

# THE ESSENCE OF POLITICS

*Cees van der Eijk*

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## *Chapter 1*

### What is Politics?

This chapter examines what we mean when referring to 'politics' and 'the political'. This is an initial discussion in which terms and concepts are used that will themselves be discussed in more depth in subsequent chapters.

I will present and discuss here a number of descriptions and definitions from authors who have occupied themselves with the question of what it is that characterises politics. When comparing their work, we learn that, despite important differences, these descriptions also have a lot in common. This leads to the conclusion that what politics is can be reasonably well described by a set of characteristics, none of which is always required, which can be combined in different ways, and which jointly are still not always sufficient to capture all the associations and connotations that the term 'politics' evokes.

The comparison and discussion drawn from existing efforts to define politics also show that it is impossible to formulate a single all-encompassing definition that will always be satisfactory. The reason for this is that the concept of politics is a 'contested' concept, as are other concepts which are often used in its definition. At the end of this chapter we will therefore investigate the character of such concepts and learn that the process by which they acquire a (sometimes dominant) meaning is itself part of what we call politics.

#### **Definitions of politics**

A review of the literature reveals an enormous number of definitions and descriptions of 'politics' and 'the political', but fortunately many of these are variants of a much smaller number of perspectives. The two most important of these are the aspect perspective and the domain perspective of politics. The first conceives politics as an aspect of virtually all kinds of human behaviour and human interactions. The second does not do so and instead regards politics as only existing in a specific, demarcated sphere of human relations. Other definitions of politics also exist that do not fit within either of these two general perspectives, the most influential of which we will also review.

### *The aspect perspective on politics*

The aspect perspective on politics holds that 'politics' is one of the aspects of human relations and interactions in all different domains of life. This perspective therefore postulates that politics not only exists in the domain of the state, the government and public administration, but also in sport, education, health care, business, personal relations, and so on. It also postulates that we can distinguish this aspect of behaviour and interactions from other aspects, such as the social, economic, affective and artistic.<sup>1</sup> In other words: not everything is political, but politics is everywhere. Obviously, before this perspective can be used, it is necessary to specify what the specific nature of this political aspect is, and how it is to be distinguished from other aspects of human behaviour and interactions.

The American political scientist Robert Dahl demarcates the political aspect, in his concise introductory text *Modern Political Analysis* (1963:6), as "*any persistent pattern of human relationships that involves, to a significant extent, power, rule or authority*". In other words, politics is present in all situations where interactions between people are structured by (differences in) power, authority and control. Therefore, we find politics everywhere: in firms and voluntary organisations, in churches and in schools and, of course, also in the state and its related institutions. Yet what goes on in all these places is not only structured by 'power, rule and authority', and that is why concrete, real-world organisations are not exclusively political. Sometimes the political aspect is dominant, sometimes it is more marginal. But in principle, one could discern a political aspect in all kinds of organisations, institutions and contexts.<sup>2</sup>

Obviously, Dahl's description requires further elaboration to be useful: what is power, rule and authority, and what is meant by 'persistent'? These questions will be addressed in subsequent chapters, and for now we will

1 Distinguishing these various aspects of behaviour and interactions does not imply that they exist independently of each other. How these aspects are related and how they affect each other is an empirical question. This means that it cannot be answered through theory or first principles alone, but must also be investigated on the basis of systematic observation. In Chapters 3 and 6 of this book the relations between these aspects are discussed in more detail.

2 A nice example of studying ostensibly non-political organisations from a political perspective is the study by Arian (1971) of the Philadelphia Symphony Orchestra. He analyses conflicts between artistic and commercial interests, and between performing musicians and the management of the orchestra, and demonstrates that regarding the orchestra mainly as an artistic institution is insufficient for understanding the origin, evolution and conclusions of these conflicts. From a political perspective, however, they are perfectly intelligible.

assume that, even when not defined precisely, most people have some idea of what these terms mean.

