

Three General Laws of Politics and Government in America (with Apologies to Sir Isaac Newton)

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ABSTRACT Since our earliest days as a profession, regularities of politics have been described in terms of laws of political behavior (Bryce 1909), but not without controversy. Reviewing a century of efforts to identify laws of politics yields numerous offerings, including Duverger's (1954) and Michels' (1915) well-known contributions. Following the structure embodied in Newton's Laws of Motion, I propose three general laws of politics and government in America: (1) political objects in motion tend to stay in motion, (2) the relationship between a candidate and his or her political force is the product of campaign funding and personal likability or appeal to the press, and (3) for every political action, there is an equal and opposite reaction (i.e., "Craig Leonard Brians Law of Unintended Political Consequences"). Each law is illustrated and discussed using examples drawn from US politics. Finally, I note several potential research limitations of these proposed laws, as well as their possible utility in teaching introductory political science courses.

Since its earliest days as a discipline, American political science has sought to define what it is to be a "science." In his presidential address at the fifth annual meeting of the American Political Science Association in 1909, James Bryce noted that, "The laws of political science are the tendencies of human nature and are embodied in the institutions men have created" (1909, 3). By characterizing the search to identify regularities in human relationships and as a way to study political structures, this British historian and ambassador to the United States both defined such laws and issued a call for the development of them.

In graduate school, many of us learn just two laws of political science: Duverger's Law (1954), and Michels' Iron Law of Oligarchy (1915). These laws usefully predict the effective number of political parties and the behavior of political parties, respectively. Although Michels' work was originally published nearly a century ago, his and Duverger's early to mid-twentieth century principles continue to motivate research in the discipline. Grofman, Blais, and Bowler (2009) offer a book-length treatment that (1) recapitulates previous examinations of Duverger's Law, (2) tests the law with

new evidence, and (3) more formally elaborates the law's "theoretical motors" that "can be broken down into 'mechanical effects' and 'psychological effects'" (2009, 2). Considering Michels' Law in US politics, Winters and Page (2009) cite evidence of continuing oligarchic tendencies in American political parties.

This article proceeds as follows: First, I review several previous efforts to describe regularities of human political behavior as "laws." Then, against this spare backdrop, I propose three general laws of political science. Finally, I humbly acknowledge two limitations inherent in this project: (1) As you will soon become aware, this is something of a seat-of-the-pants proposal (thus, it partially builds on previous work, but is somewhat constructed of whole cloth), and (2) this venture requires a temporary suspension of disbelief that political scientists can use a natural science model by constructing laws describing human behavior (for serious scholarly background of this debate offered by several skeptics, see, e.g., Farr et al. (1990); and also Smith (1996) and Farr, Hacker, and Kazee (2006)).

PREVIOUS LAWS OF POLITICS

The value of scientific laws derives from their ability to help us make testable predictions about the world around us, based on a

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theoretical framework: “The main function of general laws in the natural sciences is to connect events in patterns which are usually referred to as explanation and prediction” (Hempel 1942, 35).

Although possibly not as well known as their physical sciences counterparts, several commentators (and humorists) have described political interactions using general laws.¹ As early as Machiavelli, theorists have searched for laws to describe political actions. Political theorist Maurizio Viroli observes that “Scholars who stress the scientific nature of Machiavelli’s approach remark that he believed that the human world, like the natural world, displays regular or recurrent features which form the basis of general laws of politics” (1998, 63). The basis of Machiavelli’s laws is identified as the consistent orientation of people’s political passions throughout history (Viroli 1998, 63).

In addition to the already noted Duverger’s Law (1954) and Michels’ Iron Law of Oligarchy (1915), many commentators still describe political interactions using general laws. After elaborating the Cube Law in Proportional Representation elections (Taagepera 1986) decades ago, Rein Taagepera continues his decades-long effort to identify laws and equations that predict political behavior with the book *Making the Social Sciences More Scientific* (2008).

Absent from the literature, however, is a set of *general* laws that describe individual and group political behavior, borrowing a structure from the natural and physical sciences. In defining social science laws, I follow prominent twentieth century political scientist Harold Lasswell’s advice:

Properly understood, the laws of political science summarize relations which have held true in the past, and they bear an implicit warning concerning their application to the future—*subject to change with insight*. (Lasswell 1951, 140)²

In the next section, I offer three General Laws of Government and Politics in America that respond to Lasswell’s depiction and provide examples illustrating each of these law’s relationships. Even if the new laws proposed here are ultimately found to lack serious scholarly value, these general principles may provide a useful organizing structure for students of introductory US politics.

