The Nature of Power, Politics, and Government

Why should you care about power, politics, and government?

Vocabulary

Glossary Vocabulary Cards

authority

government

power

legitimacy

public good

nation-state

sovereignty

politics

institution

Introduction
The Senate and the House of Representatives meet in the U.S. Capitol Building, shown here.

The United States of America was born in an explosion of rebellion against authority. The Declaration of Independence, defending that rebellion, spit forth a list of all the British monarchy’s crimes against the American colonies. Clearly, many colonists had lost faith in the British government—if not in government in general.

*Society in every state [condition] is a blessing, but Government, even in its best state, is but a necessary evil; in its worst state, an intolerable one.*

— Thomas Paine, *Common Sense*, 1776

This general mistrust of government did not end with the American victory in the Revolutionary War. In fact, it continues to this day. In 2017, more than 1,500 Americans were asked this question in an opinion poll conducted by the Pew Research Center: *How much of the time do you think you can trust the government in Washington to do...*
what is right: just about always, most of the time, or only some of the time?

Only 4 percent of participants answered, “just about always.” Another 16 percent responded, “most of the time.” About 70 percent answered, “only some of the time.” And the remaining 10 percent voluntarily said, “never.”

This distrust of government also shows up in popular movies and television dramas. Corrupt or power-hungry politicians are often the villains in movies. The plot lines of some television shows center on conspiracies hatched by public officials at the highest levels of government. Conspiracy theories about government involvement in the assassinations of President John F. Kennedy and civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. continue to generate books and magazine articles even today.

Is this attitude that politicians and government in general cannot be trusted justified? Is government at its best, in the words of Thomas Paine, “a necessary evil”? Or is it necessary at all? To answer these questions, we must first figure out what government is and what it does. One way to begin is to examine the central concern of all governments: power.

1. The Power to Rule

The power to rule can be gained—or lost—in many ways. In the 1100s B.C.E., the Shang dynasty ruled northern China. However, tough military campaigns against other nearby kingdoms eventually exhausted the Shang’s fighting forces. In time, the neighboring Zhou, under a leader named Wu, took advantage of this weakness. From their lands to the west, the Zhou attacked and quickly overwhelmed the Shang defenses. The Shang ruler reportedly killed himself, and Wu became his people’s new ruler.

The history of China, like that of many countries, is filled with tales of the violent overthrow of one government after another. In modern times, however, transfers of power, such as presidential elections in the United States, typically are much more peaceful. Whether one looks at an ancient Chinese ruler or a modern American president, what they have in common is the power to rule. How they use that power, however, can vary greatly.

What Is Power, and How Is It Exercised? Power is a difficult
concept to define. People seem to know it when they see it, but they have a hard time pinning down exactly what it is. In his book *Economy and Society*, published in the 1920s, the German sociologist Max Weber defined power as “the possibility of imposing one’s will upon the behavior of other persons.” Kenneth E. Boulding, an economist, would later write in his book *Three Faces of Power* that power was “our capacity to get other people to do things that contribute to what we want.” Though written decades apart, both definitions describe power as one’s ability to exercise will over others.

That’s about as simple as the concept gets. When scholars dig deeper into the sources, uses, and effects of power, the subject seems to expand in many different directions. Social psychologists John R. P. French Jr. and Bertram Raven theorize that there are five sources of power, ranging from persuasion to coercion, or the use of force. Governments throughout the ages have relied on each of these types of powers, often in combination.

**Five Sources of Power**

This diagram shows five sources of power exercised by people in a variety of roles. Political leaders often combine these sources of power to get citizens to act in a certain way. For example, a president might speak to the nation (combining formal authority and persuasion) about offering tax breaks (a reward) to people who buy fuel-efficient cars.

Whatever its source, the power to rule can be used for positive or negative ends, or purposes. Through the centuries, some rulers have used their power to build cities, promote the arts, or feed the poor. Others have abused their power by looting their subjects’ wealth, turning captives into slaves, and even committing mass murder.
In *Common Sense*, Thomas Paine characterized British rule of the colonies as “a long and violent abuse of power.” In his view, “a thirst for absolute power is the natural disease of monarchy.” A century later, British historian Lord Acton echoed Paine’s observations on the abuse of power when he wrote, “Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.”

