A Definition of Political Stability

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An attempt to define political stability must begin by clarifying the concepts of politics and political structure. Political behavior is any act by any member of a society that affects the distribution of the power to make decisions for that society. Political behavior is ubiquitous. Members of society behave politically insofar as, in obeying or disobeying the laws of the society, they support or undermine the power stratification system. Obedience to the law constitutes political behavior just as much as contesting elections does. For, whether intended or not, the effect of obedience to the law is to uphold the authority of those who make decisions about what the law should be, and how it is to be enforced. To uphold this authority is to aid in maintaining aspects of the distribution of power to make decisions for society. Similarly, all violations of the law constitute political behavior; every violation of law is ipso facto a defiance of constituted authority. It threatens the maintenance of the existing pattern of distribution of the power to make decisions for society. If the incidence of violations of law continues to increase, political authority eventually atrophies; that is axiomatic.

We have clearly not defined the political in the usual sense of demarcating particular acts that are political from those that are not. Nor do we intend to offer such a definition, because it is misleading to delineate the political in that fashion. Strictly speaking, there is no human act, even so simple as wearing hair long, that is intrinsically nonpolitical. This is true because the “politicalness” of an act is not a quality inherent in that act but rather a characterization of it according to (1) the context in which we study it, and (2) the context in which it occurs. To illustrate, we would not ordinarily consider long hair a form of political behavior. Yet a puritanical despot might decide that this act corrupts and consequently command everyone to cut his hair short. Suppose that shortly after such a decree has been widely and intensively publicized, all the men invited by the despot
to a state ceremony arrive with long hair. In the circumstances, we would legitimately conclude that these men were committing a very bold act of political disobedience.

It is more accurate to define the political in terms of an effect—namely, the alteration or maintenance of patterns of the distribution of the power to make decisions for the society. In that way, we arrive at a definition of the "political" which compels us to assume that all human behavior is potentially political. The objection might be made that if we assume that whatever members of society do is potentially political, the definition of political is too inclusive and therefore useless. We believe such an objection rests on an error. Our definition may not be precise enough, but that is not because it does not exclude any particular act as being intrinsically nonpolitical. The definition of the political is not a problem of making declarations about intrinsic differences between particular acts, but rather one of specifying a particular effect. If it is clear what this effect is, then the political is defined, whatever the variety of particular acts that may be associated with this effect. All the foregoing is not to suggest that, in studying political behavior we do not have to make distinctions between the acts of members of society. We do indeed make distinctions; they are based on the saliency of particular acts to the effect. We start from the effect and work backwards to the acts, which are given a role in our analysis according to our assumptions about their significance to the generation of the effect we are studying in a particular political system.

Political behavior takes place in organized society, that is, in a situation in which men are in a state of interaction, as opposed to having random contact. For people in random contact, behavior is infinitely variable and, hence, unpredictable. People in interaction behave in the context of shared expectations about what can legitimately be done in any given situation. For these people in interaction, the variability of behavior patterns is limited so that behavior can be predicted to some extent. The congeries of standardized expectations that are the basis of the predictability of behavior are called "roles." To say that people are in interaction as opposed to random contact is to say that they act out roles to some degree. The congeries of standardized expectations that govern political behavior are known as "political roles." The network of political roles in a given society forms that society's political structure. If we think of political roles in terms of their function in controlling the flow of transactions and communications among political actors, we may refer to political structure as the system of political exchanges.
The concepts of political role and political structure need further clarification. We have said that roles are congeries of expectations about how actors behave in a given situation. It is well to note that these expectations are very rarely precise in the sense that people in interaction know exactly what the role occupant must do in a given situation. Role expectations are generally vague—so much so that it is often quite easy to agree that a role has been fulfilled by two or more different sets of acts. It would be more accurate to think of role expectations not so much as a definition of legitimate behavior but as a delimitation of available behavior options. In short, role expectations amount to delineations of the variability of political behavior rather than specifications of how to act. Thus, the network of political role expectations, or the political structure, constitutes a system of channels or obstacles that control the flow of political exchanges (that is, the transactions and communications) between political actors, preventing political exchanges from fluctuating beyond certain limits and giving them a general regularity without making them perfectly predictable. Political structure may thus be called the "pattern of the flow of political exchanges."

Political stability is the regularity of the flow of political exchanges. The more regular the flow of political exchanges, the more stability. Alternatively, we might say that there is political stability to the extent that members of society restrict themselves to the behavior patterns that fall within the limits imposed by political role expectations. Any act that deviates from these limits is an instance of political instability.

To determine the extent of political stability of a polity we must be able systematically to identify both regularities and irregularities in the flow of political exchanges. Political behavior or act or exchange is regular if it does not violate the system (or pattern) of political exchanges; it is irregular if it violates that pattern.

The phrase "violates the system of political exchanges" is somewhat ambiguous, however. Whose expectations? The question arises because it is possible for some members of society to disagree over the expectations of a given role or set of roles. Such disagreement may occur on account of lack of information or differences in understanding or interpretation. It may also occur as a result of differences in values and ideological commitments. This is why it is necessary to specify that the role expectations that serve as the standard for judging whether a form of political behavior is irregular or regular is the most authoritative definition of role expectations that the society has—namely, its laws and conventions, and particularly the former.
Regular exchanges do not violate the laws of the society, irregular exchanges do. We are not assuming that it is always clear whether or not a form of behavior violates the law. Such an assumption is unnecessary. For our purposes it is enough that when it becomes an issue whether an act has violated the law or not, the issue can be resolved by appeal to the courts or whatever institution the society uses for compulsory arbitration.