THREE NEW LAWS

Borrowing from the principles by which Sir Isaac Newton described motion in the physical world, I propose Three General Laws of Politics and Government in America.³ Although I term these “general laws,” this article confines its focus to their application in US politics and government.

The three laws are:

1. Political objects in motion tend to stay in motion
2. The relationship between a candidate and his or her political force (F_p) is the product of campaign funding (M) and personal likability or appeal to the press (l)
3. For every political action, there is an equal and opposite reaction—The Craig Leonard Brians Law of Unintended Political Consequences

THE FIRST LAW: POLITICAL OBJECTS IN MOTION TEND TO STAY IN MOTION

The first law of politics recognizes political inertia. That is, the natural tendency for things to keep being done how they are currently done. This continuous, directed motion may (1) carry a can-

didate through a successful campaign into legislative and policy success as an elected representative, (2) refer to the campaign activity of those in office, even if the next election is several years away, (3) stimulate the incumbency advantage, and (4) model the inertia inherent in bureaucracies.

First, candidates who gather sufficient momentum during the campaign are likely to carry this impetus into office, possibly convincing reporters that they have received a “mandate” from the voters. Following Ronald Reagan’s 1980 presidential victory, the press widely characterized this victory as a mandate. This popular perception led many Democrats in the House of Representatives to vote much more conservatively than they normally had, capitulating to President Reagan’s policy proposals (Peterson et al. 2003, 418).⁴

Second, whether “running scared” or the “perpetual campaign,” typical officeholders are constantly preparing for their next election. This ongoing job seeking behavior has produced a dialogue critical of this “permanent campaign.” In the concluding chapter of their ground-breaking book-length treatment of this phenomenon, Norman J. Ornstein and Thomas E. Mann cite myriad ways in which continuous campaigning damages the policy process (Ornstein and Mann 2000, 225).

Third, electoral inertia may be best represented by the incumbency advantage, and perhaps stronger nowhere among the world’s democracies than in the US House of Representatives.⁵ For example, even in the regime-changing fall, 2010 US congressional elections, 86.3% of current office-holders in the House of Representatives were reelected (i.e., 335 of 388).⁶

Fourth, when formed, bureaucracies resist change. No chief executive would honestly expect government agencies to nimbly move to address changing situations, but political leaders still seek to guide administrative priorities and redirect agencies’ objectives. Many leaders, however, have been foiled in these efforts. Ronald Reagan memorably quipped that, “a government bureau is the nearest thing to eternal life we’ll ever see on this earth” (Reagan 1964).

Political structures may reinforce bureaucratic inertia. Iron Triangles form enduring links between businesses, elected officials, and government agencies (Adams 1989, 24). In his farewell presidential address, former General Dwight D. Eisenhower famously warned against such embedded connections, stating that “we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex” (Eisenhower 1961).⁷

SECOND LAW: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN A CANDIDATE AND HIS OR HER POLITICAL FORCE (F_p) IS THE PRODUCT OF CAMPAIGN FUNDING (M) AND PERSONAL LIKABILITY OR APPEAL TO THE PRESS (l).

This relationship may be simply expressed:

$$F_p = M * l$$

Political force (F_p) or “capital” may be used, first, to get elected, and, second, to effect legislation after taking office. For political science, this force is typically characterized in terms of a combination of a candidate’s personal and policy characteristics. Returning to a concept discussed previously, political force is often linked to electoral mandates. For example, immediately after being reelected in 2004, George W. Bush declared that, “Let me put it to you this way: I earned capital in the campaign, political

capital, and now I intend to spend it” (Stevenson 2004).⁸ In GW Bush’s case, scholars roundly challenged this assertion, questioning whether a presidential campaign necessarily serves as a referendum on a candidate’s policies (Weiner and Pomper 2006). It may or may not be true that a successful *campaign* earns politicians extra policy prerogatives after taking (or re-taking) office, but these opinion entrepreneurs act as if it were true. Returning to another previous concept, some scholars contend that presidents’ ceaseless campaigning represents “part of a broader strategy to generate legitimacy, build political capital, and gain leverage” (Cook 2002). Clearly, this “permanent campaign” seeks to maximize political force while seeking office, as well as when in office.

Obviously, money (M) matters in major political campaigns, whether used for professional staffs, advertising, media events, travel, or other expenses. Early in the campaign season—often even well before a primary is held—money is necessary to establish a serious candidate’s presence and profile. In the run-up to the 2012 Republican Primary, Mitt Romney substantially out-fundraised the field, which helped propel his nomination victory. For example, by October 2011 Romney’s campaign had raised more than \$32,000,000, almost double second-place Rick Perry’s \$17,000,000 (FEC 2012).

