

## Basic Definitions used in the Study of Government

- Govern:** "1. to exercise authority over; rule, administer, direct, control, manage, etc....**govern** implies the exercise of authority in controlling the actions of the members of a body politic and directing the affairs of state, and generally connotes as its purpose the maintenance of public order and the promotion of the common welfare; **rule** now usually signifies the exercise of arbitrary or autocratic power; **administer** implies the orderly management of governmental affairs by executive officials"<sup>1</sup>
- Government:** "2. a) a system of ruling, controlling, etc. b) an established system of political administration by which a nation, state, district, etc. is governed c) the study of such systems; political science...."<sup>2</sup>
- Power:** "The capacity to produce intended effects."<sup>3</sup>
- What is politics about?:** Energy. Why? Because according to physicists, the only thing that exists is energy—or empty space. Furthermore, energy comes in two varieties: what we normally think of as energy, heat, or what might be called energy stored in the form of matter, like ourselves or an automobile. That's where Einstein's famous equation,  $E=MC^2$  comes in, relating energy to matter (what the physicist calls mass).
- Politics:** "The struggle for control over people's picture of reality."
- Reality:** A social construction. (Fairly commonly accepted definition by sociologists, who emphasize the role language plays. A lot of what we accept as real is what we can describe in language.) Because it is social it is plastic, but it is not infinitely plastic, even if you are president of the United States.
- Consciousness:** "An hallucination which is socially acceptable, in contrast to our dreams which in the normal person occur when we are asleep."<sup>4</sup>
- Ideas:** A form of energy, like a switch, which controls larger flows of energy. (Our actions result in large energy flows compared to the electrical activity in the brain that initiates them. Cf, a decision to launch all-out nuclear war.)
- Money:** Something we exchange for energy. It is a payment operator in a non-barter economy.
- Separation of Powers:** A **functional division** of government. James Madison, the principal architect of our constitution was supposedly influenced on this point by Charles de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu—although Aristotle probably knew of the concept as he did practically everything else. At the national (or Federal) level, our government is divided into **three branches: the legislative** (Congress: charged with the responsibility for enacting laws), the **executive** (the President and Executive Departments: having the duty of executing laws, e.g., prosecuting those who disobey them), and the **judicial** (the Courts: whose duties include trying cases in the meting out of justice).
- Unitary Executive:** Doctrine that in time of war, the Executive Branch is not to be challenged by either Congress or the Judiciary. Advocated in part, and practiced by the George Bush/Dick Cheney Administration citing the constitutional authority of the president as commander-in-chief.
- Judicial Supremacy:** Once any action of government is challenged in the courts and appealed to the Supreme Court of the United States (a murder conviction, for example, or an interpretation of a law as implemented by the President), **the dispute ends when the top court reaches its decision.**
- Checks and Balances:** An **overlap of power** between the branches of government whereby one branch may stop the action of another (a **check**) and in retaliation another may respond to the check (a **balance**). E.g., the President may **check** the legislative power of Congress through the veto; Congress may **balance** this power through override of the veto by a two-thirds vote.
- Unitary Form of Government:** A form of government where the **Central government is supreme;** local government is but an extension of the central government of a country. In the United States, drivers'

(Please See Reverse)

licenses are issued by the state, not the federal government. In a unitary system—such as the United Kingdom—one would have to apply to the national government or a local jurisdiction acting as an agent of the national government.

•**Confederation:** A form of government where the **local jurisdictions are supreme**. Examples include: 1) the Articles of Confederation under which the government of the United States first functioned (each state had a veto power over any contemplated action by the U.S.), and, 2) the international political system. Almost all countries are members of the United Nations, for example, but they are not compelled to abide by its rulings. U.S. government is not an extension of the United Nations.

•**Federalism:** A **geographic division of powers** where some powers are reserved for the central government, others reserved for local governments, and some distinctions are so "fuzzy" there is overlapping jurisdiction. Historically, the police power, public health, education, transportation, and a host of matters, have been reserved to the States. For all practical purposes the national government of the United States prevails when it wants to assert its authority. Examples, in the same order, include: 1) the central government has exclusive authority in foreign affairs, national defense, regulation of commerce, and printing money; 2) education is usually an exclusive prerogative of local government in the United States, until decisions of the Warren Court are taken into account regarding desegregation, etc.; 3) the police power is becoming more entangled as time goes on (Lee Harvey Oswald would have been tried for murdering President Kennedy under Texas law—now there is also a federal law against presidential assassination). The investigation of the World Trade Center bombing involved a number of overlapping jurisdictions: the local police and their bomb squad, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms of the Federal Government (since dynamite was suspected), and the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Even the CIA was involved since there was evidence of international terrorism.

•**Cross Filing:** A system introduced by the Progressives in California; candidates for partisan office could file in primaries of any or all parties. Governor Earl Warren would win both the Republican and Democratic nominations for governor in the primaries. Thus he would run against himself in the final election, assuring victory. Neat! The system, was abolished in 1959.

•**Blanket or Open Primary:** California recently adopted by initiative the *Blanket or Open Primary* (over the objections of both of the main political parties). Under the new arrangement, voters of any party can vote for any candidate during the primary election.

•**Presidential System:** A system of government where the ceremonial head of state or, as in the U.S. government, the chief of state, is elected separately from the legislative branch of government. In the U.S. system the president is elected indirectly by the people since actual selection is performed by the Electoral College.

•**Parliamentary System:** A system of government where executive power flows from the legislature or parliament. In Great Britain, for example, the Prime Minister (equivalent to the U.S. President as chief of government), is the Member of Parliament who leads the majority party. (Sometimes, notoriously in Israel, Italy, and in earlier years, France, a coalition of parties is necessary for a prime minister to emerge.) The ceremonial head of state is the monarchy in Great Britain, while in Israel, Germany, and other parliamentary forms of government (which are **not** monarchies), the ceremonial chief of state is elected directly by the people.

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<sup>1</sup>*Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language*, second college edition. New York: William Collins Publishers, Inc., 1980, p. 604.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 605.

<sup>3</sup>Bertrand Russell, *Power: A New Social Analysis*. London: Allen & Unwin, 1938.

<sup>4</sup>Again, a non-traditional definition.