

CHAPTER ONE

The Game of Politics

Concepts and Institutions

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading this chapter, you should be able to

1. Define and distinguish between the concepts of state and nation, and politics and government.
2. Identify and explain key features that distinguish democratic and authoritarian states.
3. Distinguish between procedural and substantive arguments about democracy.
4. Identify the main features of Canadian democracy and discuss some of the problems the country faces.

Canadian democratic politics sometimes seems confused and pointless. There are winners and losers in elections: parties and individuals regularly come and go. However, despite all of the frenetic activity, there may not appear to be any concrete results or improvements for ordinary people. In fact, the following comment in Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* seems to depict how many people see politics.

The players all played at once, without waiting for turns, quarrelling all the while ... they quarrel so dreadfully that one can't hear oneself speak—and they don't seem to have any rules in particular: at least, if there are, nobody attends to them ...

However, the democratic ideal in Canada is not frivolous. After all, it embodies the values and hopes of Canadians. Yet politics in Canada is in many ways analogous to a team sport. The stakes of politics are often seen as equivalent to the trophies and



IMAGE 1.1 Peace Tower on Parliament Hill

theless they all determine to a large extent how the players organize and conduct themselves. As in sports, the rules vary from country to country. For example, Canada's monarchical democracy has little in common with Saudi Arabia's monarchical authoritarian regime. Canada has no experience with revolution or coups d'état.

However, Canadian politics includes none of the body contact typical of hockey, football, or lacrosse. Possibly baseball, or a board game such as chess, would be more appropriate to compare with politics. Sometimes even military or war analogies are needed. Former US president Richard Nixon, for example, prepared an enemies list, and Canadian party strategists often develop "whisper lists" to spread false rumours during election campaigns, just as propaganda experts do during a war. Usually, however, the media depict politics between the government and opposition as something like a horse race, or as having the skill and finesse of chess. At the same time, despite what casual observers watching them may think, the players act in a context and with rules. Sports may be played on fields or courts; politics is played in the context of histories, economies, social structures (regions, ethnic groups, classes), and especially institutions.

The game analogy should not detract from the seriousness of politics, even though politics and games share some characteristics. Both have rules or agreed-upon principles to provide limits to behaviour. In democracies, the broadest rules are called constitutions. Politicians may be able to change the rules. In both politics and games, players with their own interests and ideas contest or compete for power. The political players bring to their activities philosophies, strategies, and tactics about how to win at the political game. They prepare plans of attack. They contest for a purpose—they wish to obtain political power. In other words, as in games, there are stakes to be won.

glory of sports and games. The winners in Canadian elections form the government while the losers are relegated to the sidelines.

The sports analogy holds in many respects. The players or politicians are in a collective game with winners and losers. Like viewing competitive sports, watching Canadian politics unfold either as a spectator or a participant can be exciting, even riveting. The competitors are organized into teams known as parties or interest groups. All of them are required to play according to rules. Some rules are more precise and codified than others, but never-

Historically, competitive games arose partly from the need to practise for war, but even then rules were devised to control behaviour. In ancient Greece, for example, a contest called *pankration* (which involved wrestling and boxing) outlawed biting, eye piercing, and other forms of bodily attack. The Romans even had rules for contests between gladiators, although in the final result human beings were killed to entertain spectators and emperors.¹ Today's Olympics are descendants of such early games. Amateur athletes are subject to a host of rules, including stiff penalties for drug use.

In politics, democracies tend to have more, and more highly developed, rules than authoritarian regimes, which generally have only minimal, crude regulations to control the behaviour of citizens who contest for political power. However, all states have rules and institutions that provide opportunities and constraints concerning political action.

GAMES AND INSTITUTIONS

Institutions direct and enforce the behaviour of politicians and public officials, and also implement the public policies that emerge from them. **Institutions** are social structures that are organized to achieve goals for society. They organize and restrict political players in the same manner that rules delimit the actions of players in sports and games.

institutions: Mechanisms of social order and cooperation; social structures that are organized to achieve goals for society.

The most comprehensive rules of a state or country generally are found in a constitution. When the Fathers of Confederation established the rules for Canadian government in 1867, they joined normative democratic principles with practical ideas about how government should function. In simple terms, they linked British parliamentary democracy with a federal division of authority—dividing powers between the federal government and the provinces. These basic rules still provide the framework for Canadian debates about what matters in politics. Since Confederation, the Constitution has determined which issues the state should resolve and which should be left for individuals or groups in the private sector to decide upon.