Dahl's emphasis on power as a defining characteristic of politics is shared by many other authors. Implicitly, they therefore also subscribe to an aspect perspective on the meaning of politics, as the existence (and use) of power is not limited to the domain of the state and its institutions. The central element in the description of politics by the American political scientists Harold Lasswell and Abraham Kaplan, for example, consists of "*the shaping and sharing of power*" (1950: xiv). This emphasis on power to characterise what is political is shared by so many authors that it is impossible to list them all, nor would it be useful to do so. This illustrates the importance of this concept for our thinking and understanding of politics. We will therefore examine this concept extensively in Chapter 6.

However, not all authors who use an aspect perspective when describing politics focus on power as the central aspect. Elmer Schattschneider, also an American political scientist, sees conflict as the most central characteristic of politics: "*at the root of all politics is the universal language of conflict*" (1960: 2), an idea that is also used by the German author Carl Schmitt who expresses it as "*the distinction between friend and foe*" (1979: 26).<sup>3</sup> The Irish author Michael Laver, however, regards the focus on conflict as one-sided, and conceives of politics as the mixture of conflict and cooperation:

[P]olitics is about the characteristic blend of conflict and co-operation that can be found so often in human interactions. Pure conflict is war. Pure co-operation is true love. Politics is a mixture of both. I will go further, and claim that any mixture of conflict and co-operation is politics.<sup>4</sup>

Yet others emphasise the aspect of distribution of (scarce) resources as the basic element of what is politics: "*who gets what, when and how?*" (Lasswell, 1936). Obviously, this question can be applied in all kinds of contexts, irrespective of whether they are commonly regarded as political ones.

A final example, for now, of the 'wide' aspect perspective on politics comes from the British authors Rod Hague and Martin Harrop (2013: 2), who emphasise collective decision-making: "*politics is the activity by which*

3 Translated from German: "*die Unterscheidung von Freund und Feind*".

4 Schattschneider also sees conflict and cooperation as being inseparably connected in politics. The main difference with Laver, however, is that he regards cooperation as a necessary condition for success for each of the sides in a conflict (see specifically his Chapter 4 on *The Displacement of Conflict*).

*groups reach and enforce binding decisions*". This highlighting of collective decisions is also shared by many other authors.

All these different descriptions and definitions have in common that they observe political processes and phenomena in situations where people interact. The differences between what is proposed to be the most central aspect by various authors – power, conflict, cooperation, distribution or collective decisions – are not as deep as they may appear at first sight, although they are not entirely irrelevant. After all, conflict (and cooperation) is often about the distribution of scarce resources. Collective decision-making is generally required to bring such conflicts to a conclusion, and power relations determine to a considerable degree what these decisions will be. It is therefore quite possible to formulate the defining element of politics in different ways, and still largely agree on which concrete phenomena, events, and processes are to be considered as 'political'.

### *The domain perspective on politics*

In contrast to the 'wide' perspective that politics is an ever-present aspect of interactions between people, the 'narrow' perspective maintains that politics is exclusively related to a specific context of organisations, institutions and actors. In this view, not all relations and interactions are (to some degree) political, and politics is not everywhere. Instead, politics is only to be found in its own political domain. That domain is usually referred to by terms such as 'the state', 'government', 'public administration' or 'the public sphere'. Such terms need further definition themselves, but we will do so in later chapters. For now we will assume that these terms are – even in their undefined form – sufficiently informative to proceed with our wider examination of perspectives on the meaning of politics. Incidentally, this 'domain' perspective on politics is more in line with everyday understandings of the term 'politics' than the aspect perspective discussed above, as demonstrated by descriptions in familiar dictionaries.

This emphasis on politics as being defined by the state and government is widely used, and it has a long and venerable pedigree, dating back at least to the Greek philosopher Aristotle. It permeated centuries of political philosophy and the contributions to that field by those who feature prominently in contemporary histories of political thought, such as Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Hegel and Marx. And it is still very much alive today. The Dutch political scientist Andries Hoogerwerf defines politics as "*government policy, along with its construction and its effects*" (1979: 42), while Meindert Fennema, a Marxist-inspired Dutch political scientist uses the following definition:



*“the expression of social conflicts at the level of the state”* (1982: 25).<sup>5</sup> The very strong associative link between politics and the state or government is also visible in a quite different way: in contemporary universities we find departments of ‘politics’, of ‘political science’ and of ‘government’ without much (if any) difference in the subject matter of their work.