Alternatively, the causal arrow may point in the opposite direction: fundraising may be an indicator of popular support and campaign organization. Thus, *how* and *when* the money is raised may be more important than how much money is gathered. For example, Adkins and Dowdle found that “with only a few notable exceptions, such as John Connally in 1980 and Phil Gramm in 1996, fundraising in the early days of the campaign closely mirrors candidate standings in the polls” (2005, 647). As his popularity climbed during the 2012 GOP Primaries, Rick Santorum’s campaign saw a huge influx of cash in the spring, finishing April 2012 with \$21,800,000 raised (FEC, 2012).

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Personal likability (1) may carry particular import with the reporters who cover politicians. Since the beginning of the TV era, an appealing personal image has been crucial for both successful campaigning and governing, as politicians sought to communicate directly with the public. Because most people receive information through elites who have direct contact with politicians, however, presenting an appealing image to reporters may be even more important. There is evidence that a candidate’s friendliness with reporters is so fundamental that the press may even deviate from its own left-of-center political preferences to offer more favorable coverage to candidates they personally like (e.g., GW Bush in the 2000 campaign) and less favorable coverage to those candidates who are more difficult to get along with or to gain access to (e.g., Clinton in 1992).⁹

The documentary *Journeys with George* (Pelosi and Bush 2003) supplies an inside view of presidential candidate influences on the press “in the campaign bubble.” During the 2000 primary

and general election campaign, Alexandra Pelosi was a producer for NBC News, traveling with the press following George W. Bush’s campaign (Pelosi and Bush 2003). Alexandra Pelosi (daughter of member of Congress Nancy Pelosi [D-San Francisco], who became Speaker of the House following the 2006 election) carried a hand-held video camera and filmed casual interactions between GW Bush and reporters. This film documents the campaign’s “charm initiative.” It also inadvertently captured the candidate’s success at wooing hardened political reporters with his engaging personality and withholding access to reporters who wrote displeasing stories. These efforts by Governor Bush may have muted negative stories about the candidate and led to more positive stories focusing on the governor’s personal attributes. Near the end of the documentary, the results of a straw poll of the reporters on the plane reveals that the reporters do not support Bush. Tellingly, the reporters strive to withhold this poll’s results from candidate GW Bush.

THIRD LAW: FOR EVERY POLITICAL ACTION, THERE IS AN EQUAL AND OPPOSITE REACTION—THE CRAIG LEONARD BRIANS LAW OF UNINTENDED POLITICAL CONSEQUENCES

This law suggests that the unintended consequences of well-meaning political actions may aggravate the original problem—even creating new, sometimes worse, problems.¹⁰ The severity of the unintended consequences may sometimes seem to be in direct proportion to how tragic or shocking the situation the policy response (e.g., statute, regulation, and executive order) is intended to address.

An illustrative example comes from the current war on drugs. When methamphetamine addiction was running rampant during the 1990s, several state legislatures sought to reduce meth availability and use by regulating the cold medication used to manufacture the drug. Implemented in the states hardest hit by the epidemic, this electronic system regulates the number of pills

containing pseudoephedrine that can be purchased by any one person, and records the names of anyone who buys the pills. According to many law enforcement sources, these restrictions on the raw ingredients used to produce methamphetamine initially slowed its manufacture, but after several years these tracking systems failed. Each box of pseudoephedrine pills can be purchased at pharmacies for less than \$10 (without a prescription) and then immediately sold to those manufacturing illegal drugs for about \$50. These high profits with (perceived) low risks have unintentionally drawn many friends and family members who serve as buyers of the cold medicine into drug enterprises (Salter 2011).

The behavior of the Founding Fathers of the United States may even offer evidence supporting this third law. Although the framing of the US Constitution predates by two centuries a formal articulation of the Craig Leonard Brians Law of Unintended Political Consequences, those who gathered in Philadelphia in

1787 seemed concerned with the risk of unintended consequences from government action. At the Convention, the Framers engineered a governmental structure that appears capable of responsiveness, but is (in reality) so laden with overlapping and shared power that the government is often too gridlocked to take decisive action (Edwards, Wattenberg, and Lineberry 2011, 45–47). Counter to many popular views, to the extent that this third law has validity, gridlock could be seen as desirable.

