomes. They try to win or obtain the best possible outcomes. Their ability to obtain preferred outcomes depends on many factors like knowledge, resources, and experience. Outcomes also depend on the choices made by other players. Everyone, therefore, cares about the choices that everyone else makes, and this encourages **strategic interaction** among actors. Strategic interaction refers to a calculative interaction between players in which (a) a player's ability to obtain the desired outcome is dependent on the move of at least one other player and (b) all players know this condition and make calculated moves in order to attain the best possible outcome.

Consider an election in which incumbent politicians are facing a threat to their reelection due to the possibility that well-qualified rivals may enter the race. Money is very important in modern-day elections. Candidates and political parties seek to raise campaign donations so that they can run effective campaigns. Many election analysts analyze the size of the war chest—the campaign fund available to a candidate—as a crucial factor in predicting the likelihood of a candidate's election victory. Candidates monitor the amount of the funds that they and their rivals garner to assess the viability of their candidacy. If other candidates are raising significantly more money than they are, perhaps they have little chance of winning the election. Knowing this, an incumbent politician facing the possibility of a competition with a high-quality candidate may expend much effort in raising campaign contributions in order to deter the potential challenger from entering the race. If the incumbent can demonstrate their ability to raise a considerable amount of funds, the potential challenger may think that their chance of defeating the incumbent is slim and may give up challenging the incumbent. This illustrates a strategic interaction that frequently occurs in politics. Janet Box-Steffensmeier (1996) and others have discovered that the size of war chests influences the entry decisions of high-quality candidates.

Players' choices are also constrained by the existing rules. In the example of the war chest and election entry, we can think about campaign finance laws and other rules and constraints that candidates and political parties face. Those laws and rules vary from one country to another. However, all democracies have laws, rules, and conventions that govern electoral competition.

Let us summarize the key elements common in games and politics:

- Players: Who are the key players?
- Goals: What goals or stakes do they have?

- Strategies: What actions (or strategies) are available to them?
- Rules: What rules constrain or influence actors' choices and behavior?

The game-like nature of politics is obvious in many situations—when the U.S. president negotiates denuclearization with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, when members of Congress consider alternative tax bills, when candidates raise money for elections, and when abortion supporters and opponents try to influence laws.

You may associate games with having fun and think that we should not use this word since the stakes of politics are often very serious. By no means do we imply that using the “game” analogy to analyze politics reduces politics to a frivolous activity. You are correct in thinking that politics is a serious business—it involves interactions that affect the lives of real people. The examples we use in this book attest to the importance of politics.

EXPAND YOUR THOUGHTS

BENEFITS AND DRAWBACKS OF THE GAME ANALOGY

We discussed how we could use the metaphor of a “game” to analyze politics. Some would argue that politics is too complex to describe it as a game. Others, instead, believe that by structuring politics as a game, we can put the different parts together to see the overall picture. What is your position? Do you think it is useful to use the game analogy to understand politics? What benefits and drawbacks are there in using the game analogy? Illustrate your answer with examples from politics and political situations that this chapter does not use.

STRATEGIC INTERACTIONS IN REAL-WORLD EVENTS

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

1.4 Recognize strategic interactions when analyzing real-world events.

In the remainder of this chapter, let's take a look at a few examples of politics to understand its game-like nature.

Strategic Voting

Political scientists have long studied strategic voting by individuals. In an election, a naive observer may think that people vote, in each election, for their most preferred candidate or party. That would be great if your preferred candidate has a real chance of winning the election. Yet sometimes that is not the case. What if the candidate, which some voters like, has little to no chance of winning? In such cases, voters may abandon the candidate and vote for another candidate in order to prevent a candidate that they really dislike from winning. When voters do this, we say they are voting strategically. **Strategic voting** occurs when voters, instead of voting

for their most preferred candidate, vote for another candidate in order to prevent a candidate that they really dislike from winning.

Strategic voting is a common occurrence, and everyone has the potential to be a strategic voter. Knowing this, politicians and parties have also tried to convince voters to vote strategically (of course in their favor) to block the election of a candidate they dislike. Have you ever heard people say that a candidate has no chance of winning, so why not vote for someone else who has a more realistic chance of winning? In asking this question, people are starting to convince others that strategic voting may be in their best interests.