**How Does Power Relate to Authority?** People with the right to use power are said to have authority. But how do they get that authority? Sometimes it stems from tradition. For example, parents have authority over their children, while religious leaders have authority over their congregations.

In the field of government, political scientists speak of formal authority, or power that has been defined in some legal or other official way. People with formal authority have the legal right to use power. The source of their authority might be a constitution, a contract, or another legal document. School principals have formal authority, as do police officers and presidents.

What Gives a Ruler Legitimacy? Leaders whose power and authority are accepted as valid by the people they govern are said to have legitimacy. Legitimacy rises and falls depending on the willingness of those being led to follow those doing the leading. A military leader can seize power by force, as in the example of the Zhou leader, Wu. But to be considered a legitimate ruler, Wu had to convince...
the people he conquered of his right to govern them.

To enhance Wu’s standing among the Shang, the Zhou introduced the **Mandate of Heaven**—a doctrine of legitimacy that would endure for more than 2,000 years. According to this doctrine, the Chinese ruler was the “son of heaven” and thus had authority over “all under heaven.” The ruler retained this right only so long as he ruled his subjects in a moral manner. If he failed to rule well, the mandate of heaven would pass to someone else. The Shang leader, they argued, had lost the mandate of heaven to Wu, who had been sent by heaven to unseat him.

In the 1500s, powerful European monarchs proclaimed a similar doctrine of legitimacy, known as the **divine right of kings**. Because their right to rule was divine, or God-given, monarchs did not have to answer to the people for their actions. Instead, God had granted them absolute power to govern as they saw fit.

Before long, some Europeans began to challenge this doctrine. The European philosophers Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau popularized what became known as the **social-contract theory** of government. According to this theory, the legitimacy of a government stems from an unwritten contract between the ruler and the ruled. Under the terms of this contract, the people agree to obey a ruler in exchange for the ruler’s promise to protect their rights. A ruler who breaks this contract by abusing power loses legitimacy and should be removed from power.
The Mayflower Compact is an example of how a central government can stabilize a group of people. In addition to quelling revolts, the Mayflower Compact also became the foundation of the colonists’ government once they landed at Plymouth.

2. The Foundations of Government

In 1620, a group of English colonists arrived off the shore of Plymouth, Massachusetts. They hoped to settle there as a community. However, before their ship landed, some colonists threatened to split off from the others. To quell this revolt, the group’s leaders demanded that all adult males sign a document promising to obey the rules and laws enacted by the group. This agreement, known as the Mayflower Compact, organized the signers into a “civil body politic,” or a government.


Like the signers of the Mayflower Compact, groups of all shapes and sizes throughout history have felt the need for some sort of government. Government serves many purposes. Among the most important are maintaining public order, protecting life and property, and providing public goods.

Living in violent times, Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau emphasized the need for government to preserve order and protect people’s lives and property. Without such protection, wrote Hobbes, people would be
condemned to live in “continual fear and danger of violent death.”

Public goods, such as Millennium Park in Chicago, Illinois, belong to all citizens. Government creates public goods, and citizens pay for them with their tax dollars. Unlike private goods, public goods are available to everyone. Once they are established, even people who do not pay taxes are free to use them.

Today, governments are equally concerned with providing a wide range of public goods to their citizens. You benefit directly from public goods. Your community’s schools, the roads you travel on, and the fire and police protection you enjoy are all public goods that you receive from your government. You also benefit from public goods when you visit a national park or when you feel safer knowing that our nation is protected by the armed forces.

Public goods have two key characteristics. First, more than one person can consume them without reducing the amount available to others. Consider streetlamps. If you walk under a streetlamp, you do not reduce the ability of others to use its light. Second, once a public good is made available, all people have the right to use it. After being installed, a streetlamp shines its light on everyone regardless of who they are.

Neither of these characteristics is true of private goods. Consider an apple that you buy at a grocery store. Once you take a bite of the
apple, you have reduced the amount available to others. And, since you own the apple, nobody else has a right to consume it. Your apple is a private good.

