

Basic Political Terms for Chinese Learners Majoring in Politics, International Politics, and Public Administration, AKA “How to Talk Like a Political Scientist from the USA”

Politics itself has been variously defined as “who gets what, when, and how” (Lasswell), what decides who your “friends” are and who your “enemies” are, or power itself. What does politics mean to you? Can it be studied scientifically (why/why not)?

Whether we study theory or practice 理论与实践, policy discourse 演说 and debate 辩论, creation or implementation 政策执行, the following terms are fundamental to the study of politics. Unfortunately, and as a root cause of many problems in international politics, many don't translate perfectly or even well into Chinese! How have you learned (or not learned) about politics so far?

In the modern age, (macro-)politics is centered around **government** (the body which governs) and **governance** 统治/支配/管理 (how a polity 政体/政治组织 is governed). Note the many different suffixes 词尾 attached, the different parts of speech 词类, and related meanings for each word! Try making a sentence with at least three of them. (i.e. In “the policy world,” governments are interested in sharing “best practices” 最优方法 in how they govern, to improve the quality of their governance and strive for what political scientists call “good governance 良好的治理/善政.”)

Since at least the 1800s, the most important political form (and level of government) is the **state**. But what is a state? To Max Weber's classic definition (“a bounded territory with a government which has a monopoly on the legitimate use of force”), we currently add international recognition 国际承认 as a state (especially by other states in the UN). Many scholars believe current scholarship focuses too much on states or that they are losing power compared to other political forms, but they remain a well-established, standard starting point. Most modern states are “**nation-states** 单一民族国家,” and either deliberately contrast themselves or avoid comparison with “**empires** 帝国,” but it's very difficult to talk about nation-states or empires without getting polemical 争议的, so let's stay focused on “the state.”

To talk about “the state” (sing. 单数形式) as a political form is different from talking about states (pl. 复数), as in: “There are 50 states in the USA.” Similarly, “the state” has a very specific meaning when we talk about policy, usually in contrast with “the private sector 私营部门.” For policy discussion, “the state,” “the public sector 公共部门,” and “the government” are often used interchangeably 可交换地 and are nearly synonymous 同义的.

While all states must have a government (or else be anarchic 无政府状态的 or “failed states” 失败的国家), to study politics in detail, we need a variety of specialized vocabulary to describe and compare changes in particular **institutions** 政治制度/机构 of government and governance.

Various terms are used to describe the **head of state** 国家元首, ranging from the pre-modern “king” or “emperor” to positions which vary in how modern they sound, whether and how their power is limited, and how they attain 取得 their position: president 总统, chairman 主席, prime minister 总理/首相, supreme leader 最高领导人, dictator 独裁者, etc. all refer to heads of state and include value judgments 价值判断 about their legitimacy 合法性. In discussions of the power of any individual, it is useful to mention the Western truism 自明之理/老生常谈: “Power corrupts. Absolute power corrupts absolutely.” Do you agree or disagree with this? Does China have an equivalent 相同的 axiom 公理?

Two of the most important and specialized words to talk about government academically in comparative politics are “**regime**” (or “political system”) 政权/制度 和 “**administration**” (or “government”). A regime describes the whole political system of a state or other polity, including especially the rules or laws for how the head of state and other leaders gain power and state-society relations in general. In a sense, modern regimes may be somewhat analogous 类似的 to how Western scholarship views “pre-modern” and “early modern” Chinese **dynasties** 朝代, like the Qing, Ming, Yuan, and so on (though these conceptual terms on “periodization 周期化” --especially “modernity” itself--originated in the West and don't map well onto Chinese history!). What similarities and differences do you see between regimes and dynasties? Are there any “modern dynasties” in the world today in government or business? In the USA?

A very important concept in recent decades, “**regime change** 政权更迭, 政权改变” refers not only to removing or overthrowing 推翻 a particular leader (i.e. Saddam 萨达姆 Hussein in Iraq) but also replacing the rules which governed political succession 继承权 and perhaps even the political culture which enabled or allowed the old leader to hold political power. The stakes 赌注 in regime change needn't always be as high as an entire state; any organization may refer to a change in leadership, policy, and protocol 规章制度, especially to show a “break with the past 与过去决裂” as a regime change. Note that a regime may also be a set of rules or sanctions 制裁 in other, specific contexts other than domestic political systems.

Administration, by contrast with a regime, is not just something that government *does*. The terms “administration” and “government” are equivalent when referring to a head of state's staff and time in office, especially when limited by law to “**term limits** 任期限制.” Although the CCP regime has remained in power for the entirety of the existence of the PRC state, China scholars in the West still call the transition between Mao and Deng a regime change, because there were major changes in the 1982 Constitution and what political scientists call “the rules of the game.” We refer to “the Mao/Maoist Regime” and “the Deng Regime,” though recent Chairmen's tenures 任期 like Jiang, Hu, and Xi are sometimes referred to as one would a U.S. president's or British prime minister's administration or government (i.e. the Obama Administration, the Labor government of Tony Blair). Around the world, calling an individual leader the head of a regime suggests that s/he and the political system s/he leads is less (and often less than) democratic. This brings up the topic of regime types, which is beyond the scope of this handout and highly controversial in states whose regimes have been given the undesirable label as “non-democratic” in Western media and scholarship.

The different roles and relationships between the how the government is organized and the people who make decisions in the government show a fundamental, philosophical 哲学的 divide between “**structure**” and “**agency**.” Be careful not to confuse the concept of agency, the ability of an individual or group to *act* or otherwise make an independent decision (similar to “free will” 自由意志), with an agency 部门 within the government! In general, U.S. political scientists (and historians) focus more on structure than agency.

When speaking in general about politics, U.S. scholars also like to distinguish between **theory** 理论, which claims to be based on empirically verifiable 经验证实, objective facts, and **ideology** 意识形态. Ideology tells us about “the way things should be” and is often the fundamental source of political opinions and (often misguided) policies. Philosophers call this the “fact/value distinction” or the difference between “what is” and “what ought (to be).” Many, generally called “**post-modernists** 现代派后期的,” reject this distinction and the possibility of objective truth. Examples of political theories (in international politics) include realism and liberalism, “sub-theories” like Hegemonic Stability Theory and Democratic Peace Theory, respectively. Ideologies (in political economy) include capitalism, communism, and market-fundamentalism.

This handout was created by Julian Lee for educational use in classes at Northeast Normal University (NENU). It is hoped that nothing discussed in it will be grounds for reprimand or deportation! More like this at www.omnifoo.info