Consider the 2000 and 2004 U.S. presidential elections. The 2000 presidential election was a very close, contested race between Republican candidate George W. Bush and Democratic candidate Al Gore. Usually, elections experts can predict the winner reasonably well because of a combination of exit polling and expected early returns. The 2000 presidential contest was so close that we did not know who the winner would be until the vote's final tally. Initial election returns showed that Gore had won the popular vote, but neither candidate had gained the 270 electoral votes required to win the presidency. It turned out that the results from the state of Florida would determine the winner. In Florida the tally showed Bush was leading Gore by only 537 votes. That difference was very small, causing a dispute over the count, which mandated a recounting of the Florida votes. The U.S. Supreme Court ultimately decided the outcome of the election, which ruled in favor of Bush in a 5-to-4 vote, thus giving Florida's 25 electoral votes to Bush. With 271 electoral votes, Bush became the 43rd president of the United States.

This presidential election drew a lot of attention and outcry questioning the legitimacy of the United States' unique institution, the Electoral College. Was there widespread electoral fraud? Was the vote count accurate? Shouldn't the popular vote winner become the president just like any other presidential democracy outside the United States? While interesting, our focus here is not on who really won the 2000 election, whether we should abolish the Electoral College, or whether it was correct for the Supreme Court to decide the election outcome. We want to point out another factor. Although candidates from the two major parties usually draw the most attention in U.S. presidential elections, there are usually more than two candidates. In 2000, there was a third candidate, Ralph Nader of the Green Party.

Ralph Nader was considered more progressive than the Democratic candidate, Al Gore. Nader's campaign addressed the pervasiveness of corporate power, environmental justice, universal health care, affordable housing, free college education, and workers' rights and living wages. In the 2000 election, Nader received 2.7 percent of the popular vote nationwide. In Florida, where Bush defeated Al Gore by only 537 votes, Nader received 97,421 votes. If about 600 of the Nader voters had voted for Gore instead, the Democratic Party candidate would have won Florida and would have had enough electoral votes to become president. This led many to claim that Nader acted as a third-party spoiler and was responsible for Gore's defeat.

Four years later, in 2004, Nader competed in the presidential election once again, this time running as an independent candidate. The election was a close race again, between Republican and incumbent president George W. Bush seeking reelection and Democrat John Kerry. This time, however, Nader faced an uphill battle. His campaign had a hard time getting people to sign on the petitions to put him on the ballot. The 2004 election results indicated that Nader

received only 0.38 percent of the popular vote, compared to 2.7 percent in 2000. This is a significant decline in the popular support for Nader. What happened? What changed so much in just four years? Do you think many former Nader supporters voted strategically? Some analysts think so. To prevent the repeat of the 2000 presidential election, it is possible that many former Nader voters abandoned the candidate and chose to vote for the Democratic candidate in order to block the reelection of President Bush, who was the least favored among many Nader voters.

Strategic voting is indeed more common than you might think. During the 2016 Democratic Party presidential primaries and caucuses, there were many that claimed that Bernie Sanders was too left wing to win nationally and that Hillary Clinton was the better choice to beat a Republican candidate. Four years later, in 2020, seeking the Democratic Party's nomination, many moderate presidential candidates within the party once again emphasized their electability as one of their main appeals that would help defeat the incumbent, President Trump of the Republican Party.

EXPAND YOUR THOUGHTS

IS STRATEGIC VOTING REALLY A GOOD IDEA?

Strategic voting is a way for voters to attempt to get their next best candidate, or at least one that is most acceptable among the viable candidates, in office. Many democracy advocates do not view strategic voting favorably. If too many people vote strategically, the politicians and political parties do not really reflect or represent the true interests of the people. In considering strategic voting, what is your opinion of people's decision not to vote for their clear favorite candidate when such an option is present? Do you consider that strategic voting is a wise decision? Do you think strategic voting lowers the quality of democracy? Why or why not? Under what conditions would voters not engage in strategic voting?

The Cuban Missile Crisis

In October 1962, U.S. President John F. Kennedy learned that the Soviet Union (officially the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics or USSR) was constructing nuclear missile sites in Cuba, which is located only 90 miles from the Florida coast. Being so close to the U.S. mainland and given the technology of the time, missiles could be launched and hit their targets before the United States could react. For months, there had been charges of the Soviets building nuclear missile sites in this Caribbean country, which both the Kennedy administration and the Soviets had denied.