The domain perspective of politics locates it in the sphere of the state and of government (and their associated institutions), and it implies that this sphere is not all-encompassing. It thus makes a distinction between matters that belong to the domain of politics (matters that are or should be dealt with politically) and those that do not belong to that domain. This distinction is also known as that between the public and the private spheres. As we will discuss later in this chapter, the question about the demarcation between these public and private spheres is often hotly contested. Nonetheless, the distinction is often seen as necessary to define politics as an exclusive domain, separate from other domains of human life and interaction.<sup>6</sup>

### *Comparison of the aspect and domain perspectives*

When discussing the advantages and limitations of each of the perspectives discussed above, the goal is not to arrive at an unequivocal verdict about which is ‘better’ or ‘preferable’. I will explain later in this chapter why that is not possible. Rather, the purpose is to gauge the implications of both perspectives on politics. The aspect perspective, as emphasised by Dahl, Lasswell, Laver and others, opens the possibility of investigating organisations and institutions, behaviours and interactions that would not in the first instance be regarded as ‘political’ with concepts and theories from political science. This often leads to unexpected and innovative insights that would have been overlooked otherwise. What happens in, for example, hospitals, universities or museums is sometimes easier to understand when seen as political than when only seen as medical, academic or artistic. This is not only useful for understanding what such institutions do (and what they do not do), but it also engenders broad theories of political processes, that can be applicable to a wide variety of concrete contexts. For example, gaining understanding about the origins, evolution, management and ‘solution’ of

5 Both translated from Dutch, respectively: *“het overheidsbeleid, alsmede de totstandkoming en effecten ervan”* (Hoogerwerf) and *“het proces van articulatie van maatschappelijke tegenstellingen op het niveau van de staat”* (Fennema).

6 This is clearly articulated by the New Zealand scholar Kenneth Minogue (1995: 5): *“it is the fact of recognizing such a division [between what is public and what is private] which distinguishes politics ... from despotism”*.

conflicts is not only relevant in the context of states and governments, but also in other settings in which conflicts exist. Moreover, acquiring insights about these phenomena is facilitated just as well through studying them at the level of the state as elsewhere. The aspect perspective on politics is therefore particularly useful when one aims for broadly generalisable knowledge about processes such as decision-making, conflict management, coalition formation, resource allocation, and so on.

Despite its advantages, the aspect perspective on politics also has its weak points. If politics is everywhere, this perspective fails to indicate which of all these political processes are more (or less) important and hence worthy of study. Are conflicts in a soccer club about the colour of the uniform equally worthy of our attention as conflicts between government and parliament about social security? Moreover, are the political processes visible in hospitals, for example, and states sufficiently comparable to lead to useful insights, or would this only result in abstractions that have little relevance when studying the real world? Also, if we are interested in politics, why would we spend our efforts on studying contexts for which the political aspect is of only secondary or more marginal relevance, instead of focussing on those contexts that are primarily political in character, as defined by the domain perspective on politics? The latter approach also has the advantage that it is more focussed on the content of conflicts, decisions, policies and outcomes than on abstract processes.

However, as with the aspect perspective, the domain perspective also has its disadvantages. The concepts of state and government themselves are problematic to define and demarcate. They also lose some of their capacity to distinguish between the public and private spheres with the increasing scope of government policy that results in a growing overlap between state and society. Moreover, some elements of 'the state' are more 'political' than other ones (in terms of the aspect perspective) and the domain perspective itself does not help us in choosing which of these is most worthy of our attention.<sup>7</sup> Another problem of the domain perspective shows itself from a comparative viewpoint. The kinds of matters that states and governments deal with vary greatly between states, or across historical periods. What is a matter of government concern in one context is not so in another one, and if that is the case for something one is interested in, the aspect perspective may be more helpful for identifying the concrete phenomena to focus on.