After unifying China, the Qin emperor ordered the building of the Great Wall to protect his kingdom from northern nomads.

The Building Blocks of Government: Coercion and Revenue Collection Governments throughout history have held two key powers that are essential for providing protection and public goods. These key building blocks of government consist of (1) a means of coercion and (2) a means of collecting revenue.

Coercion refers to the various ways in which government can use its power to force citizens to behave in certain ways. The most obvious means of coercion include the police, the courts, and the prison system. Governments use the threat of arrest and punishment to maintain public order and keep people secure in their homes and in public spaces.
During times of war, governments may institute a draft, forcing citizens to join the military to protect the nation.

Other means of coercion relate to involuntary services required of citizens. One example is conscription, or a military draft, in which government compels young people to serve in the armed forces. Another involuntary service is jury duty, in which a panel of citizens decides an accused person’s guilt or innocence of a crime.

The second building block of government is a means of collecting revenue. All governments need money to provide security and pay for public goods. They generally get that money from the people they govern or control.

The ways that governments collect revenue have varied historically. Ancient empires extracted *tribute*, or payments, from the smaller states they controlled. Such “gifts” of goods or money were a sign of submission from the smaller states. For much of its history, China received tribute from peoples on its borders. China also levied taxes on its citizens. Through taxation, the Qin dynasty acquired the resources it needed to build one of history’s early public goods: the Great Wall.

**Who Should Rule: The One, the Few, or the Many?**

Governments
take many forms. In the past, most governments, like that of China, were headed by a single, powerful ruler. In contrast, the ancient Greeks experimented with forms of government ranging from rule by the rich and powerful to rule by all male citizens.

The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle, who is revered as the father of political science, thought deeply about who should have the power to rule. Aristotle was motivated by an interest in ethics, or proper conduct. This led him to examine many possible forms of government.

Aristotle categorized governments along two lines. One was how many people are involved in the process of governing—one powerful ruler, a few upper-class aristocrats, or the mass of common people. The second was what motivation people in power used when making decisions. Ideal rulers, he said, cared about the common good. Corrupt rulers, in contrast, cared only about advancing their own selfish interests.

As a philosopher, Aristotle liked to consider ideal forms. The ideal form of government, he reasoned, was a monarchy led by a single, virtuous ruler. But Aristotle also prided himself on being a realist. Rule by a single person, he knew from experience, could easily lead to the abuse of power. He admitted that

*Political writers, although they have excellent ideas, are often unpractical. We should consider, not only what form of government is best, but also what is possible and what is easily attainable by all.*

—Aristotle, *The Politics*, Book IV

In the real world, Aristotle wrote, rule by the well-intentioned many would suit most societies. He called this kind of government a polity. In a polity, he argued, the best-qualified citizens, a middle class, would dominate government and make decisions that would benefit the most people because “where the middle class is numerous, there least occur factions and divisions among citizens.”
Two thousand years after Aristotle wrote about government, the founders of the United States faced some of the same questions he had explored. Although the founders ended up creating a different kind of government than imagined by Aristotle, his writings strongly influenced their thinking.
The 49th Parallel is the agreed upon border between Western Canada and the United States. The trees along the border have been cut down to show where one nation-state ends and the other begins.

The Governments of Modern Nation-States When political scientists study government today, they are usually concerned with the larger and complicated governments of nation-states.

Territorial integrity. A nation-state occupies a specific geographic territory, with internationally recognized boundaries.

Stable population. A nation-state has people living permanently within its boundaries.

Code of laws. The people of a nation-state agree to live under a common legal system.

National sovereignty. A nation-state has sovereignty, meaning it is
independent of other states and self-governing.

The nation-state is a fairly modern political phenomenon. It merges two concepts: the nation and the state. A nation is a group of people who share a common ethnic origin, culture, and language. A state is a geographical area controlled by a single government.

The governments of modern nation-states are quite varied. In some, power is concentrated in the hands of one or a very few powerful leaders. In others, like the United States, power comes from the people and is broadly distributed throughout the government.

