

harold lasswell definition of politics

harold lasswell definition of politics stands as a foundational concept in political science, encapsulating the dynamics of power, influence, and decision-making within societies. Lasswell, a prominent political scientist and communication theorist, offered a distinctive lens through which politics can be understood, emphasizing the distribution and contestation of power. His definition diverges from traditional views by focusing on “who gets what, when, and how,” highlighting the allocation of resources and authority as central to political processes. This article explores Harold Lasswell’s definition in depth, examining its historical context, theoretical implications, and relevance to modern political analysis. Additionally, the discussion will cover how Lasswell’s perspective compares to other political theories and its application in various political systems.

- Historical Context of Harold Lasswell’s Definition of Politics
- Core Elements of Lasswell’s Definition
- Impact on Political Science and Theory
- Comparison with Other Definitions of Politics
- Applications of Lasswell’s Definition in Modern Politics

Historical Context of Harold Lasswell’s Definition of Politics

Harold Lasswell developed his definition of politics during the early to mid-20th century, a period marked by significant global upheaval, including economic depression, world wars, and the rise of new political ideologies. His work emerged in the context of behavioralism in political science, which sought to apply empirical and scientific methods to the study of political behavior and institutions. Lasswell’s focus on power dynamics and communication reflected a broader interdisciplinary approach, integrating psychology, sociology, and communication theory into political analysis. Understanding the historical backdrop is essential to appreciate why Lasswell emphasized the distribution of resources and power as the core of political activity.

The Rise of Behavioral Political Science

During the 1930s and 1940s, political science began shifting from normative theories to empirical research. Lasswell was a key figure in this transformation, advocating for a scientific approach to studying politics. His definition of politics was part of a larger effort to analyze political behavior systematically, moving beyond abstract concepts to observable phenomena.

Influence of Communication Theory

Lasswell's background in communication theory played a significant role in shaping his understanding of politics. He viewed political processes as forms of communication where power was exercised through symbols, propaganda, and persuasion. This perspective helped broaden the scope of political analysis beyond formal institutions to include media and public opinion.

Core Elements of Lasswell's Definition

The hallmark of Harold Lasswell's definition of politics is the phrase: "Politics is who gets what, when, and how." This succinct statement encapsulates several critical components that define political activity. Each element of this definition sheds light on the mechanics of power allocation and decision-making in society.

"Who" - The Participants in Politics

The "who" in Lasswell's definition refers to the actors involved in political processes. These include individuals, groups, institutions, and governments that exercise or seek power. Identifying the participants is crucial to understanding the dynamics of political competition and cooperation.

"Gets What" - The Distribution of Resources

This element focuses on the tangible and intangible resources that are contested in politics. Resources can range from economic wealth, political rights, social privileges, to policy outcomes. The distribution of these resources often determines social hierarchies and power relations.

"When" - The Timing of Political Decisions

Timing is a strategic aspect in politics, influencing how and when decisions are made. It affects the effectiveness of political actions and the ability to mobilize support or resist opposition. Lasswell's inclusion of timing underscores politics as a dynamic and temporal process.

"How" - The Methods and Processes

The "how" represents the mechanisms through which political power is exercised. This includes negotiation, coercion, persuasion, voting, legislation, and propaganda. Understanding these methods reveals the complexity of political interactions and the various forms power can take.

Summary of Core Elements

- Actors involved in political processes ("Who")

- Resources or benefits contested (“Gets What”)
- Timing and sequence of decisions (“When”)
- Mechanisms and strategies employed (“How”)

Impact on Political Science and Theory

Harold Lasswell’s definition of politics has had a profound impact on the development of political science as a discipline. By framing politics in terms of power distribution and decision-making processes, Lasswell shifted the focus from abstract ideals to practical realities. His approach provided a foundation for the study of political behavior, policy analysis, and power structures.

Influence on Policy Studies

Lasswell’s emphasis on “who gets what, when, and how” has been instrumental in shaping policy studies. It encourages analysts to examine policy outcomes in terms of competing interests and resource allocation, facilitating a more pragmatic and empirical approach to understanding governance and administration.

Contribution to Power Theory

His definition advanced the concept of power beyond coercion or authority to include influence and resource control. This broader understanding has enriched theories of political power, enabling scholars to analyze subtle and complex forms of dominance and resistance in political systems.

Encouragement of Interdisciplinary Research

Lasswell’s work bridged political science with psychology, sociology, and communication studies. This interdisciplinary orientation has expanded methodological tools and theoretical perspectives, making political analysis more comprehensive and nuanced.

Comparison with Other Definitions of Politics

Harold Lasswell’s definition can be contrasted with other influential definitions in political theory to highlight its unique contributions and limitations. Comparing different perspectives helps clarify the scope and focus of Lasswell’s view.

Traditional Definition: Politics as Governance

Classical definitions often describe politics as the art or science of government and statecraft,

focusing on institutions and formal authority. Unlike these, Lasswell's definition centers on power relations and resource distribution, making it more behavioral and empirical.