7 The branches of the state and government that provide services to citizens (e.g., issuing passports or driving licences) are clearly less 'political' than a national government or legislature.

A different problem with the domain approach is its inapplicability to some phenomena which clearly seem to be of a political nature. International relations can often not be reduced to what happens at the level of the various states involved. Moreover, sometimes there is no discernible state at all, as in situations of civil war, collapsed structures of government and so-called failed states. Yet that does not imply that political processes would be absent in such contexts.

### *Other perspectives on politics*

Although the distinction between the aspect and domain perspectives on politics is relevant for many of the definitions provided in the literature, it does not capture everything, and some other descriptions of what politics is about must be mentioned. Gijs Kuypers, a Dutch political scientist, sees politics as “*designing the future of an entire society, and influencing this design*” (1973: 164).<sup>8</sup> Although this definition focusses on the macro-level (‘an entire society’), just as the domain perspective does, it differs from it by leaving open the question of who is involved in this designing. It may be the state (and its associated institutions), but it may also be churches, firms, social movements, individuals, and so on. An additional interesting element in this description is that it refers to the substantive aspirations of everyone who is involved in this process of designing the future. It thus draws attention to what politics is about in terms of goals, visions, ambitions and policy.

The characterisation of politics as formulated by the American political scientist David Easton also eschews the distinction between the aspect and domain perspectives. His definition, which is a rather abstract one, has been very influential in the American and international literature: “*those interactions through which values are allocated authoritatively for a society*” (1965: 21). As with Kuypers’ definition, cited above, Easton focusses on the level of a society, and thus excludes what he terms ‘parapolitical’ processes which pertain to political aspects internal to smaller organisations and groups. It is therefore more restrictive than the aspect perspective, yet it does not restrict itself to the state or government, as the domain perspective does. The ‘allocation of values’ is a very wide formulation that encompasses material matters (e.g. income, housing) as well as immaterial matters (e.g. justice, respect, happiness, power), and it pertains to, on the one hand,

8 Translated from Dutch: “*het vorm geven aan de toekomst van een samenleving als geheel, danwel het uitoefenen van invloed op zo’n vormgeving*”.

their distribution (see also Lasswell, above), and on the other hand to the availability of (non-divisible) collective goods, which can themselves be material (infrastructure of rail, roads, internet) or immaterial (such as the institutional arrangements of the state, the presence of an effective legal system, etc.). The qualification 'authoritative' refers to these allocations being binding.

Just as with the other definitions discussed previously, both Easton's and Kuypers' definitions require further conceptual elaboration: what is a 'society', what does it entail, and what and who is included in it? Both authors seem to have in mind a culturally homogeneous nation-state (another term we will examine later in this book), but the reality on the ground is often less sanitised and messier than such an abstraction implies.<sup>9</sup> Another problem, particularly for Easton's definition, is how to distinguish between political and economic processes and interactions. Interactions on markets also lead to a binding allocation of values, but they are not generally regarded as political in character, but rather, economic. Indeed, politics and markets are often portrayed as distinct and alternative mechanisms for the allocation of values, each with its own strengths and weaknesses. (We will examine the relation between politics and economics in Chapter 2.)<sup>10</sup>

The last interpretation of what politics entails that we will discuss here is a set of associations and connotations rather than a specific description or definition. In this form, 'politics' is mostly linked to a kind or style of behaviour – sometimes even referred to as a craft or an art. Politics is then the competence to realise specific goals as well as is possible, given the circumstances. Irrespective of whether we agree about the goals pursued, we nevertheless can observe that some people are more competent than others in realising their goals. This competence is not the same thing as 'expertise', since it also involves anticipation and calculation, and being convincing (either by force, threat, trust, bluff, duplicity or compelling argument), culminating in what is often referred to as strategy and tactics.