3. Politics and Political Activity

The idea that governments should provide public goods is not new. In the early American republic, federal and state governments supported the building of ports, roads, and canals to facilitate travel and commerce. These projects did not come together overnight. The idea for the Erie Canal, for example, was first proposed in 1724, when New York was still a colony. The first bill supporting the building of the canal reached the state legislature in 1787 but failed to win passage. Construction finally began in 1817, but only after extensive debate, planning, report writing, compromising, and arm-twisting—in short, politics.

The political process that results in projects such as the Erie Canal is extremely complex. Yet political scientist Harold Lasswell was able to boil it down to just a few words. He famously described politics as the process of determining “who gets what, when, how.” People who participate in that process engage in many forms of political activity. But all political activity has a few common characteristics.

**Political Activity Has a Purpose** Political activity can range from looking at a political cartoon to running for public office. Some political actions take little effort. Others require a significant amount of time, money, effort, and even courage. No matter how simple or difficult, political activity is purposeful.

Consider this situation. A city council is contemplating a proposal to build a new skateboard park in the community. Most residents care about children and want them to have recreational opportunities. For that reason alone, they at least follow the issue in the local newspaper. They might also discuss it with friends or coworkers.
In the United States, the people govern by participating in elections and politics. These graphs show information taken in a poll about how American adults participated in political activities during the presidential election year of 2008. Can you see yourself doing all of these things or just a few?

Some citizens, however, are motivated to look more deeply into the proposal. One group, concerned that construction and insurance costs might cause their taxes to go up, speaks out against the proposal at city council meetings. Another group, believing that the skateboard park will make the town more attractive for young families, speaks up in support.
In order for laws to be made, politicians must work collectively to decide on what is best for them and the people they represent.

Prompted by their enthusiasm for the park proposal, a group of skaters and their parents become more actively involved. Some seek appointment to a study group that is reviewing the proposal. One parent even decides to run for a seat on the city council in the next election. For these citizens, the possible benefits of becoming politically active outweigh the costs in time, effort, and resources.

As this example suggests, political activity is intentional, not random. That is, people think through what they are trying to achieve and weigh the costs and benefits of the actions needed to achieve their goals.

**Political Activity Involves Collective Action** Individuals can achieve many of their goals by acting on their own. But political activity is collective—it involves working with others to achieve shared goals.

*Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.*

—Margaret Mead

Even when people share a common goal, acting collectively can be challenging. Consider the proposed skateboard park. Skateboarding enthusiasts from around the city come together to plan how best to make their case. They all want the park to be built, but they do not agree on where it should be located.

Conflicts within a small group like this one can often be resolved through face-to-face negotiation, or informal bargaining. In large
groups, bargaining sessions may follow more formal rules. In either case, for collective action to work, the people involved need to be prepared to seek and accept compromise.

**Institutions Shape Political Activity**  The *institutions* we live with also influence political activity. Institutions are organizations or sets of rules that shape the behavior of groups. They have a social purpose and permanence in human affairs. The family is an ancient institution. Its purpose now, as long ago, is to provide for the physical and emotional well-being of its members. Schools, hospitals, and governments are other old and familiar institutions.

Institutions establish routines for dealing with recurring problems. For example, when students misbehave in class, schools have standard procedures for dealing with the problem. In this way, institutions tend to limit conflict while encouraging the kind of cooperation that can lead to the solution of various problems.

Institutions also create the rules, both written and unwritten, that shape political activity. These rules tell us who has the authority to make decisions, how decisions get made, and how we can influence those decisions.

In the scenario involving a proposed skateboard park, the community’s political institutions shape how residents participate in the decision-making process. Some residents share their views in meetings. Others send emails to the city council. A few join a study group to consider alternative sites. But once a decision is finally made, most people accept the result because they believe that their voices have been heard in the process of determining “who gets what, when, how.”
Roger Sherman, a delegate from Connecticut, proposed the Great Compromise during the Constitutional Convention in 1787. Here, Sherman is presenting the first draft of the Constitution with a group of men that includes Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin.

