

Introduction to Political Sociology

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Key concepts, theories, and themes for a first-year course

1. What Is Political Sociology?

Aspect	Description
Definition	The sub-field of sociology that studies the relationship between society and politics, focusing on how social structures, cultures, and identities shape political behavior, institutions, and power.
Scope	• Power, authority, and legitimacy • Political institutions (states, parties, legislatures) • Social movements & collective action • Public opinion & political culture • Inequality, class, race, gender in politics
Core Question	<i>How do social forces produce political outcomes, and how do political processes reproduce or transform social structures?</i>

2. Classic Theoretical Traditions

Tradition	Main Proponents	Core Ideas
Marxist / Conflict Theory	Karl Marx, Antonio Gramsci, C. Wright Mills	Politics is a tool of class domination; the state protects capitalist interests; ideology masks exploitation.
Weberian / Authority Theory	Max Weber	Legitimate authority arises from rational-legal, traditional, or charismatic bases; bureaucracy shapes modern politics.
Pluralist Theory	Robert Dahl, David Truman	Power is dispersed among competing interest groups; democracy is a balance of group bargaining.
Elite Theory	C. Wright Mills (Power Elite), Gaetano Mosca	A small, cohesive elite controls political decisions; mass participation is largely symbolic.

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Tradition	Main Proponents	Core Ideas
Structural? Functionalist	Talcott Parsons, Gabriel Almond	Political institutions serve social integration, regulation, and adaptation functions.
Post?Structural / Constructivist	Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu, Judith Butler	Power is diffuse, embedded in discourse, knowledge, and everyday practices; identities shape politics.

3. Key Concepts

Concept	Explanation	Example
Power	Ability to influence or control outcomes; can be coercive, persuasive, or structural.	Government imposing taxes; media framing public debate.
Authority	Legitimate power recognized as rightful by the governed.	Parliamentary sovereignty; elected mayor.
Legitimacy	General belief that a rule, institution, or leader is appropriate.	High voter turnout indicating trust in electoral system.
State	Institutional apparatus that monopolizes legitimate violence within a territory.	Police, courts, bureaucracy.
Civil Society	Organizations and associations outside the state and market (NGOs, unions, churches).	Labor unions lobbying for workers' rights.
Political Culture	Shared values, symbols, and attitudes toward politics.	Patriotism, trust in institutions.
Political Participation	Activities aimed at influencing political outcomes (voting, protests, petitioning).	Online petitions, street demonstrations.
Social Movements	Collective, organized efforts to promote or resist change.	Climate justice movement (e.g., Fridays for Future).
Ideology	Coherent set of beliefs that guides political behavior.	Liberalism, conservatism, socialism.
Intersectionality	Overlapping social identities (race, gender, class) affect political experiences.	Women of color facing both sexism and racism in policy debates.

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4. Major Areas of Inquiry

1. The State and Its Forms

- Nation?states, federalism, authoritarian regimes, democracies.
- Comparative analysis of institutional design (presidential vs. parliamentary