9 This assumption demonstrates that reflection about the nature of politics can easily spill over into normative ideas about how politics and political systems should be organised. The (implicit) notion that political systems should be culturally homogeneous lies at the heart of nationalist aspirations that states should represent nations and that nations should have their own states. It also implies a tenuous normative distinction between state and society, with far-reaching consequences for our perspective on conflict (see Chapter 2).

10 Lindblom (1977), for example, distinguishes between states in terms of their *political* structure (various forms of democracy and non-democracy) on the one hand, and their *political-economic* structure (various mixtures of political or market influences in economic and distributive processes) on the other.

The importance of these associations of politics is that they call attention to the fact that politics is not only about its location (everywhere, or only within the state and government), or about the stakes involved (conflicting goals, aspirations, etc.), but also about how it is 'played'. This competence to play the game effectively can be used for all kinds of political goals, for good and for evil, for substantive policy or for the pursuit and preservation of power. It is particularly when this competence or skill involves duplicity and when it is used to acquire power for its own sake that the term 'politics' generates negative evaluations and associations (cf. Hay 2007).

### *What is politics? – A preliminary conclusion*

All of the definitions of politics discussed so far in this chapter have their pros and cons. Each of them functions as a tool to distinguish what is political from what is not. Although there are important differences between these various definitions, they also have a lot in common, particularly when we consider how they are used in practice rather than how they could be used in hypothetical instances that rarely, if ever, occur. Those who emphasise that politics is an aspect of human interactions that can, in principle, be found everywhere, do nevertheless recognise that politics in the context of states is more important than in the context of a birdwatching society. This is because political outcomes that affect large numbers of people in key aspects of their lives are generally more deserving of analysis than those that affect only very few people and only in a marginal way. Likewise, those who are attracted to the domain perspective, which regards politics as being exclusively related to states and governments, do not deny that the way in which very large organisations – such as multinational corporations, media empires, banks and financial institutions and large universities – arrive at decisions and manage conflicts is very similar to the operation of politics at the level of the state.

The various definitions discussed so far all include – either implicitly or explicitly – several shared elements. Identifying these elements does not lead to a potentially satisfactory overarching and perfect definition, for reasons to be discussed in the next section. Nonetheless, identifying these common elements does help to develop a better sense of the nature of politics. The following four features are of particular importance.

1. Politics is a social phenomenon: it exists only in the relations and interactions between people, and it pertains therefore to groups, collectives or societies.

The implication of this is that discussing politics requires a specification of the specific groups, collectives or societies that we discuss, and of

their demarcations. This specification may be implicit or explicit, but any discussion will soon turn out to be unproductive in the absence of a shared understanding of it. It is also important to reflect critically about these groups and about what and who is (or is not) included: how clear are these boundaries, and therefore also, how 'real' are the groups and collectives or societies that we label as such? We will return to these questions in Chapter 8.

The overarching term that is often used for the chosen group/collective/society is that they all represent a *political system* in some form. Such systems can be identified in the following contexts:

- a. The political system at the global level;
- b. Political systems at the level of countries, states or societies;
- c. Political systems within regional, devolved and local administrations;
- d. Sundry other groups and collectives which also act as political systems, insofar as their internal relations and interactions lead to binding decisions for all those involved.

These different political systems are not unrelated to or independent of each other. Sometimes one is nested within another (as is the case with local/regional/state-level administrations), and sometimes they are not nested or hierarchically ordered but are connected in other ways.<sup>11</sup> Other political systems hence form a part of the relevant environment of the one we are trying to understand (this will be elaborated further in Chapter 7). Which of these possible political systems is most relevant will depend mainly on the specific phenomena one is interested in.

2. Politics involves matters that must be settled for a group, collective or society in its entirety. This includes the management of conflicts, making collectively binding decisions, and so on. Many societies, states and large organisations are comprised of specialised institutions charged with performing such functions, and jointly they constitute the political domain.
  - a. As argued above, the various definitions of politics overlap to a large extent in their core. In this book, we will rely on a concise definition, that of 'conflict and cooperation in achieving collective outcomes', because this vantage point lets itself be easily elaborated in the form of 'key questions' that need to be addressed when studying concrete political phenomena.

