

simplicity of a theory and the number of exceptions we are willing to tolerate. We do not really have any choice. Without theories, we are faced with the unreadable chaos of reality.

\* Actually, what social scientists do in developing theories is not different from what we normally do every day in interpreting our environment. Social scientists merely interpret reality in a more systematic and explicit way. Without theories, students of society are trapped. They are reduced to merely observing events, without comment. Imagine a physicist—or a fruit picker for that matter—operating in the absence of theory. All she could do if she saw an apple falling from a tree would be to duck, and she would not even know which way to move.

Social theory, then, is the sum total of all those theories developed by social scientists to explain human behavior. Political theory, a subset of social theory, consists of all theories that have been developed to explain *political* behavior.

### Types of Political Research

The way a particular political scientist conducts research will depend both on the uses that she visualizes for the project and on the way she marshals evidence. Political research may be classified according to these two criteria.

The two main ways by which to distinguish one piece of research from another are as follows:

1. Research may be directed toward providing the answer to a particular problem, or it may be carried on largely for its own sake, to add to our general understanding of politics. This distinction, based on the *uses for which research is designed*, may be thought of as **applied** versus basic research.
2. Research may also be intended primarily to discover new facts, or it may be intended to provide new theories to account for old facts. Thus, political research can be characterized by the *extent to which it seeks to provide new factual information* (**empirical** versus **nonempirical**).

Table 1-1 shows us the four types of political research based on different combinations of these two dimensions. **Normative theory** consists of arguments about *what should be* in politics. Probably the oldest form of political research, it includes among its practitioners Plato, Karl Marx, Ayn Rand, and others. It is applied research; that is, its goal is problem solving. This means that it is not intended so much to devise or amend political theories as to use what political theories tell us about society and politics as a basis for making political decisions.

TABLE 1-1 Types of Political Research

	Applied	Recreational
Nonempirical	Normative theory	Positive theory
Empirical	Engineering research	Theory-oriented research

It is also  
of fact.  
moral  
Mill's a  
the ad  
of gove  
potenti  
respons

Lik  
Howeve  
to solve  
reappor  
ment pr

The  
science,  
is a thri  
departm  
institute  
Researc  
as the R  
politics.

Nor  
often th  
not the  
is done  
schools,  
Weekly S

At t  
recreatic  
the unpl  
This typ  
might m  
political  
of exerci  
sense of  
empirica

Posi  
recently  
theorists  
they pos  
argumen  
posited c  
to take tl  
goal is to  
agreed-up

ceptions we are willing to tolerate. We theories, we are faced with the unreadable

developing theories is not different from what environment. Social scientists merely inter- way. Without theories, students of society ring events, without comment. Imagine a perating in the absence of theory. All she would be to duck, and she would not even

all those theories developed by social ical theory, a subset of social theory, ped to explain *political* behavior.

ducts research will depend both on d on the way she marshals evidence. to these two criteria.

sh one piece of research from another

g the answer to a particular problem, ke, to add to our general understand- the *uses for which research is designed*, e research.

to discover new facts, or it may be ount for old facts. Thus, political to which it seeks to provide new factual ).

litical research based on different **ative theory** consists of arguments : oldest form of political research, l Marx, Ayn Rand, and others. It solving. This means that it is not d theories as to use what political asis for making political decisions.

---

#### Recreational

---

Positive theory

Theory-oriented research

---

It is also nonempirical, in that it does not consist primarily of investigating matters of fact. It typically takes certain political facts as given and combines them with moral arguments to prescribe political action. A good example is John Stuart Mill's argument in *Considerations on Representative Government*, in which he urges the adoption of democratic representative government because (1) the chief end of government should be to facilitate the development in each citizen of his full potential (moral argument), and (2) democratic government, by giving the people responsibility, will do this (factual assumption).

Like normative theory, **engineering research** is geared to solving problems. However, its stance is empirical; it is concerned with ascertaining the facts needed to solve political problems. Some examples would be measuring the effects of various reapportionment methods, trying to design a diplomatic strategy to effect disarmament procedures, and designing policies to reduce inflation in health care costs.