4. Political Games People Play

Politics is serious business. Decisions made by governments can have a profound impact on people’s health, wealth, and happiness. Yet, politics is also a form of competition. Politicians and citizens who engage in political activity are all players in the “game of politics.” Each of these political “games” has its own specific strategies and goals.

Horse Trading: Winning by Giving to Get

Horse trading is a classic American business. In the old days, traders brought their horses to a local market where interested buyers would examine them to determine their value. Horse traders were shrewd bargainers. Hearing the low bid, the trader might walk away in disgust only to suddenly turn on his heel and make a counteroffer—one much higher than the horse was worth. The buyer and seller would go back and forth until they reached a price they both agreed on.

Today, horse trading is another name for the kind of hard bargaining that goes on in politics. The key players are often politicians who want something that they cannot get without help from their political opponents. Often this “something” is a proposed law.
The objective of the horse-trading game is to achieve a “win-win situation,” in which both players walk away satisfied. The basic strategy involves giving up something one’s opponent wants in exchange for something of equal—or greater—value.

The famous Great Compromise, which established the legislative branch of the United States, was the result of horse trading during the Constitutional Convention. After much debate, both the small and large states agreed on a bicameral legislature. The House of Representatives pleased the large states with representation based on population, while the Senate pleased small states with equal representation. This win-win compromise helped the Convention come to an agreement and continue creating a new government.

The horse-trading game is familiar to many children and parents. A teenager, for example, might negotiate to stay out an hour beyond normal curfew in exchange for a pledge to help clean out the garage the next day. In this game, each side has given up something to get something else it wants.

**Walkout: Winning by Refusing to Play**  The walkout game is similar to horse trading in some ways. But instead of giving something to the opposition, players take something away—usually themselves. They walk out of the game and refuse to return until the opposition agrees to give them something they want.

The classic example of this strategy occurs in a basketball or football game when the owner of the ball gets upset, perhaps about a disputed rule or a foul. When this player becomes upset, they seize the ball and threaten to go home, effectively putting the game on hold. This puts pressure on the other players to give in. They know that without the ball, the game cannot continue.
César Chávez’s United Farm Workers strike against California grape growers quickly gained support from organized labor, religious groups, minorities, and students across the country. Chávez died in 1993, but his influence persists. In 1994, President Bill Clinton presented Chávez’s widow with the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation’s highest civilian award. Chávez, the president said, “faced formidable, often violent opposition with dignity and nonviolence. And he was victorious. César Chávez left our world better than he found it, and his legacy inspires us still.”

On a larger scale, the walkout game is commonly played by labor unions to back up demands for better pay and working conditions. If employers refuse the demands of labor unions, union workers may choose to strike, or walk off their jobs. Without these workers, businesses find it difficult to function. This puts pressure on employers to come to terms with the unions.

César Chávez successfully used walkout tactics in his struggle to improve the lives of California farm-workers. In 1962, Chávez, along with Dolores Huerta, founded the National Farm Workers Association,
which later became the United Farm Workers. The organization’s goal was to convince California growers to treat their workers fairly, with dignity and respect. This meant paying farmworkers a decent wage and providing them with better working conditions.

When growers refused to bargain with the new union, Chávez organized a strike of California grape pickers. In addition to the strike, he encouraged all Americans to boycott table grapes as a show of support. The strike and boycott lasted five years and brought national attention to the struggle of farmworkers. It also led to the first major labor victory for farmworkers in the United States.

**Power Struggle: Winning by Being Smarter and Stronger than the Opposition**  Politics often involves power struggles between people with very different goals. When engaged in such a struggle, clever politicians try to win by outfoxing or overpowering their opponents.

The strategies needed to win the power struggle game were first described by a 16th-century political philosopher named Niccolò Machiavelli. Machiavelli was born in Florence, Italy, and rose to a high position in the city’s government. In this role, he faced the question of how wealthy Florence could best defend itself against enemy attacks.