<sup>11</sup> Many political systems that are not part of state structures are connected through overlapping membership, as may be the case, for example, between labour unions and churches.

- b. Important political interactions and processes are certainly to be found in the political domain of the political system in question, but not necessarily only there.
3. Politics involves power and power relations in the management of conflicts, the allocation of values for the system, and for making collective decisions. This makes the question about how power is acquired (or retained, or lost) of particular importance, as well as the question about how power 'works' in political interactions and processes.
4. There is something at stake in political processes and interactions. Depending on what we are specifically interested in, the stakes can involve the design of the political system itself and its relations with its environment, or the realisation of 'solutions' for specific problems, but they can also involve the struggle and competition for power and other resources necessary to realise these visions.

### Essentially contested concepts

The common elements to be found in the multitude of attempts to clarify what politics entails are insufficient to arrive at a fully encompassing and universally agreed definition. Indeed, a detailed analysis of all such efforts (something that I will not undertake here) shows that they are not all necessary, let alone sufficient criteria to distinguish politics from other phenomena. This raises the question why it is so difficult to arrive at a commonly accepted definition; a question that applies not only to the concept of politics, but also to many terms and concepts that are of central importance when studying politics, such as 'power', 'legitimacy', 'freedom', 'equality', 'justice', 'democracy', and so forth.

Not every term and concept that is used in the study of politics defies agreed-upon definitions. Some concepts let themselves be defined in unambiguous and uncontested terms, but these are mainly 'technical' terms such as the 'zero-sum game' (a concept explained in Chapter 5). While such terms can be invaluable in analyses of concrete political phenomena, they are too narrow to cover many of the questions that are on people's minds when thinking about politics. The broader terms that we need are, however, contested (at least to some degree). In this section, I discuss the nature of contested concepts, why their presence cannot be avoided, and how we can attempt to use them productively, in spite of their contested character.

The character of contested concepts can be summarised in at least four aspects:<sup>12</sup>

1. Contested concepts are complex, which means that they derive their meaning from multiple components, none of which is sufficient to capture the full meaning of the concept in question. It is often even impossible to list these components exhaustively. Moreover, it is not always necessary that all of these components are present to consider the concept applicable, but various sub-sets of all of them may be sufficient. Such complex concepts are sometimes referred to as cluster concepts. Descriptions of such concepts are therefore not definitions per se, but rather clarifications of their intended meaning that are not fully exhaustive, and thus also not fully unambiguous.<sup>13</sup> Comparing such clarifications may help, however, to arrive at a more complete understanding of the term in question, and of irreconcilable differences in meaning that may exist depending on who uses it.
2. Some of the components of complex concepts may themselves be complex in their character. Thus, if we interpret politics as involving power, then we find that power is also a complex concept that does not let itself be defined unambiguously.
3. Contested concepts generally contain two kinds of components that impart meaning to them: descriptive and evaluative ones.<sup>14</sup> Descriptive components point to empirical phenomena to which the concept may be applicable, and are usually explicit. It is often seen to be desirable to include only descriptive components in definitions, but even if that were possible, the question remains which of numerous possible components (none of which is sufficient or necessary) to include in a 'definition', and what emphases to apply when using several. Differences in how we solve these questions often reflect unexplicated differences in our understanding of the concept in question. Evaluative (or normative) components are often implicit, and they are often unavoidable because descriptive and evaluative components cannot always be fully separated and, moreover, because the concepts we try to define would lose much of their purpose and meaning without them. William Connolly (1983: 29) expresses this as follows:

12 This section is heavily inspired by Gallie (1955/56) and Connolly (1983).

13 For a more wide-ranging discussion, see Oppenheim (1975).

14 The difference between descriptive and normative is that different people could (at least in principle) agree on matters of description, while their agreement on normative matters cannot be assumed for reasons elaborated in Chapter 2. Thus, the descriptive statement that the European Parliament consists (in 2017) of 751 members is unlikely to create disagreement. Whether or not this body can be considered to be a 'real' parliament, however, is frequently hotly debated.