These two forms of applied research are important parts of academic political science, but they are also often pursued outside of academia. Political engineering is a thriving industry and many courses relevant to it are taught in political science departments, but research and instruction in it are also often found in special separate institutes like the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard or the Institute for Research on Poverty at the University of Wisconsin. Private corporations such as the Rand Corporation and the Gallup Poll also study engineering problems in politics.

Normative theory is taught extensively in political science departments, but often this means primarily the *history* of normative theory and its development, not the active formulation of normative theories. Much work in normative theory is done in political science departments, of course, but much is also done in law schools, or outside academia by writers in philosophy, or in publications like the *Weekly Standard* or the *Nation*.

At the other end of the continuum from applied research is what I will call recreational research. It is usually called "pure" or "basic" research, but this carries the unpleasant implication that applied research is either impure or of limited value. This type of research is really not as flippant as the choice of the term *recreational* might make it seem, for this is research carried on for its own sake, to improve political theory. Political scientists pursue this type of research for the twin pleasures of exercising their minds and increasing their understanding of things. In a high sense of the word, it is "recreation." **Theory-oriented research** is recreational, empirical research.

**Positive theory**, largely a post-World War II phenomenon, is the most recently introduced form of political research. Like normative theorists, positive theorists posit certain facts about politics; but in contrast to normative theorists, they posit facts as empirical conditions rather than as the foundation for moral arguments. And they distinctively operate by deriving further implications of the posited conditions by precise logical and mathematical operations. Their concern is to take the posited facts, or assumptions, and derive theories from them. Their end goal is to develop reasonably broad and general theories based on a small number of agreed-upon assumptions.

The main use of positive theory, as in the above-mentioned example, is explanation; a positive theory is used to construct a set of conditions from which the thing we wish to explain would have logically flowed. Such explanatory positive theories are then often tested empirically through theory-oriented research. But because positive theory consists of taking a set of assumptions and working out where they lead—that is, what they logically imply—it is also useful for developing and analyzing strategies for political action. That is, we can use positive theory to construct analyses of the following form: If we want to achieve X, can we devise a set of reasonably true assumptions and an action that, in the context of those assumptions, will logically lead to the goal we desire? Positive theory is used in this way, for example, to argue for various ways to set up elections, or for various ways to arrange taxes so as to get the outcomes we want. Flat-tax proposals are a good example. They originated in argument of the following form: (a) If we want to maximize investment and economic growth, and (b) if we assume that governmental investment is inefficient and that individual taxpayers act so as to maximize their income, then (c) can we deduce what sort of taxes in the context of the assumptions of (b) would best achieve (a)?

Good work in positive theory will take a set of seemingly reasonable assumptions and will show by logical deduction that those assumptions lead inescapably to conclusions that surprise the reader. The reader must then either accept the surprising conclusion or reexamine the assumptions that had seemed plausible. Thus, positive theory provides insights by logical argument, not by a direct examination of political facts.

Following Downs' theory, a great deal of positive theory in political science has based itself on the economists' core assumption of *rational choice*: the assumption

A good example of positive theory is another classic: Mancur Olson's rational choice assumption point and allowed him to stand receive basic question of political organization assumed that when interests of professions, groups with special organizations could be expected to We should thus expect to see a wide in politics. A whole school of political around the expectation that most actively organized.

Olson laid out several conditions that must be met or problems will arise. One such condition is that the organization must have the resources that she knows no organization in town has. The largest department store in town, for example, is the J.C. Penney Association cannot function if it does not have a store on the corner, though, is not in the area. The Shop on the corner, though, is not in the area. The Shop can count on an organization being able to get its valued good unless it takes the time to get it.

<sup>2</sup>For example, Duverger (1963) assumed t

that individuals choose their actions in order to maximize some valued object and minimize the cost expended in achieving it. (In economics, the valued object is generally taken to be money; in political science, it may be money—as in theories of why and how communities seek pork-barrel spending—but theories may also posit that the valued object is political power, or a nonmonetary policy such as abortion. Sometimes the object may even be left unspecified in the theory.)