Comprehensive and formal rules, such as those found in constitutions, change only gradually over time. Much like the rules of some games, the elements of play may change slowly over time. Rules for some games, such as checkers and chess, change only rarely, while in other games, such as basketball, some regulations change every year. Rules in political games are designed to do both. Constitutions change slowly or rarely, while the rules about elections and parliamentary organizations may change often. Managers, coaches, and players should always play within the rules whether they like them or not. This does not mean that political rules are never broken. They often are—just as they are in games. Penalties are meted out. To understand politics

¹ Michael B. Poliakoff, *Combat Sports in the Ancient World: Competition, Violence, and Culture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987).

and governing, we must first know what the rules of institutions are, how they are intended to guide behaviour, and whether they actually do so or not.

Institutions help to organize government and politics much like rules organize sports and games. Some people—say, short people—are defined out of professional basketball. If the height of basketball hoops were changed in relation to the height of the players, then, theoretically, players of any size could play in the pros. Unfortunately for the height-impaired, the rules are the same for short, medium, tall, and very tall players. The same thing is true in politics: formal and informal rules provide advantages to some players and groups and constrain others. They also limit which issues can develop, which individuals can play, and at what level. The rich, for example, have advantages in all political games.

Where do the rules come from in the first place? In contemporary professional sports, they are usually made by the owners of the teams, or in bargaining sessions between owners and players. In amateur sports, rules are determined by university or school sports officials. In government as well, the rules are set in many forums. As in chess, conventions may develop; rules may come from traditions and customs that are many centuries old. Rules also may be conceived and put in place by political players acting on their own assumptions and biases about the task of governing; they may even act according to their own selfish interests. However, participants in the political game are bound together by common interests just as other groups of people are united in developing and changing the rules for games and sports.

STATES AND NATIONS

This book is concerned with the game of politics that takes place within Canada. We are all familiar with the concept of Canada as a country or state, with clearly defined borders, a specific system of government, and a legal system. However, when we use the terms *state*, *nation*, or *ethnic group*, the meanings can be obscure, interpreted differently by different people. It is important to understand precisely what we mean by each of them.

Think about the various social groups to which you belong. Individuals belong to many organizations or institutions. At the most basic level, you may be part of a family. You may be a student of a college or university. You may belong to a church, an online gaming community, or a sports or recreation club. You may also belong to a certain town where you might pay municipal taxes. You also belong to a specific Canadian province or territory.

Within Canada, you are also probably a citizen—a formal member of the state—and therefore eligible to enjoy specified rights and privileges. States normally consider all persons born on their territory and their children to be citizens. Other individuals

acquire citizenship through a specified process, such as residing in the country for a certain length of time and carrying out a formal duty such as swearing an oath of allegiance. In Canada, an immigrant may apply for citizenship after a total of three years' residence in the country—if the individual is at least 18 years of age, can communicate in English or French, and has basic knowledge about Canadian history, politics, and society (see Close-Up 1.1). Of course, many non-citizens also live in Canada: they are residents on an extended or a short-term basis.

Most people also consider themselves part of an ethnic group. **Ethnicity** is primarily a subjective characteristic of groups of people who share customs, language, dialect, and/or cultural heritage, and sometimes distinct physical characteristics. When combined with religious, territorial, or political differences, ethnicity is a strong political force. Canada's earliest founders came from two ethnic groups, French and English, but they settled on lands that had originally been occupied by Indigenous peoples.

Nations, like ethnic groups, are cultural entities. They are essentially subjective, involving a sense of “we-ness” or belonging. We define a **nation** as a politically conscious and mobilized group of people, often with a sense of territory, who may aspire to greater independence or even statehood. Nations are not the same as ethnic groups, nor do they necessarily correspond to the territory of a country. Some Québec leaders claim to represent a “nation,” and so do many Indigenous leaders. English-speaking Canadians, on the other hand, usually proclaim their loyalty to the country as a whole, or perhaps to a territorial entity such as a city or province.

ethnicity: Primarily a subjective term used to describe groups of people who share customs, language, dialect, and/or cultural heritage, and sometimes distinct physical characteristics.

nation: Politically conscious and mobilized group of people, often with a sense of territory, who may aspire to greater autonomy or even statehood.

CLOSE-UP 1.1

What Should Citizens Know about Their Country?

The Angus Reid Group asked a sample of Canadians 200 questions about Canadian history, culture, government institutions, and laws similar to those that immigrants are required to answer before they are allowed to become citizens of Canada.² The results were embarrassing. They indicated that nearly half of Canadians would fail the citizenship exam. Here are some surprising results:

- 95 per cent of respondents knew the title of the national anthem, but only 63 per cent could recite the first two lines correctly.
- Only 8 per cent could name the Queen as Canada's head of state; 57 per cent believed that the prime minister fills that role.

Do you think that Canadians who cannot answer these kinds of questions are able to vote intelligently? Should they lose their citizenship? How can the level of understanding be improved? What basic questions should Canadians of voting age be able to answer about their country and their form of government?

Try the practice test for Canadian citizenship at www.cic.gc.ca/english/citizenship/cit-test.asp
Are the questions fair?

² The Dominion Institute National Citizenship exam survey of 1997.