*[C]oncepts such as 'democracy', 'politics', and 'freedom' are bounded by normative considerations.... if we were to exorcise the evaluative point from any of these concepts, we would be at a loss as to how to clarify or refine its boundaries when new and unforeseen situations arose. We would find eventually that a concept so cleansed would lay idle (unless we illicitly brought such considerations back in). With no point or purpose to serve, the concept itself would fall into disuse.*

4. These problems are increased by the fact that formulating a definition requires words which, to be fully unambiguous, need to be defined as well, and so on, ad infinitum. It is thus unavoidable that definitions and descriptions are partly formulated in terms of words that are undefined themselves –so-called primitive terms, which derive their own meaning from the everyday language that is used in a community. However, as I will discuss in the next section, everyday language imbues many words with (implicit) normative meanings. Moreover, the meaning of words in everyday language is not unequivocal, resulting in different associations and connotations being evoked for different people.

Contested concepts are concepts that, unavoidably, have different meanings for different people. These differences can be the consequence of differences in associations evoked by the term in question, or of differences in the importance of such associations, or of differences in evaluative and normative connotations that the term may have for different people. Yet, at the same time there is often also a degree of shared understanding of what is meant by the term or concept in question.<sup>15</sup> This (partially) shared understanding makes it possible to communicate, while the differences in meaning simultaneously give rise to debate or, if there is no debate, to confusion and misunderstanding. To avoid the latter, debate about the meaning of the terms used to describe and understand the political world is key. Such debate about concepts should not be conducted in the expectation that it will lead to full agreement, but rather with a more modest, and more productive aim in mind: to avoid confusion and misunderstanding.

<sup>15</sup> This shared understanding of what is meant by contested terms presumes a language that is sufficiently shared and that comprises a critical mass of terms and phrases which are not contested in their meaning.

## The struggle over words and language as an aspect of politics

Understanding that the meaning of many important concepts is contested helps to identify the variety of perspectives that exist on political phenomena. It also helps us to appreciate that language is to some extent formed as an outcome of politics. The words and phrases used to refer to concerns, issues, problems, norms and procedures are similar to contested concepts: they are complex and multifaceted; they have not only descriptive, but often also normative meanings; and the associations and connotations evoked by them will vary, depending on how they are phrased and given meaning. Which of the ways to interpret the meaning of words become accepted among the dominant groups in a political system therefore affects how the phenomena referred to by these words are evaluated, whether or not they will be regarded as matters for collective decisions and, if so, the range of possible outcomes of such decisions.

Economic policy, for example, can be cast in terms of the magnitude of national income, or in terms of its distribution. Each of these approaches then has consequences for the way economic policy is discussed, for the kind of policy proposals that will evolve, and for who will be aligned with whom in favour of or against these proposals. Similarly, debates about crime follow a different political trajectory, depending on whether they are cast in terms of prevention or of suppression; and the same holds for abortion ('right to choose' vs. 'right to life'), and so on. Each alternative way to give meaning to words has implications for whether it becomes a subject for collective decision-making or not, and, if it does, then for what kind of information will be relevant in the development of proposals, and for the chances of different proposals becoming binding decisions.

The political domain is, in contemporary western societies, relatively autonomous (for a discussion of this notion, see Chapter 7). In common everyday parlance, the term 'politics' is most frequently used to refer to this domain. This means that referring to concerns or problems as being 'political' problems brings with it the implication that they should be dealt with by the actors and institutions of the political domain, while those that are not termed to be political will be taken up by actors and institutions which are not part of the political domain. Where, and by whom concerns and problems are dealt with subsequently affects the norms and procedures that are invoked, and the outcomes in terms of decisions (or their absence).