A good example of positive theory that illustrates the rational choice assumption is another classic: Mancur Olson's *The Logic of Collective Action* (1965). The rational choice assumption pointed Olson to a question no one had asked before and allowed him to stand received wisdom on its head. Olson wrote on the very basic question of political organization in society. Before his book, scholars had assumed that when interests existed in society—racial minorities, businesses, professions, groups with special concerns such as historic preservation—political organizations could be expected to emerge naturally to represent those interests.<sup>2</sup> We should thus expect to see a wide range of parties and interest groups engaged in politics. A whole school of political science, the *pluralist school*, was organized around the expectation that most of the time most of society's interests would be actively organized.

Based on the rational choice assumption, however, Olson reasoned that there was nothing natural about organization at all. From the standpoint of any individual in a group with a shared object, he concluded, participation in the group is usually nonrational. Remember that the rational choice assumption states that individuals choose their actions in order to maximize a valued object, while minimizing the cost expended in achieving it. If I am a person concerned with historic preservation, I know that unless I have very unusual resources, my individual contribution to an interest group pursuing preservation will not make a measurable difference. Let us say there are 300,000 people around the country who share my interest; if each of us contributes \$100 to the cause, the difference if I do or do not contribute is a budget of \$29,999,900 versus \$30,000,000. To the organization this amount would be trivially small, but to me \$100 makes a real difference. If I contribute, I will have expended a significant cost without getting any more of my valued good, which is not rational. What is rational, instead, is to be a *free rider* and let all those other people make the contributions. However, Olson pointed out, since every potential member of such an organization is in this same situation, the marvel should be that any interest organizations exist at all.

Olson laid out several conditions under which organizations might nonetheless arise. One such condition is that one potential member might have such large resources that she knows no organization is possible without her participation. The largest department store in town, for instance, knows that a Downtown Merchants' Association cannot function if it does not join and contribute. The Bijoux Tee-Shirt Shop on the corner, though, is not in that situation. Under these circumstances, we can count on an organization being set up, because rationally, the large store cannot get its valued good unless it takes the lead in setting up the association.

<sup>2</sup>For example, Duverger (1963) assumed this in the theory I described on pp. 2–3.

No theory can ever be all-encompassing, and in fact one function of theory may be that it highlights exceptions for closer examination. We know that many people do contribute to political organizations even though, as Olson has proved, it is irrational for them to do so. The virtue of Olson's theory in this case is that instead of viewing such contributions as "natural" and therefore ignoring them, we are forced to treat the contributions as a puzzle requiring further investigation.

However, in a wide array of settings, Olson's theory predicts behavior rather well. The excruciating efforts of public television stations to get their viewers to join rather than be free riders ("Please! Only one in ten of our viewers is a member. If you join KXXX-TV today we will send you this beautiful coffee mug!") bear testimony to the power of Olson's logic. In the next chapter, you will see that it may also help to explain why small nations typically do not pull their "fair" weight in international alliances.

Although positive theory is the fastest growing type of political research, most research and teaching in political science is still of the fourth type suggested in Table 1-1, *theory-oriented research*. This type of research is concerned with expanding our knowledge of what happens in politics and why it happens as it does. Like political engineering, it is empirical; it is concerned with discovering facts about politics. But unlike engineering, which deals with facts for their usefulness in specific political problems, this research deals with them to develop new political theories or to change or confirm old ones. Accordingly, the most important activity in this research is the development of theories linking observed facts about politics. In engineering, facts are sought out if they are needed to solve a problem; here, they are sought out if they will be useful in developing theories.

Duverger's study of political parties is an example of theory-oriented research. Another good example is a test by Michael Crow (2010) of the long-established theory of "fiscal federalism," which states that because individuals and businesses can move readily from locality to locality, city governments will tend not to provide social welfare programs. They will fear that such programs will attract an influx of people needing help and that businesses will leave the city, reducing its tax base. Rather, according to the theory, cities will leave social welfare programs to state and national governments. And because cities with large numbers of poor people have the lowest tax bases and are least prepared to deal with an influx of those needing help, tragically, exactly those cities that have the largest numbers of poor people will most fail to provide programs to help the poor.

