Definition: political science from Collins English Dictionary

1 (esp as an academic subject) the study of the state, government, and politics: one of the social sciences

Summary Article: Political Science
from The SAGE Glossary of the Social and Behavioral Sciences

A discipline that can be traced back to the Ancient Greeks. Considered by many to be the first theorists in the discipline, thinkers like Plato and Aristotle wrestled with questions related to good government and the political system. As the discipline has broadened, it now largely coincides with political sociology in research themes, theory, and methodology. In the United States in the 1930s and 1940s, it was shaped by concerns about the systematic study of power, as it sought to differentiate itself from other disciplines such as economics and philosophy. Political science studies the distribution of power in different polities; the sources of power; how, when, and by whom it is exercised; as well as who gains and who loses in power struggles. These struggles may range from local-interest groups competing for positions of power in county government to a military dispute between two super powers. From these observations, political scientists draw general propositions, hypotheses, and, ultimately, theories about power and politics.

The study of power takes various forms, from the investigation of individual political attitudes and behavior to the examination of state activities at the national and international levels. The study of power and how it is shared (or not) is applied to governmental institutions, across the world economy, and in terms of international relations rather than merely within particular nation-states.

By the mid-20th century, political science was beginning to fragment into different subfields, such as political philosophy, methodology, American politics, international relations, and political economy. Furthermore, differentiation occurred through the field of comparative politics and the study of the Cold War. The result was the emergence of subfields such as political party systems, comparative legislative behavior, federalism, polling, and elections. By the 1980s, there was a further change in what was being analyzed and for what purpose, with the “Bring back the state” focus on the impact that state authority can have on historical processes of political development.

The failure of political science to predict the sudden end of the Cold War and the demise of the Soviet empire raised troublesome questions about the quality of international relations theories and the accuracy of what had been presumed to have been solid knowledge about world politics. This failure also points to the contradiction in the use of the term science when dealing with humans. In other words, predicting human actions is a very inexact art rather than a science. Currently, the discipline has been consumed with interest in the political consequences of economic globalization and the information and communications revolutions. For more information, see Almond (1990), Chilcote (2000), Krieger (2001), and Lipset (1981) in the bibliography.

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