**What Is Politics?**

[**James Hanley**](http://ordinary-gentlemen.com/blog/author/james-hanley) / [December 21, 2010](http://ordinary-gentlemen.com/blog/2010/12/21/what-is-politics)

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In a comment on the [DADT Open Thread](http://ordinary-gentlemen.com/blog/2010/12/18/dadt-open-thread/), Will H. wrote;

Politics is really more about building coalitions rather than staking out a position.  
Staking out a position is activism, and that sometimes gets mistaken for politics.

In response, I wrote;

“Politics is who gets what, when, how.” Harold Lasswell (American political scientist). When staking a position it is the “how” that helps you get something, it certainly would count as politics by Lasswell’s definition (which is arguably the most commonly accepted one in the discipline).

And there ensued a brief exchange on whether the definition was too broad to be meaningful or not. I would like to make my argument in more detail, so I have promoted the exchange to a top-level post. No criticism of Will is intended by doing so. It’s just an excuse for me to ramble on about my topic.

**Two Definitions of Politics**  
Political science is such a broad and ungainly discipline that there is some doubt about what our core is, or whether we even have a core. Once upon a time the discipline was about law and government. Then it came to include the study of social movements. And then it came to include the study of the effectiveness of policy. And about voting. And about decision-making and rational choice. And now it has come to include the evolved psychology of social interaction. So what is this thing we call “politics,” that we are attempting to study (more or less) scientifically?\*

In an attempt to pin down what all of us political scientists are collectively about–if we are in fact collectively about anything–two definitions of politics have been proffered that vie for supremacy in the discipline. One is by David Easton, who said that politics is “the authoritative allocation of values for a society.” Easton’s definition is widely accepted, but I dislike it for two reasons, one pragmatic and the other conceptual. My pragmatic objection is that I get hung up on the word “values.” I’m not sure just how far that extends, and since I take a very broad definition to that word, I remain uncertain that my definition of values would actually fit Easton’s definition of politics. Is he referring to just collective values, or to personal values as well? Is there such a thing as collective values? Is he referring to material values? Or both material and non-material? I just think the use of the word “values” opens up too many questions for the definition to be very functional. My conceptual objection is in the word “authoritative.” I think it’s too restrictive. “Authoritative” implies “official,” which is not always the case. At any rate, politics certainly existed before humans developed “official” authority, or formal authoritative institutions. Well, to be fair, that criticism requires reliance on a different definition of politics, but let me reword it to say that those behaviors that we frequently consider political pre-date the invention of formal authoritative social institutions.

The other definition that commands allegiance is Lasswell’s “who gets what, when, and how.” From my perspective, this is the only good definition of politics, and its value is in its broadness. There is a necessary but unstated assumption within it, though, and that assumption is “when there are two or more people.” In a hypothetical state of nature where I am all alone, my choice to climb a tree to pick apples is not a political decision. But if you are also present, and the options that exist are to work together to pick the apples, then figure out how to divide them, or to try to pick the apples surreptitiously, or to try to exert sole despotic dominion over the apples and keep the other away–then we have politics. To take a literary example, when Robinson Crusoe was alone on the island there was no politics, but as soon as “Friday” appeared, *everything* became political.

**Politics and Coalition-Formation**  
Will suggests that coalition-formation is politics, a claim with which I not only agree, but which is meaningful enough that I am going to keep it and build my analysis around it. But then he says, “staking out positions is activism, and [activism] sometimes gets mistaken for politics.” But if coalition-formation is politics, then how can staking out positions not be politics? One cannot form coalitions without staking out positions. Position-taking is an activity that is wholly inseparable from coalition-formation. First, you are forming a coalition around some particular position. Second, you must take into account the positions that others are taking, and consider how close or how far they are from your own position, and whether you must adjust to get closer to them, or whether there is some way you can bring them closer to you. And of course you are forming the coalition as a method (the “how”) of trying to “get” something (the “what”). And each potential coalition-member is also trying to “get” something–part of position-taking is the purposeful overclaim that forces the coalition-builder to offer you more, allowing you to “get” more.