After leaving government, Machiavelli studied this question more deeply. He examined the behavior of leaders, good and bad and how they were viewed throughout history. From this, he developed ideas about how best to win the power struggle game.
Niccolò Machiavelli’s *The Prince* was an early how-to book for rulers engaged in power struggles with other states. While he is often credited with the phrase “the ends justify the means,” many students of his work do not believe he was literally advocating an “anything goes as long as it is for a good purpose” philosophy. The end he had in mind was “maintaining the state.” A prince who did this, he wrote, “will always be judged honourable and praised by every one.”
In his most famous book, The Prince, Machiavelli described strategies that a prince, or ruler, could use to acquire power, create a strong state, and keep it safe from attack. He urged rulers to take a hard look at the world as it is, not as it ought to be. Italy at that time was plagued by political corruption, mercenary armies, and backstabbing politicians. Given this reality, a prince could not afford to look to Christian morality as his guide to action. As Machiavelli put it,

*How we live is so far removed from how we ought to live, that he who abandons what is done for what ought to be done, will rather bring about his own ruin than his preservation.*

—Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 1532

To play the power struggle game, Machiavelli wrote, a ruler needed to be as smart as a fox and as strong as a lion. He explained in *The Prince* that

*The lion cannot defend himself against snares and the fox cannot defend himself against wolves. Therefore, it is necessary to be a fox to discover the snares and a lion to terrify the wolves.*

As a player in this game, a prince had to be prepared to do whatever was necessary for the survival of his state. “In the actions of men, and especially of Princes,” Machiavelli wrote, “the end justifies the means.” He wrote that a prince must not hesitate to “destroy those who can and will injure him” and instill fear in others, even if this costs him the love of the people. “If we must choose between them,” he advised, “it is far safer to be feared than loved.”

So great was Machiavelli’s influence on the study of politics that *The Prince* is still widely read today. Moreover, we often describe politicians who use cunning tricks and amoral tactics in the power struggle game as **Machiavellian**.

President John F. Kennedy played the power struggle game with the Soviet Union during the Cuban missile crisis. The president viewed Soviet construction of missile bases in Cuba as a threat to the security of the United States. To end that threat, he employed both force and cunning.
Here, President John F. Kennedy signs the declaration of a blockade of Cuba. At times during this crisis, Kennedy behaved like a lion as he readied the military to attack Cuba. At other times, he behaved like a fox as he looked for ways to end the crisis peacefully.

On October 22, 1962, Kennedy ordered a naval quarantine, or blockade, of Cuba. The U.S. Navy prepared to forcibly board Soviet ships heading to Cuba and search them for missiles. The president also made plans to invade the island, if necessary, to remove the missiles.

Meanwhile, the president began negotiating with the Soviet Union. After several tense days, the Soviets agreed to remove the missiles on two conditions. First, the United States would promise not to invade Cuba. Second, it would remove its missiles from Turkey, a U.S. ally bordering the Soviet Union. Kennedy agreed publicly to the first condition and secretly to the second, thereby ending the crisis. By keeping the second condition secret, however, the president left the impression that he had forced the Soviets to back down simply by threatening war.
In a demolition derby, drivers crash into each other until there is only one car left.

**Demolition Derby: Winning by Wiping Out the Opposition**  
While the goal of the power struggle game is survival in a sea of enemies, the aim of demolition derby is the complete destruction of one’s opponents. The game takes its name from car-crashing contests in which drivers use their vehicles as weapons to demolish the other cars. The winner is the last car running at the end of the contest. In the political version of this game, players try to eliminate all real and perceived enemies.

The key players in demolition derby are those who command the means of force. They include military leaders, dictators, and monarchs. Players use a variety of strategies, ranging from fear and intimidation to murder and massacres, to wipe out the opposition.

The demolition derby game often ends in a bloodbath. This was the case in the century-long struggle for control of the Mediterranean region between ancient Rome and the North African city-state of Carthage. By the end of the first two Punic Wars, Rome had stripped Carthage of much of its military power. Even still, Roman politicians continued to argue that “Carthage must be destroyed.”
Rome finally destroyed Carthage during the Third Punic War. Its army totally demolished Carthage, burning the city to the ground. The 50,000 Carthaginians who survived this destruction were sold into slavery. According to legend, the Romans then plowed salt into the ground surrounding Carthage so that nothing would ever grow there again.