However, a U.S. U-2 spy plane produced clear photographic evidence of medium-range and intermediate-range ballistic missile facilities under construction on the island. Upon this confirmation, President Kennedy, on October 22, notified Americans in his televised speech about the presence of the nuclear missile site construction on the island and explained his decision to implement a naval blockade around Cuba. The blockade would prevent the Soviet Union from sending more materials to Cuba and thereby prevent the completion of construction, which many believed at that time not to be operational. Kennedy made it clear that the United States



On October 29, 1962, President John F. Kennedy met with the Executive Committee of the National Security Council in response to the Cuban Missile Crisis, White House, Cabinet Room.

Image courtesy of the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston. Image in the public domain. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:EXCOMM_meeting,_Cuban_Missile_Crisis,_29_October_1962.jpg

was prepared to use military force if necessary to defuse this threat to national security. Many people feared the possibility of this confrontation escalating into an all-out nuclear war between the superpowers. Kennedy himself estimated the probability of this happening as “between one out of three and even.”

You can readily see the game-like nature of the Cuban Missile Crisis. In the overall picture, President Kennedy determined that the presence of Soviet missiles in Cuba was unacceptable. The challenge was to arrange their removal without escalating into a nuclear war that seemed imminent in the view of many people. Kennedy and his team of advisors and officials in the Executive Committee of the National Security Council, or ExComm for short, discussed a wide range of options, from using diplomacy to launching air strikes and a full-scale invasion of Cuba. How would the Soviets respond to each of these options? Would diplomacy put enough pressure on Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev to remove the missiles from the Caribbean Island country? If the United States launched massive air raids to destroy the missiles, would it provoke a nuclear retaliation by the Soviet Union? President Kennedy and his advisors needed to weigh each option carefully by considering the Soviets’ likely response.

To consider the Soviets’ likely response, we need to assess Soviet leader Khrushchev’s preferences and constraints. As the head of an undemocratic country, he could quickly lose his leadership position if he made the Soviet Union look weak in the eyes of the world. Why? Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union only 20 years prior. The invasion and consequent struggle to win World War II resulted in an estimated 20 to 27 million Soviet deaths. That was

approximately 11 to 14 percent of the country's population. There was also a very large cost in physical damage and painful memories during the Nazi occupation. Khrushchev himself was at the Battle of Stalingrad, one of the worst battles of World War II. The Soviet leadership vowed that it would not suffer like that again and suspected the United States of trying to bring down the Soviet government through force.

It is also important to note that Khrushchev became the Communist Party leader in the aftermath of a fierce struggle with his rivals after the death of Joseph Stalin. Getting to the position of Soviet leader involved many sacrifices and maneuvering. There were many backroom deals and conspiracies. Sometimes those who attempted to obtain or secure the Soviet leadership would imprison or kill their opponents. Therefore, the stakes were high for him in many ways. Giving up the missile sites in Cuba without something of substance in return would lead to his downfall.

PRACTICAL APPLICATION

ADVISING PRESIDENT KENNEDY ON THE CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS

During the Cuban missile crisis, U.S. President John F. Kennedy needed to make some of the most difficult decisions in human history. His mistakes could lead to the annihilation of living species through an all-out nuclear war. What options did President Kennedy have in response to the news that the Soviets were constructing nuclear missile sites in Cuba? President Kennedy sought to rid Cuba of Soviet nuclear missiles at the same time avoiding an escalation of this crisis into a nuclear war between the two superpowers. Given President Kennedy's goals, which of the options you listed were more likely for him to use? Consider probable Soviet responses to each of these options. Given your assessments of the Soviets' likely responses, how would you advise President Kennedy about how to respond to this crisis?

You can also see the game-like nature of the crisis in many tense sub-episodes where the framework of a game is useful to analyze the event. Let's go back to the U.S. choice. After several agonizing days, President Kennedy made his decision: The United States imposed a naval blockade of the island to prevent the Soviets from delivering additional missiles and military equipment while giving an ultimatum that the USSR must remove the existing missiles. On the other hand, Soviet ships prepared to run the blockade. A decisive moment arrived on October 24, when Soviet ships bound for Cuba came close to the line of U.S. vessels enforcing the blockade. Both sides recognized the prospect of an escalation into a nuclear war, but both wanted the other to be the one to back down. Political analysts understand this type of brinkmanship using the **game of chicken**, where players benefit if the other side yields, and the worst outcome for both sides is when neither side swerves, resulting in an outright collision (or a nuclear war in this case). Therefore, the players' optimal choice depends on what their opponent will do: if the opponent yields, the player should not, but if the opponent does not yield, then the player should yield. In this particular sub-episode, the Soviet ships stopped, and thus the world avoided a nuclear war.