And what about activism in general? Activism is in part, although not solely, about setting the grounds for coalition-building. If I am an activist, I am trying to persuade people to join me–to build a coalition–by moving them away from some positions and toward other positions. If I am a WTO protester in Seattle, I am trying to encourage the public to oppose free trade and globalization–I am trying to grow a loose-knit coalition of people who will call and write their legislators saying, “hell, no!” to economic globalization.” Or to take a more famous example, can the activism of the civil rights movement seriously be sharply separated from the process of coalition-formation? Not only was the activism an effort to expand the coalition, the expansion of the coalition was crucial to the success of the activism! We can, mostly, distinguish between the two concepts themselves, but we cannot distinguish between the purposes and aims for which they are deployed.

Let’s take this out of the governmental/public policy realm now. What about “non-political” organizations, like a church or a university’s physics department? Each of those–and those who are familiar with either of those, or anything like them will know this intimately–are political in the sense that there are people who are trying to “get” something (influence, respect, more office/lab space, the ouster of the current preacher, a shift from communion wine to grape juice, different hymnals, etc., etc.), and because they can almost never do it solely on their own they are trying to build coalitions. A great readable example of coalition formation outside government, in fact outside the human species, is Frans de Waal’s *Chimpanzee Politics*. De Waal explicitly calls chimpanzee social behavior political, and in the 25th anniversary edition to the book he notes that after writing it he learned about Lasswell’s definition and he eagerly accepts it as the appropriate definition for what he observed among chimp societies.

My children are inveterate coalition-formers, natural political animals. I have three kids, and at any given time two of them are ganging up on the other to exert power and control. When that doesn’t work, or when there’s only two of them, one or another is always running to mom or dad to get one of us on her side. When things are, in my estimate, out-of-control, I’ll usually step in (although it doesn’t always work out the way the would-be coalition former intends), but as often as not I’ll simply refuse to join the battle, and leave them to work it out without a coalition.

So what about when coalitions aren’t possible because there are only two people involved? Does it make sense to say that the two of my children who are engaged in battle over who gets what, when, and how are not being political, but the moment one turns to me for support they’ve suddenly become political? Admittedly that provides a bright-line distinction, but is it really a meaningful distinction? I argue that it’s not, because the coalition-formation effort is*just another means* for my kid to get what she wants. It’s not a fundamentally distinct activity, but *a particular strategic approach within the same activity*.

So accepting Will’s focus on coalition-formation–which I want to re-emphasize is a good focus, as it’s a fascinating and important issue–we still end up with politics being who gets what, when, and how. There’s no clear, meaningful, and strongly defensible point at which we can say, “this activity geared toward getting what I want within a social context is politics, but this one is not.” Sure, we *can* draw lines in there, but on what basis other than wanting to make finer distinctions can you defend them? And while wanting to make finer distinctions is important (the root of the word science is said to have originally referred to dividing or separating things), there are more defensible terms to stick to them. Coalition-formation is itself a good defining term, so clarity in it isn’t enhanced by sticking the less precise term politics to it.\*\*

In other words, the more we try to limit the word “politics” the more we run into the question, “but why only *that* (set of) activities?”. “Politics” as a term is best used for a broad class of human activity, with the more specific behaviors, strategies, and tactics within that broad class being identified with more precise, less arguable, terminology.

**Politics and Economics**  
I was told a story (I no longer remember by whom) of an economist who objected to Lasswell’s definition by saying, “that’s not politics, that’s economics!” Yes and no. Certainly economics studies how people get things. But this economist apparently did not understand that this was also what political scientists studied. So where does the distinction lie? As a first pass at it, one might suggest that economics focuses on market activities, while politics focuses on non-market activities. That is, if I am selling a used car, and you are shopping for a used car, and we strike a deal, that is a market exchange and is within the field of economists and not political scientists.