In parliamentary democracies, for example, designating something as 'political' usually implies that public debate is in order, that policy-makers are accountable to parliament (and, eventually, to the voters), that decisions

are based on parliamentary majority, and so on. But when problems and concerns are not designated as 'political' but instead as 'technical', 'medical', 'scientific', or yet different still, then the norms and procedures that belong to the political domain do not necessarily apply, and other sets of norms and procedures will become pertinent. In short: the adjective 'political' is not innocent, and nor are other words and phrases. Those who have an interest in specific concerns and problems are usually well aware of this and will try to get their choice of words, and their interpretations of particular terms, accepted as apposite. Others, who have different interests in the same issues, will push for different terminologies and different interpretations of words to prevail.<sup>16</sup> The struggle over words and language is thus one of the ways in which political conflict and competition plays out.

### The perspective on politics used in this book

Earlier in this chapter I asserted that different perspectives on what politics is are not necessarily incompatible. However, that does not imply that the differences between these perspectives are irrelevant. The perspective that one uses (whether consciously or not) guides the questions that one asks about politics, the concepts that one uses when analysing political phenomena, and so on. It is therefore necessary to clarify, in the context of this examination of the character of politics, the perspective from which this book is written.

This book is based upon the aspect perspective on politics, i.e. the perspective that politics exists in all kinds of human relations and interactions, irrespective of whether they are commonly referred to as 'political' or not. When seen from this perspective, the characteristic feature of 'the political' can be summarised by the terms conflict and cooperation. Politics

<sup>16</sup> The aspect perspective and the domain perspective look at all the conflicts about how to 'define' problems in quite different ways. These conflicts involve semantics, that is, the 'framing' of problems in terms of associations and connotations triggered by the words and phrases used, and whether or not the problem is designated as 'political' in the narrow sense of the word. Many of these conflicts are not played out in the political domain, but in the wider society (i.e. in interest groups; institutions of an economic, religious or social character; via traditional communications and, increasingly, social media; and so on). These processes are often referred to as *issue formation* (cf. Crenson, 1971; Cobb and Elder, 1972; van der Eijk and Kok, 1975). From a domain perspective on politics, this process is only 'political' once it reaches the stage that a problem (or 'issue') becomes part of the agenda of the government. From an aspect perspective this process is always to be regarded as political, irrespective of whether it has or has not entered the political domain. For a more extensive discussion of this, see Chapter 6.

then involves conflicts in which (large) groups of people are involved, the development of such conflicts, how groups and 'actors' cooperate to influence the outcome of conflicts in directions they prefer, and how conflicts are concluded. This indication of the book's perspective is still somewhat rudimentary, and lacks depth, but it will be elaborated and acquire detail and nuance in the next chapters. In those chapters, I will make use of illustrative examples – some from the real world, others hypothetical – of which many relate to politics in the context of states and governments.

Such illustrations that relate to states and governments are not an implicit endorsement of the domain perspective on politics. They do, however, reflect the dominant position in the contemporary world of states as institutional frameworks that affect the genesis, evolution and conclusion of all kinds of matters deemed to be of collective interest. This does not only hold for those matters that are dealt with in the political domain of states. It also holds for the relations, interactions and behaviour of actors outside the realm of the state (individuals, private groups, firms, social organisations, and so on), which play out within the 'rules of the game' defined and imposed by states. This regulatory capacity of states and the consequences thereof will be further discussed in Chapter 7.

The focus on conflict and cooperation that flows from the aspect perspective on politics necessitates the clarification of specific concepts and the examination of a set of key questions. This starts with the clarification of the terms conflict and cooperation in Chapter 2 and is followed in Chapter 3 by an elaboration of a set of 'key questions' that have to be addressed when trying to understand conflict and cooperation. These questions are also at the heart of subsequent chapters, but then in more detail and depth. Chapter 4 focuses on political actors, and Chapter 5 on political conflict. Chapter 6 elaborates the concept of power and related terms. Chapter 7 locates politics in wider contexts and discusses the relation between them. Finally, Chapter 8 discusses the question introduced earlier in this chapter about the demarcations between groups, collectives and societies that are implied in political analyses, and it does this mainly around the concepts of the political system and the political community.