Politics as Conflict and Cooperation

Some theorists emphasize politics as the process of conflict resolution and cooperation among groups. Lasswell's approach aligns with this by recognizing the contestation over resources but adds specificity through the "who, what, when, and how" framework.

Politics as Power and Influence

Max Weber famously defined politics as the pursuit of power within a state. Lasswell extends this by detailing the mechanisms and timing of power distribution, providing an operational framework for analyzing political activity.

Applications of Lasswell's Definition in Modern Politics

The practical applications of Harold Lasswell's definition of politics are evident in contemporary political analysis, policymaking, and governance. His framework aids in dissecting complex political phenomena and understanding power dynamics in diverse contexts.

Policy Analysis and Decision-Making

Policy analysts utilize Lasswell's model to identify stakeholders ("who"), the benefits at stake ("what"), the timing of interventions ("when"), and the strategies employed ("how"). This approach improves clarity and effectiveness in crafting and implementing public policies.

Media and Political Communication

Lasswell's background in communication theory makes his definition particularly relevant in analyzing political messaging, propaganda, and public opinion. Understanding the "how" of politics involves studying media influence and information dissemination in shaping political outcomes.

Power Dynamics in Electoral Politics

Electoral competition exemplifies Lasswell's concept, where political actors vie for resources such as votes, campaign funding, and influence. Timing and methods of campaigning are critical factors in determining electoral success, illustrating the practical utility of his definition.

Conflict Resolution and Negotiation

In international relations and domestic politics, Lasswell's framework assists in understanding

negotiation processes and conflict resolution by identifying parties, stakes, timing, and tactics. This holistic view enhances diplomatic strategy and peacebuilding efforts.

List of Key Applications

- Policy formulation and evaluation
- Political communication and media analysis
- Electoral strategy and campaign management
- Conflict negotiation and peace processes
- Power structure and resource distribution studies

Frequently Asked Questions

Who was Harold Lasswell and what is his definition of politics?

Harold Lasswell was a political scientist and communication theorist who defined politics as the process of determining 'who gets what, when, and how,' emphasizing the allocation of resources and power within a society.

What does Harold Lasswell mean by 'who gets what, when, and how' in his definition of politics?

In Lasswell's definition, 'who gets what, when, and how' refers to the distribution of resources, privileges, and power among individuals or groups in society, highlighting the decision-making processes that determine these allocations.

How does Harold Lasswell's definition of politics differ from traditional views?

Unlike traditional views that focus mainly on government institutions, Lasswell's definition broadens politics to include all processes of influence and distribution of resources, emphasizing power dynamics and decision-making in various social contexts.

Why is Harold Lasswell's definition of politics considered influential in political science?

Lasswell's definition is influential because it shifts attention to the role of power and resource allocation in politics, providing a practical and analytical framework to study political behavior beyond formal governmental structures.

How can Lasswell's definition of politics be applied in modern political analysis?

Lasswell's definition can be applied by analyzing who holds power in contemporary issues, how resources and benefits are distributed among different groups, and the timing and methods used to make political decisions in societies.

What are the criticisms of Harold Lasswell's definition of politics?

Critics argue that Lasswell's definition is too focused on power and resource distribution, potentially overlooking other aspects of politics such as ideology, identity, and normative values that also shape political processes.

Additional Resources

1. *Politics: Who Gets What, When, How* by Harold D. Lasswell

This seminal work by Lasswell himself lays the foundation for understanding politics as the study of power and resource distribution. The book introduces the famous definition of politics as "who gets what, when, how," emphasizing the allocation of values in society. It explores the mechanisms of political processes and decision-making in various contexts.

2. *The Power Elite* by C. Wright Mills

Mills investigates the concentration of power in American society, analyzing how political, military, and economic elites shape policy and governance. The book complements Lasswell's definition by focusing on the actors who control key resources and influence political outcomes. It provides a critical perspective on power dynamics within modern societies.

3. *Political Order in Changing Societies* by Samuel P. Huntington

Huntington explores the development and stability of political institutions in the context of social change. The book discusses how political order is maintained through the distribution and exercise of power, aligning with Lasswell's focus on who controls resources and decision-making. It is essential for understanding political development and conflict.

4. *The Logic of Political Survival* by Bruce Bueno de Mesquita et al.

This book analyzes the strategies political leaders use to maintain power by rewarding supporters and managing resources. It builds on Lasswell's framework by detailing the "who gets what, when, how" in terms of political survival and governance. The authors use formal models to explain political behavior and institutional design.

5. *Power and Politics* by Harold D. Lasswell

Another important work by Lasswell, this book delves deeper into the dynamics of power in political systems. It examines how power is acquired, maintained, and exercised, reinforcing Lasswell's definition of politics as the distribution of values and resources. The book also discusses propaganda and communication as tools of political influence.

6. *The Anatomy of Power* by John Kenneth Galbraith

Galbraith offers insight into how power operates in modern societies, focusing on economic and

political dimensions. The book complements Lasswell's definition by explaining the systems and institutions through which power is distributed and contested. It is a critical analysis of power structures and their impact on policy and society.

7. *Politics as a Vocation* by Max Weber

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