But that first pass will invoke the ire of economists. They study crime, punishment, war, and all sorts of non-market exchanges, including the incentives and behavior of government actors. And when you have economic analyses of the law, and economists studying the incentive bases of social movements…well, you’ve pretty much wiped out any subject matter distinction. And while that pass probably won’t invoke any wrath from political scientists, it’s nonetheless true that political scientists will ask about the relative bargaining position of the two actors, whether there was deception involved, and whether there ought to be regulations on such transactions. Some will even question whether there is such a thing as a purely market transaction that is wholly voluntary with no-coercion at all.

That’s not too surprising if we consider the history of the two fields. Before there was either, there was political economy, which evolved out of moral philosophy, which evolved out of philosophy, which was originally most heavily focused on politics. Without intending any disrespect towards economists (for the most part I like them better than I like political scientists, after all), I think it’s not inaccurate to say that economics can fairly be considered a subset of political science. Or perhaps a better term would be the political scienc*es*. That’s not to say there shouldn’t be separate departments of economics in colleges and universities. Everyone who’s looked at the issue recognizes that most disciplinary divisions are based on a mixture of logical distinction and purposeful turf-building. Some schools have separate departments of international relations, even though that is a standard subfield of political science. Small schools have Biology departments, while big schools have departments of zoology, microbiology, etc. etc. And truth be told, I think all of the social sciences, properly speaking, are subfields of biology, since what we’re studying is the behavior of a biological species. Lines of greater or lesser arbitrariness have to be drawn somewhere, just for purposes of functionality in organizing educational institutions and professional organizations, so an official line between economics and political science doesn’t really bother me as long as we don’t make the mistake of reifying it and seeing it as reflecting a distinct division between the disciplines.

**Conclusion**  
“Politics” as a term should not be limited to any one set of activities, but should be applied to a class of human behaviors that have a common purpose. In grad school I knew a student who was upset about the narrowness of what counts as legitimate political options (e.g., real socialism wasn’t on the agenda). This meant we just quibbled about small matters around the edges of a consensus about the basic political/economic structure, rather than considering wide-ranging social reorganizations. “That’s not politics,” he fumed, “that’s just *civics*.” That’s one of those moments that stuck in my head because it struck me as wrong, but I wasn’t able to work out a satisfactory analysis at the time (this was before I encountered Lasswell’s definition). Ultimately, the problem with his argument is it doesn’t rest on a conceptually defensible restriction of the word “politics.” How can politics be restricted to discussion of large issues when there’s no dividing line between large and small issues? Issue size is a continuous variable, rather than a discrete variable. There’s no point at which there is some step-function distinction between small and large issues, so there’s no point at which you can say “*this* issue is political, but *that* one is not.”

It’s true that definitions can be so broad as to be meaningless. But that’s not the case here. We haven’t defined all human activities to be political, only those that involve the pursuit of goals and value in conjunction with others. Within that, others can be used toward gaining our goals, or they can be obstructions to be neutralized, and doing either of those things is political behavior.

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\*As a pre-emptive warning, I’ll respond badly to anyone who trots out the pseudo-intellectual line, “politics isn’t a science.” Such people only demonstrate their ignorance of both political science as a discipline and the concept of science in general. First, a great amount of political science is studied scientifically, using the definition of science as *hypothesis testing*. We’re admittedly hampered by the fact that ethics prohibits some of the very interesting experiments we might otherwise like to carry out, but that doesn’t change the basic approach taken by many political scientists. There is also the fact that science is about *cumulative knowledge*, and while our discipline is indeed slow to develop this, it is developing. Third, the word science comes from the Latin *scientia*, which meant simply, “knowledge.” Those who would insist that only, say, chemistry and physics are sciences are required to justify their restrictive use of the word.  
\*\*To be fair, Will never said that “only” coalition-formation was politics. I’m taking some artistic license in interpreting him here, and I can only hope that by confessing to my sin I’ll earn his forgiveness.