Climate Change Negotiations

Scientists who study the relationship between global climate change and the amount of carbon in the atmosphere have demonstrated that significant, long-term changes in the global climate have been happening. Some of the notable changes in the global climate include more intense heat waves, melting glaciers, increasing sea levels, increased frequencies of more violent hurricanes, and extended periods of droughts. These scientists state that the main culprits of climate change are human activities that increase carbon in the atmosphere, such as burning fossil fuels and destroying forests. Carbon dioxide, methane, nitrous oxide, and other substances we release into the atmosphere (called **greenhouse gases**) function like a blanket, trapping the sun's heat, causing the planet to warm. Scientists warn us that unless we do something about it, there will be dire consequences. Since climate change affects everyone on this planet, you would think that it would not be difficult for governments of all countries to come together to work out solutions to curb greenhouse gas emissions. However, global climate change negotiations have faced significant challenges. One of the most recent challenges came from the U.S. government.

On June 1, 2017, President Donald Trump's announcement that the United States would withdraw from the 2015 Paris climate change agreement unsettled the world. The Paris agreement established a global target to hold the increase in the global average temperature to well below 2°C above preindustrial levels, primarily by reducing greenhouse gas emissions. One hundred ninety-five countries ratified the treaty and agreed to strengthen their efforts to monitor and cut greenhouse gases. Why would President Trump withdraw the United States from the agreement, and what effect might it have on other countries and climate change?

President Trump cited the "unfairness" and "economic burdens" of the Paris agreement on the United States. He estimated that if implemented, it would cost the United States \$3 trillion in lost GDP and 6.5 million industrial jobs. The United States would have possible short-term benefits by withdrawing from the agreement so that it could maintain flexibility in how to promote economic growth while free riding on other countries' efforts to combat climate change, that is, taking advantage of the benefits produced by other countries' efforts to curtail climate change without contributing to the efforts. However, the United States is the second-largest emitter of greenhouse gases after China (and cumulatively the largest producer), and without U.S. cooperation, it would be difficult to achieve the agreement's goals. This puts other countries in a difficult position. Why should they sacrifice their economic growth and budgets trying to help achieve the agreement's goals, especially since without the United States, they would be unlikely to achieve them? The political leaders of other countries also face domestic pressures for jobs and energy resources, so they may also leave the agreement, putting the system at risk of breaking down.

The climate change example illustrates a situation known as the **prisoner's dilemma**. It explains why perfectly rational individuals do not want to or cannot work together even when it is beneficial to do so, resulting in a socially worst outcome. The prisoner's dilemma story goes like this. Two criminals are confined in separate prison cells and are barred from communication. A prosecutor offers to drop all charges if one confesses to their crimes, but the other does not. The one who does not confess would get 10 years in prison. The prosecutor does not have

enough evidence to convict them on the principal crime without a confession, so if neither confesses, they both get one year in prison for minor charges. Finally, if both confess, they each get six years in prison. So the prisoners face the dilemma: Whatever the other chooses, each is better off confessing than remaining silent. The prediction of the game is that individually rational prisoners will confess, resulting in combined 12 years in prison. The problem is that they collectively would obtain a better outcome if they both remained silent. The “dilemma” faced by the prisoners here is that, whatever the other does, each is better off confessing than remaining silent. But the outcome obtained when both confess (combined 12 years in prison) is worse for each than the outcome obtained if both remain silent (combined two years in prison). The prisoner’s dilemma is used to illustrate how players acting in their own individual self-interest can lead to socially suboptimal outcomes.

Applying the prisoner’s dilemma to understanding our example of climate change negotiations, each country has an incentive to not cooperate regardless of what other countries would do. The result is the continued threats of climate change that are in everyone’s interest to avert. Although the prisoner’s dilemma predicts lack of cooperation and collectively undesirable outcomes, it is possible to change people’s behavior. Under what conditions do you think people or governments are more likely to cooperate?

