

## Class One

### Getting Acquainted . . .

#### Overview:

What do we mean by politics? How is power and authority exercised, and on what foundations do these concepts rest? These concepts are explored by demonstrating how politics takes place in the classroom.

#### Purpose:

To introduce students to the meanings and concepts of “politics,” “authority,” “power,” “elites,” “values,” and “government.”

**Objectives:** Students will be able to

1. Define “politics.”

#### Activities:

After some chitchat, getting acquainted, and introductory lecture (what comes to mind when you say “politics,” etc.), ask the students whether they believe that politics takes place in the classroom. Let the discussion carry on for a minute or two, then tell the class to arrange themselves alphabetically.

Once they have, begin asking students individually whether they believe that politics takes place in the classroom. Once you’ve found someone who says “no,” ask them to leave the room.

Once they get up and begin to leave, tell them to stop and ask “why are you leaving?” “Why are you doing what I told you to do?”

Has my position as a teacher influenced you to do something you would not have done otherwise? I was able to use my position to get all of you to sit in alphabetical order, and to get you to first begin to leave the room, and then begin to stay. So we just observed a process of influence in this classroom that affected a group of people . . . that’s politics.

The political scientist Harold Lasswell defined politics as the **process of who gets what, when, and how**, and we saw that I (who) was able to get (student) to leave the class (what) by using my authority (how). Notice that I did not even have to really threaten or persuade, although these might have been implied. This indeed is politics.

This definition of politics centers on actions among a number of people involving influence. How do people get others to do what they wish? How does our society or any society distribute those things it values (wealth, prestige, and security?) Who gets these valued things, or values, and how? The answer lies in the notions of **power** and **authority**.

## Politics and Power

Notice that I just influenced *student x* to do something he/she wouldn't have done otherwise. In other words, I exercised power over *student x*.

What is power? *Power* is simply the *ability to influence another's behavior, getting someone to do something they wouldn't otherwise do*. Power may involve *force* (or *coercion*), or *persuasion*, or *rewards*. But its essence is the ability to change another's actions in some way. The more power one has over another, the greater the change, or the easier the change is to accomplish. Having more power could also mean influencing more people to change.

Who has power? Power to do what? What is the nature of that power? Bill Clinton? Slobodan Milosevic? Bill Gates? Pope John Paul II? Your teacher?

Power always involves *relationships* between people and groups . . . power without anything to exercise it against is meaningless. When someone says that a person has a lot of power, one should ask: Power to influence whom to do what? What is the power relationship being discussed?

People generally do not seek power for its own sake alone, but rather for the other values that they believe it can get them – fame, wealth, affection. Power, like money, is a means to other ends. Most people seek money for what it can buy, whether possessions, prestige, or security. Just as some people go after money more intently than others so too some people seek power more than others.

## Elites

Having defined and characterized power a little bit, something else becomes very evident . . . in virtually every relationship that we can observe, power is not allocated uniformly. Almost without exception, some have more power than others, although these relationships may always be in flux (now that you're less frightened of me and more comfortable, the power relationships between you and me may have altered!) We could answer the "who" part of Lasswell's question by saying that the elite are those who get the most.

There may be different elites depending on which value is being considered. In a small town, the owner of the largest business may be getting most of the wealth in the community, while the poor but honest mayor may have most of the respect. Oftentimes, however, these values will overlap . . . those with the most wealth also tend to get a great deal of respect!

To see the difference between an elite and non-elites, we can look at how one value (wealth) is allocated in one polity (U.S.). Clearly wealth is not distributed equally among the population . . . the elite have more than others. The top fifth of the American population has an income nine times that of the bottom fifth. The top 1 percent of the nation owns 33 percent of the wealth.

## **Authority**

Often, member of an elite reinforce their position by gaining *authority*. *Authority* is *legitimate power*. By *legitimate* we mean even more than *legal*: the word implies something *accepted as right*. This *correctness* or legitimacy is connected in people's minds to both the position and the wishes of the authority, and we may not even be aware of these assumptions. People generally recognize certain others as having the right to influence their behavior in certain ways.

### **Homework Assignment:**

*The United States is the most powerful nation in the world today.*

Is this sentence true or false? Why or why not?

## Class Two

### **Role of the Government**

#### **Overview:**

What does one mean by the word “government?” What first comes to mind might be the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C., your state capitol, or even your local city hall. Others may interpret government as being the elected officials (president, congressmen, state reps, mayors, and councilmen) that represents it. Many others see law enforcement officers and the rules and regulations they enforce as being government. Finally, some may view government as being the closest authority over them – school officials (teachers) and the rules they must enforce.

#### **Purpose:**

The intent of this activity is to introduce students to the meaning of the word “government.” The students will examine why society needs to a government to exist. The activity can also serve as an introduction to exploring the foundations of American democracy and government: the Declaration of Independence, Articles of Confederation, Constitution, and Bill of Rights.

#### **Objectives:**

1. State the reasons as to why government is essential, and identify the services it provides.
2. Define the meanings of the words “republic” and “democracy” (direct and representative), identifying ideas by values found in the Declaration of Independence, Articles of Confederation, Constitution, and Bill of Rights.
3. List and understand the basic freedoms that are guaranteed to all Americans through the Bill of Rights.

#### **Activities:**

1. Write the following statement on the chalkboard:

***To Be Free, One Must Be Chained***

- Have the students take 5-10 minutes to write down what this statement represents in a half-page or less. After completion, have each student read his/her paper while listing the main points under the statement on the chalkboard.
2. Wouldn't it be possible for all Americans to live as they choose with total freedom and without a government establishing limits on our individual freedoms? Do we, as a society, really need rules and regulations to enforce cooperation among individuals? Lead the students in a discussion that should lead to a resounding “yes” for the need for governments. Then, have the students identify the foundations of American government. List the pro and cons of each document and the ideas or beliefs they represent on the chalkboard.
  3. (Homework Assignment) Finally, have the students examine how they, as individuals, play a very important role in the function of government. Have the students answer the following questions:
    - a. What are your duties and responsibilities as a citizen of Arkansas or the United States?
    - b. What does the government of the United States or the government of Arkansas owe you?
    - c. What is the role you play in government?