CONCLUSION: PURPOSE AND USEFULNESS OF LAWS OF POLITICS

Laws specifying the general nature and product of relationships are common to most sciences. In this article, I note the potential value of laws for political science. After reviewing several existing laws (and citing some humorous “laws”) related to the operation of government and politics, I propose three general laws of politics. These laws predict that: (1) political objects in motion tend to stay in motion, (2) the relationship between a candidate and his or her political force (F_p) is the product of campaign funding (M) and personal likability or appeal to the press (I), and (3) for every political action, there is an equal and opposite reaction—the Craig Leonard Brians Law of Unintended Political Consequences. Evidence finding support for each of these three laws comes from contemporary and historical examples drawn from US politics.

Although it is not difficult to imagine the utility of laws that may provide general principles to organize our study of politics—both practically and heuristically—I am not so naïve as to believe

mandate might seem peculiar to those serving in a unicameral parliament. Whether as the majority party or through a coalition, those ruling such a legislature simultaneously hold legislative and executive power, giving parliamentary leaders an automatic perceptual and actual mandate by virtue of their political dominance. In comparative perspective, perhaps these laws apply only to the United States, to the extent that there is something to the idea of “American Exceptionalism” (e.g., Lipset 1996).

Third, what are the exceptions to these political regularities (or “Laws”), and how does identifying these irregularities elucidate the Three General Laws of Politics and Government in America? Whereas the first part of this question is self-explanatory, the meaning implicit in the latter part of the question may be clarified by an illustration. For example, are there cases in which political actions accomplished their intended goals with little downside, militating against the Craig Leonard Brians Law of Unintended Political Consequences? When phrased this way, all of us can think of bills or executive orders that might meet this criterion because the legislation is narrowly drawn, precisely written, and not widely publicized. Playing the devil’s advocate, however, one could say that *any* legislation utilizes time, funding, or (at least) political capital. Thus, all legislation has opportunity costs: any political action necessarily restricts the time available to consider other actions, which is, potentially, an unintended consequence.

Still, whether one finds research significance in specifying laws of politics, these laws may have classroom applications.¹² Systematically organizing the sometimes disparate facts and

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that the laws proposed here will be uncritically accepted. To the contrary, I hope this proposal fosters dialogue on at least three fronts. First, how useful is it for political science to conceptualize relationships through broad, general statements?¹¹ Although the value of seeking universal explanations (that have many unstated exceptions) is rarely questioned in many other sciences and in engineering, the notion of these types of generalizations remain contentious among political scientists. Perhaps a set of simplified principles of US politics could convince other members of our profession—particularly those teaching high school government courses, serving in elected office, or commenting about politics on TV or radio—that our profession involves some analytical rigor beyond simply framing ideological arguments about politics with uneven evidence standards.

Second, do these laws apply outside of the US political and governmental context? The United States is the locus of my examples illustrating the three laws presented here, yet perhaps many of these laws are a product of governmental structures largely absent outside of the American case. For example, US elections are more candidate-centered, producing greater incumbency advantage. Likewise, the discussion of an electoral

details of the political world (in a nonpartisan manner) could facilitate students’ introductory study of American politics. In appraising the controversial ideas offered here, at minimum, students are prompted to examine and identify patterns of behavior among political actors and institutions.

Normatively, there may be benefits inherent to stating and acknowledging behavioral tendencies. The process of indentifying political “laws” allows us to decide if we find value in these predispositions, choose ways to channel these tendencies in different directions, and avoid future predictable political pitfalls.

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laws. Students in the same course during the fall of 2008 contributed to these laws' further development. As I continued to refine these laws, Logan Vidal (who is now a PhD student at the University of Wisconsin, Madison) contributed invaluable bibliographic research, elucidation, and commentary.

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NOTES

1. Many humorous laws of politics also exist. For example, Nies' Law states that, "The effort expended by the bureaucracy in defending any error is in direct proportion to the size of the error" (Dickson 1978, 132).

Commenting on three facets of the political process, Abrouezk's Laws of Politics advise:

1. Don't worry about your enemies, it's your allies who will do you in.
2. The bigger the appropriations bill the shorter the debate.
3. If you want to curry favor with a politician, give him credit for something that someone else did (Omar 2003).

The late Pakistani poet Kaleem Omar's (2003) news column refers to these as "Abrouezk's Laws of Politics," but the politician to whom Omar refers is actually named James Abrouezk. He was a US Representative and Senator from South Dakota during the 1970s. Abrouezk wrote two books on politics, including a memoir documenting his professional life working in Washington, DC (Abrouezk 1989).

Better known politicians also get into the act, expressing their frustrations or caricaturizing political reality in pithy observations they term "laws." For example, Lyndon Johnson's Law says, "If two men agree on everything, you may be sure that one of them is doing the thinking" (Glickman 2002, 193). Curiously, a strikingly similar statement is also attributed to former Speaker of the US House of Representatives, Sam Rayburn: "When two men agree on everything, one of them is doing all the thinking" (Steinberg 1975, 349).