PRACTICAL APPLICATION

U.S. CARBON POLICY

Think about the reasons why the United States would be reluctant to limit carbon emissions as part of an international effort. What would convince the U.S. leaders to cooperate internationally in limiting carbon emissions? Is “It’s in everyone’s best interest” enough? What reasonable incentives would convince people like former President Trump to change their minds?

The Syrian Civil War

In spring 2011, a wave of protests swept North Africa and the Middle East. What would later be referred to as the **Arab Spring** saw citizens of various countries rise up against long-time dictatorships and demand democratic reforms. Some of the protests ended in democratic reform. However, many efforts developed into new dictatorships. In a small set of cases, the protests turned into violent revolts, which then spiraled into civil war. The Syrian Civil War, which is still ongoing, is such a case. Why would the sides of this conflict continue to fight after approximately 10 years? You can answer this question by examining the actors and their conflicting goals. Although the following is a simplified accounting of the war, its description will help us understand why it has lasted so long and why there is no end in sight.

A **game of attrition** involves interactions where actors attempt to “wait out” each other. Actors believe that the other side will give up eventually. They reason that it is better to keep incurring costs until the other side gives up since the benefit of winning is worth the costs. As you can imagine, if both sides follow this approach, then the conflict would go on, almost

indefinitely, so long as all sides have the resources to carry on. However, if one side decides that the conflict is no longer worth the cost, then they will back out. A central question is: How will we know when one side believes it is no longer in its interest to keep going?

To answer this question, we need to know what is at stake for the competing sides. In the case of the Syrian Civil War, the stakes are very high. It is very possible that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad believes that in the event of his defeat, not only will he lose his position as ruler, he will also lose his life. An armed revolt removed a similar dictator, Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi, during the Arab Spring and then captured and executed him. The video of his brutal execution went viral on social media. Similarly, the Syrian rebel forces must be concerned that they would face execution by al-Assad if they surrendered given the ruthless reputation of his government. Therefore, it is not surprising that both sides would want to continue until the other gives in. They literally believe their lives are at stake.

The limiting factor for either side is, of course, the resources to continue fighting. Without arms and personnel, it would be difficult to carry on. The limitation of resources has not been a large problem, however, since both sides are receiving aid from foreign allies. On the government side, al-Assad has received material support from Iran and Russia. The rebel side has multiple factions with one group getting support from Turkey and another from the United States. Some international terrorist organizations are supporting other rebel factions. The foreign actors have vital interests in making sure that the side they support will eventually win. For them, the costs of maintaining support are fairly low compared to what would happen if their side lost. So long as all sides of the war have ample supplies and they fear death should they surrender, we will likely see a continuation of this civil war.

PRACTICAL APPLICATION

IS THERE AN END GAME FOR THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR?

The Syrian Civil War is one of the Arab Spring events and is still ongoing more than 10 years since the war broke out. Review the barriers to ending the Syrian Civil War as discussed in this chapter. Imagine that you are a foreign policy analyst and your task is to make recommendations about how to end the civil war in Syria. How would you end this game of attrition? What incentives would you give the conflicting parties to stop the war? What confidence would they have in you that you could deliver your promised incentives? How would you deal with the foreign interventions?

ZERO SUM OR NON-ZERO SUM?

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

- 1.5** Explain how perceptions of outcomes in zero-sum terms influence interaction among political actors and the degrees of conflict among them.

The perception of “winning” and “losing” greatly affects how political actors behave and make choices. In using the framework of a game as a way of analyzing politics, you may think that a game’s outcome must produce a clear winner and a clear loser; that is, someone wins a prize and the other loses the prize. After all, when you play a game, you expect this sort of outcome. This can surely be the case in certain situations. However, it does not always have to be the case. Let’s take a look at games that may lack a clear winner-and-loser outcome.

Zero-Sum Games

First, let’s define a **zero-sum game**. A zero-sum game is a situation in which one player’s win is another player’s loss. If we add up the total gains and losses of the players, the sum equals zero. If we think about gains and losses in terms of wealth, in a zero-sum game situation, no new wealth is created, and therefore someone’s gain must necessarily come from another person’s loss. The term comes from the quantifiable payoffs of the outcome. If two people bet on a contest, say who can eat the most pizza, the winner will get some amount of money from the loser. If both parties bet \$20, the person who wins gains \$20 and the person who lost, loses the same amount. When we add the two amounts together, we have zero: $\$20 + (-\$20) = \$0$. Someone’s gain is another person’s loss. Consequently, in a zero-sum game there is a clear winner and loser outcome.