The Romans were ultimately victorious in this form of power struggle against the Carthaginians. However, the city of Rome would fall about 500 years later to Germanic forces, bringing an end to its once powerful empire.

Today, nation-states that are ruled by a single political party often use demolition derby style politics to stay in control. Members of opposition parties within the country may be threatened or killed if they try to take power from the ruling party.

Inspired by Mohandas Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr. brought the philosophy and tactics of the civil disobedience game to the U.S. civil rights movement. Civil rights demonstrators held marches without parade permits, sat at lunch counters reserved for “whites only,” and refused to sit at the back of the bus. This photograph shows how civil rights activists communicated their powerful messages through organized, peaceful protest.
Civil Disobedience: Winning by Refusing to Comply  At the opposite end of the spectrum from demolition derby players are those who forsake violence for the moral high road. The key players in the political game of civil disobedience are people whose goal is to bring attention to some law or policy that they disagree with in hopes of ending it. Their strategy involves disobeying what they consider to be unjust. Sometimes, they also shame the opposition over its beliefs or actions to bring about change.

The word civil in this game’s name means having to do with citizens. As the name suggests, the players in this game are usually ordinary citizens who are protesting an injustice. In this game, the protest typically involves citizens directly and peacefully confronting authorities. By remaining nonviolent, the protesters hope to contrast their behavior with the unjust laws and actions of the government.

One of the most revered players of this game was Mohandas Gandhi, one leader of the struggle to free India from British colonial rule after World War I. Gandhi organized massive civil disobedience campaigns to protest the injustices of colonialism. His followers refused to work for the government, pulled their children out of government schools, and blocked city streets so that nothing could move.

Gandhi was arrested many times and spent a total of seven years in prison. He used each imprisonment to remind the world that taking action against an unjust government was the highest duty of a citizen. In 1947, he finally won his great struggle when Britain granted India its independence.

Often, attention from the media plays a role in civil disobedience. In the 1980s, during a rapid increase in AIDS diagnoses, activists pushed for the government to act quickly to address the illness. AIDS activists drew media attention when they protested outside the FDA and blocked employees from entering the building. Within the next year, government agencies began talking to and including AIDS activists as they worked to address the AIDS epidemic.

The political game of civil disobedience is difficult to play. As Gandhi’s story shows, it takes courage, patience, and strength of character. But when played well, it can produce amazing results.
Over 1 million people took part in the March for Our Lives, a demonstration against gun violence led and organized in March 2018 by high school students from Parkland, Florida.

When politicians and citizens engage in political activity, they must choose which political game will provide them with the best result for the given circumstances. Consider a situation where your local community instituted a rule that sets an 8 p.m. curfew for teenagers. What would you do?

You could choose a horse-trading approach by negotiating with the local government. In searching for a win-win, you may choose to negotiate for an 11 P.M. curfew, but in return, teenagers will volunteer their time in the community once a week. In this scenario, both the community and the teenagers gain something valuable.

You may also wish to take a civil disobedience approach toward the situation. In this approach, you could organize sit-ins at the local town hall or protest the unfair treatment on the streets. This will bring attention to the issue, and the government may choose to reverse the decision. You could also choose not to spend any of your money at local stores or stage a walkout during class as a form of protest. This walkout approach could also bring attention to the issue.
Regardless of the approach chosen, the end goal of the political games is to engender a result that is ultimately beneficial to you. By engaging in a local debate like this, you have participated in politics.

Lesson Summary

Throughout our history, Americans have tended to be distrustful of power, government, and politics. Nonetheless, we look to our government to provide goods and services that we all want and need.

**Power** The term power is often defined as the ability to make people act in ways they might not otherwise choose to act. The power to influence others comes from many sources, from formal authority to coercion. Historically, rulers have used power for both good and ill.

**Government** Groups of people organize government to maintain order and provide public goods, such as roads and national defense. To fulfill these functions, governments must have the means to coerce the population and to extract revenue from it.

**Politics** When people work to influence the decisions made by groups, they are engaging in politics. Political activity is purposeful and involves collective action. Because politics involves competition, it is often described as a game. While most political competition is peaceful, it can turn deadly.