The only president to have a PhD in political science coined his own law. Woodrow Wilson's Law advises, "If you want to make enemies, try to change something" (Wilson 1916).

2. Italics in original text.
3. This article refers to laws as "American" as a shorthand for politics occurring in the "United States of America" in much the same way that (1) the subfield studying US politics is called "American politics" by the APSA, (2) freshman-level introduction to US politics courses are often called "Intro to American Government," and (3) the textbooks in these courses frequently refer to the "America" as their locus of study (e.g., *Government in America* by Edwards, Wattenberg, and Lineberry, 2011; *American Government: Institutions and Policies* by Wilson, Dilulio, and Bose, 2010; *Understanding American Government* by Welch, Gruhl, Rigdon, and Thomas 2012).
4. Yet, interestingly, subsequent scholarly research failed to find evidence of a policy mandate for President Reagan among voters in the 1980 election. Miller and Wattenberg (1985) found that citizens were more likely to make their vote choice based on a negative judgment of President Carter's performance, rather than as an endorsement of candidate Reagan's policy proposals.
5. When studying the increasing incumbency advantage since the 1960s in the national legislature, Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde note that "the pattern was less clear and more erratic in Senate elections than in House elections" (2010, 245).
6. Of course, knowing that they faced steep reelection odds, there may have been some strategic retirements. Still, in the case of the 24 Democrats who retired, ran for another office, or died, 1/3 of their seats were retained by Democrats.
7. Over the years, many have commented on the irony of a former military leader and conservative politician warning about the dangers of strong relationships between those in the military and those in the private sector. Griffin (1992) examines primary documents and sheds light on the genesis of Eisenhower's farewell speech. In the years since the Eisenhower administration, the discussion of defense Iron Triangles has scarcely abated (e.g., Lavallee 2003).
8. Following this postelection press conference, articles were written documenting GW Bush's longtime (dating to his earliest days in Texas politics) fondness for using the phrase "political capital," as if this was something that one earns, banks, and then spends (Suellentrop 2004). For a book-length treatment of this topic, see Steven Schier's *Panorama of a Presidency: How George W. Bush Acquired and Spent His Political Capital* (2009).
9. The presence of reporters' liberal/Democratic party voting proclivities is hardly news. For example, in 2004 the Pew Research Center compiled a report on the state of the news media, based on the results of a broadly drawn survey of more than 500 national and local reporters, editors, and executives. A "rela-

tively small minority of journalists ... think of themselves as politically conservative (7% national, 12% local)," in contrast to the general public, in which about 33% identify as conservative (Pew 2004, 5).

10. It is not completely novel to label systematic, inadvertent reactions to government or political actions as "unintended consequences" or "unintended results." For example, political columnist Dan Walters (2008) excoriated lawmakers for moving California's presidential primary from June to February, thereby making it less influential during the drawn-out 2008 Democratic primary season. Earlier, Walters (2006) invoked the same idea when discussing the consequences of Prop 98, a California school union-backed initiative that guaranteed schools a percentage of state tax revenues—far from reducing Republican governors' influence over local school policy, this law increased politicians' micromanaging of schools. Writing about the 1988 presidential primary season, a *Herald* reporter noted the irony that this wide-area primary had made it more likely the Democratic Party would pick a liberal—either Michael Dukakis or Jesse Jackson—as its nominee, given the goals of the conservative politicians who created Super Tuesday to enhance the national influence of southern Democrats (Barker 1988).

Scholars have also long observed that political actions often have "unanticipated consequences" (Selznick 1950, 164), or "unintended consequences" (Vernon 1979).

Nor is it unique to frame this oppositional relationship in Newtonian terminology. For example, the public employee union-busting actions of Republican Governor Scott Walker seemed to energize fatigued Wisconsin Democrats. One political commentator equated this relationship to "Newton's third law of motion—for every action there's an equal and opposite reaction" (Todd et al. 2011)

What is original to this third law's construction here is that it combines a Newtonian framework, with a general statement that applies to a wide range of government and political actions.

11. An alternative general organizing principle might be a methodology (e.g., positivism, critical studies, and feminist theory), or a general framework of decision making (e.g., rational actor models and biological social science).
12. These laws might be used to teach US politics much as one might use country songs to illustrate political concepts in class. For example, when discussing the linkage between Civil Rights and one's personal experiences, students might listen to and discuss the lyrics of "We Shall Be Free" (Brooks and Davis 1992).

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