Crow argued, however, that the theory overlooked the difficulties people and businesses face in moving from one city to another. Because of these "exit costs," he reasoned, cities might have more wiggle room than was recognized in the theory and might play a larger role in the provision of social services than was generally recognized. He tested his critique of the theory with data on social programs across all large cities in the United States, together with measures of how difficult it is for people and businesses to move into or out of each city (plus a number of other factors to take into account other possible theories). He found, as his new theory predicted, that cities where exit costs and difficulties in in-migration are high are more active in providing social services than the old theory had predicted.

Therefore, he concluded that the exit costs and the difficulties of of social programs. And, his rev cities will be especially active in

## Research Mix

Practically no research is a *pure* These are abstract distinctions, research. Generally, any specific types. Although one method will some interaction between the dif help illustrate this point.

First, let us look a bit more c as an example. Marx's theory of t His argument takes the same ger government: "Because \_\_\_\_\_ a because the state and the econor effects, we should strive to change will eliminate the bad effects." Bu the factual portions of his argum trying to work out the precise eco

It should be evident that an must begin with some factual a: willing to assume these facts fro others, as Mill was; on the other h investigation of this factual basis. degree in engineering research. It the researcher does not feel *requir* In this respect, normative theory

The distinction is an impor theorists are not required to prov free to devote more energy to c they often need to assume facts normative theorist must be free t and these, of course, cannot be t standards of factual evidence as have to be thrown out.

As a second example of the v work, let us look at a case in wh ing project found they needed to A group of sociologists led by Sa the morale of American soldiers Stouffer and his coworkers were p little to do with his objective situ



Therefore, he concluded that the theory must be revised to take into account that exit costs and the difficulties of in-migration will allow cities to offer some level of social programs. And, his revision also enriches the theory by predicting which cities will be especially active in doing this.

### Research Mix

Practically no research is a *pure* example of any of the types I have presented here. These are abstract distinctions, types of emphasis found in particular pieces of research. Generally, any specific piece of work is a mix of more than one of the types. Although one method will usually predominate, there will almost always be some interaction between the different types in any given work. Two examples may help illustrate this point.

First, let us look a bit more closely at normative theory, using Karl Marx's work as an example. Marx's theory of the dialectic is primarily a work in normative theory. His argument takes the same general form as that in Mill's essay on representative government: "Because \_\_\_\_\_ aspects of the human condition today are bad, and because the state and the economy function in \_\_\_\_\_ ways to produce these bad effects, we should strive to change the state and the economy in \_\_\_\_\_ ways, which will eliminate the bad effects." But Marx was less willing than Mill to simply *assume* the factual portions of his argument. Instead, he spent years of empirical research trying to work out the precise economic effects of capitalism.

It should be evident that anyone developing normative theories about politics must begin with some factual assumptions. A researcher may be relatively more willing to assume these facts from general experience and/or from the research of others, as Mill was; on the other hand, he may wish, like Marx, to conduct a personal investigation of this factual basis. Such activity will, of course, involve him to some degree in engineering research. It is characteristic of normative theory, however, that the researcher does not feel *required* to produce the full factual basis for his argument. In this respect, normative theory differs from the empirical types of political research.

The distinction is an important one. For one thing, the fact that normative theorists are not required to provide evidence for all their assumptions leaves them free to devote more energy to other parts of the research task. More important, they often need to assume facts that cannot possibly be tested against reality. The normative theorist must be free to imagine realities that have never existed before, and these, of course, cannot be tested. If normative theorists were held to the same standards of factual evidence as empirical researchers, all utopian dreams would have to be thrown out.

As a second example of the way in which types of research are mixed in any one work, let us look at a case in which researchers working on a primarily engineering project found they needed to develop a theory to make sense out of their work. A group of sociologists led by Samuel Stouffer was employed by the Army to study the morale of American soldiers during World War II (Stouffer and others, 1949). Stouffer and his coworkers were puzzled by the fact that often a soldier's morale had little to do with his objective situation.