A government’s redistributive policy is an example of a zero-sum policy. Consider a situation in which the government decides to equalize wealth in the society by taxing the rich heavily and giving that money to the poor. Since the government did not produce any new wealth but simply reallocated the existing wealth from the rich to the poor, it is a zero-sum policy. As you can easily imagine, a zero-sum policy is prone to generate conflict because it necessarily creates losers and the stakes of the losers may be high.

Non-Zero-Sum Games

A **non-zero-sum game** produces an outcome that is either more or less than zero. This means that one’s gain does not necessarily come from another’s loss. It is possible that all players win; it is also possible that all players lose. If the total of gains and losses is greater than zero, we call this a **positive-sum game**. If the total of gains and losses is smaller than zero, then we call it a **negative-sum game**.

Positive-Sum Games

Consider a scenario where a government policy increases employment in a society. This is a positive-sum situation because the policy’s net effect on employment is more jobs available to workers. Since workers’ employment results from additional jobs created by a government policy, you would expect little to no conflict among workers because someone’s employment does not mean another’s unemployment. There will simply be more employment. It is also a win-win situation because jobs are desirable and politicians gain support due to the policy’s success in creating employment.

It is important to keep in mind that positive-sum outcomes do not mean that everyone “wins” equally. Employment increases may mean that some are getting better paying jobs than others are. A positive-sum game also does not mean that everyone gains. It is possible that some

players lose. It is still a positive sum if the net outcome is positive, that is, the total of the gains is greater than the total of the losses. What is important is that it is possible for players to gain without taking things away from other players. Therefore, in a positive-sum situation, political interaction is not necessarily competitive or conflictual. It is possible for all parties to gain.

At the same time, it is imperative to remember that people do care about how much they gain relative to others. Therefore, competition and conflict are possible even in positive-sum games. For example, consider international trade where mutual gains from trade occur. For instance, the trade relationship between the United States and China can be considered a positive-sum outcome in the sense that China exports products to the United States at prices that the average U.S. consumer can afford to buy. China gains by selling its products to the United States and the United States benefits by making affordable Chinese products widely available. Therefore, this is a win-win situation. However, we also know that there have been long-standing trade disputes between the United States and China. One of the causes of the trade disputes is the perception on the part of some businesses and individuals in the United States that the trade relationship disproportionately favors China, that even though the United States is gaining, China has gained much more.

Negative-Sum Games

An example of a negative sum is environmental damage. Some businesses have aggressively sought profits by neglecting their impact on the environment. Many factories have polluted air and water. The total cost to the society from environmental degradation—the cost to clean up water, the additional health care costs that people have to pay to care for compromised health due to pollution, and so on—often significantly outweigh the profits that the firms responsible for the pollution make. However, because the benefit is concentrated (the firms make money) and the cost is diffuse (many people share the cost of environmental issues), environmental issues, despite their importance, generally do not receive the kind of attention they deserve. In the meantime, the environment continues to deteriorate.

Perceptions of Zero-Sum and Non-Zero-Sum Games

Sometimes people may perceive an outcome as zero sum or non-zero sum with no basis in reality. People may believe that if someone or some group is “winning,” then they must be losing. We see this frequently in many aspects of politics. As we saw earlier, some may argue that if China’s economy is growing due to trade with the United States, then they are “winning” and the average American is “losing.” They may point to certain types of job losses as an example. However, they do not consider the lower prices trade has made possible as a net benefit.

Another set of cases where we can find perceptions of zero-sum outcomes is in multiethnic societies. In societies where there are many different identities, a fear often arises that one group’s success is another group’s loss. Let’s look again at policies that promote job growth. Perhaps the government policy strongly effects job growth in a particular region of a country and not in other regions. In a country with multiple ethnicities, there could be a good chance that ethnic groups are concentrated in specific regions. In such cases, the regional job growth could also mean job growth for a specific ethnic group. This result could lead other ethnic groups to believe that jobs are growing for the other ethnic group at their expense. They may believe that if one group is getting jobs,

then other groups must be losing the opportunities for those jobs. This may or may not be the case. However, the perception that the outcome is zero sum can generate conflict among ethnic groups.

We see this in many countries that have multiethnic societies. For example, the West African country of Nigeria is home to over 250 different ethnic groups. The three major groups are the Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba, and Igbo. These groups also split along religious and regional lines. For example, the Hausa-Fulani people are predominately Muslim and are located in the Northeast of the country. The Yoruba people are located in the Southwest, with roughly half being Christian and the other half being Muslims. Tensions among Nigerian ethnic groups tend to develop due to the uneven economic development within Nigeria and perceptions that one group gains by another group's loss of opportunities to economic resources. Even if the government policies may not have intended such an outcome, people will likely perceive that the outcome was intentionally zero-sum. To keep conflict at a minimum, policies in Nigeria need to keep in mind the possible regional disparities of outcomes.

Another example involves the advancement of racial equality in the United States. Norton and Sommers (2011) found that white people see racism as zero-sum. White people in their study believe that the decline in biases against African Americans since the Civil Rights movement has resulted in increases in perceived bias against white people. African Americans in the study did not share this notion. In other words, they did not believe that lower levels of discrimination against them meant higher levels of discrimination against white people. Perceiving that one group gains (or loses) due to losses (or gains) in another group can make mending race relations in the United States a great challenge.

You may notice that how people perceive the possible outcomes, whether it be zero sum or non-zero sum, can strongly influence their behavior in the political game in question. If one believes that job growth is a zero-sum outcome, then voters in a multiethnic society may wish to vote for political parties that best represent their ethnicity's interests. This behavior furthers competition among the ethnic groups. However, if a non-zero-sum perception is prevalent, then voters may choose a political party that is more nationally oriented instead of ethnically oriented. If we take the concept further, we can see how consistent perceptions of zero-sum outcomes over time can possibly trigger violent actions such as a civil war.

EXPAND YOUR THOUGHTS

ZERO SUM OR NON-ZERO SUM, THAT IS THE QUESTION

We learned that whether political actors see outcomes as zero sum or not influences the intensity of political conflict and the interaction among the actors. A zero-sum game is a situation in which one player's win is another player's loss. A non-zero-sum game produces an outcome that is either more or less than zero. This means that one's gain does not necessarily come from another's loss. It is possible that all players win; it is also possible that all players lose.

Go back through the examples found in the "Politics as a Game" section and select one case. How would the actors perceive the potential outcome in your selected example? Did they see them as zero sum or non-zero sum? Why do you believe this to be the case? Do you think it makes a difference if the actors view the outcomes as one way or the other? Why do you think so?

SUMMARY

Harold Lasswell defined politics as “who gets what, when, and how.” Understanding politics requires analytic thinking with systematic use of evidence to come to a valid conclusion. Analyzing politics requires a cool head and distancing ourselves from our emotions. However, it does not mean that the study of politics must be boring. On the contrary, it is quite interesting!

As the chapter shows, politics and games have common elements. We can therefore analyze politics using game frameworks because political actors often need to make decisions considering other actors’ actions and reactions within the constraints of rules and resources. We also need to understand how they perceive possible outcomes. Hence, to understand politics we need to identify key actors, their goals and values, the range of alternative options available to them, and existing rules of the game. That means that it is important for us to understand what their political values are and where they come from, as well as the formal institutions and informal rules that may constrain actors’ choices and behavior. Subsequent chapters address values and ideologies, how actors make decisions, and political institutions within which actors make those decisions. However, before delving into those substantive areas, we will examine in Chapter 2 how political scientists today conduct empirical analysis of politics.

KEY TERMS

Analytic thinking (p. 2)

Arab Spring (p. 11)

Game of attrition (p. 11)

Game of chicken (p. 9)

Greenhouse gases (p. 10)

Negative-sum game (p. 13)

Non-zero-sum game (p. 13)

Politics (p. 3)

Positive-sum game (p. 13)

Prisoner’s dilemma (p. 10)

Strategic interaction (p. 4)

Strategic voting (p. 5)

Zero-sum game (p. 13)

FURTHER READING

Jung, N., Wranke, C., Hamburger, K., & Knauff, M. (2014). How emotions affect logical reasoning: Evidence from experiments with mood-manipulated participants, spider phobics, and people with exam anxiety. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 5, 570.

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