The main reason for using law and custom as the arbiters of role expectations is that the two constitute the system of sanctions that gives political structure its particular character. Once the group evolves a customary or legitimate way of doing things, this way tends to persist because of the inconvenience or the cost to the individual of going against it. To say that custom exists is to say that behavior is "structured," that there are sanctions against some patterns of behavior. In other words, there are role expectations. The legal system or the institution for binding arbitration of the group or society has the same effect as custom. It limits the variability of behavior in given situations by authoritatively defining what we ought to do (obligations), what we may do (rights), and what we can do (powers). Since the legal system monopolizes the function of authoritatively deciding when infringements of proper behavior have occurred, it is the very kernel of political structure. In light of these remarks, it should be clear that our choice of criterion for resolving conflicting claims is not an assertion that constituted authority is always right, or even that its claims ought to be given priority, but rather a recognition of the fact that the dominance of a particular system of laws and conventions gives the historical polity its particular structure.

Problems and Possibilities of Measurement
When we call a form of political behavior stabilizing or destabilizing, we are describing its relation to a specific political structure or to a specific pattern of political exchanges. A form of behavior that is destabilizing in relation to one political structure may well be stabilizing in relation to another. To put it somewhat differently, no political exchange is intrinsically regular or irregular as such. Political exchanges are regular or irregular in relation to specific political structures. Therefore, to measure political stability we must hold the political structure constant momentarily. But if we must do this to take our measurements, how do we go about studying stability over time? How do we arrive at statements such as, "Polity X or Y was
highly stable over period P"? And what do such statements mean?

Suppose we want to find out the extent to which a polity was stable over a period of fifty years. Our problem is that in order to measure stability we must hold the political structure constant; yet the political structure may have changed in the course of the fifty years. We might settle for holding constant the political structure as it existed at some point in year one. Then, further, we may now use this particular structure which we are holding constant as the criterion for distinguishing between regular and irregular exchanges for the entire fifty-year period. But such a procedure would be misleading. To illustrate, imagine that a revolution took place in year five and drastically changed the system of political exchanges. By measuring stability against a single base system of exchanges from year one, we may obtain an entirely false picture of the extent of political stability during the period; for measurement of political stability for the period would not have taken account of the changes of political structure that have transformed some regular exchanges into irregular ones and some irregular exchanges into regular ones.

How, then, are we to take account of the changes of political structure when we study political stability over time? Our solution is to "pluralize" the base system of political exchanges. That means that we take measurement in as many different points in time as possible. To the extent that we can do this, we take account of changes in the political structure. For example, in the case of the polity whose stability we want to assess over a period of fifty years, it will be better to choose two base systems of political exchanges, say one in year one and one in year twenty-five, instead of using only one base system. It will be better still to reduce the intervals between the base systems of exchanges. Thus, ten-year intervals are preferable to twenty, and five-year intervals to ten, and so on. In short, the denser the base series, the more accurate our assessment will be.

If we did not pluralize our base system of political exchanges, we would not be taking account of the fact that polities change all the time, and that not all political change is destabilizing. By holding on rigidly to one base system of political exchanges, we will invariably find that our criterion of regularity will diverge from that of the polity we are studying. It is pertinent to recall that we had suggested that the basis for distinguishing between regular and irregular political exchanges is the laws and customs of the polity, particularly the former. The operational definition of irregular political exchange is what the law forbids, and the operational definition of regular political exchange is what the law does not expressly forbid. And, of
course, the relevant law is the law of the polity whose political structure is being studied. Thus, if in studying political stability over a period of time we fail to maximize the density of our base system of political exchange to take account of the polity’s changing criterion of regularity and irregularity, our measurement will be inaccurate.

There is one remaining question about the pluralization of the base system of exchanges. To pose this question we must first distinguish between two types of irregularity in political exchanges. One is the irregular exchange which is simply counted as an irregularity when it occurs, with the system of political exchanges remaining such that, the next time it occurs, it is again treated as an irregularity. This type of irregularity is called nonadaptive deviance. The other kind of irregularity is the one that becomes legitimate, modifying the system of political exchanges and the rules of the polity so that the next time it occurs it is no longer regarded as an irregularity, but rather as a regular pattern of political exchange. This type of irregularity is called adaptive deviance. It may be objected that the process of using a dense series of systems of exchanges to measure political stability over time gives too much weight to nonadaptive, and too little to adaptive, deviance. For by this method nonadaptive deviance is coded as irregularity whenever it occurs, whereas adaptive deviance soon begins to count as regularity.

The objection is irrelevant. If nonadaptive deviance is always coded as irregularity, that is as it should be. Our aim (when we measure political stability over time) is to discover to what extent the flow of political exchanges of the political population was regular in that time period. As long as any irregularity does not become legitimated or regularized, it is properly coded as an irregularity whenever it occurs. Thus, it is really not a matter of overweighting nonadaptive deviance, but one of giving it its proper significance. It should be noted also that the pluralization of the base system of political exchanges for measuring stability over time does not give less weight to adaptive deviance than it should. When irregularity occurs (assume that this is the irregularity that will later become adaptive deviance), it is coded as such until the political structure and the rules of the polity are modified in such a way that this irregular pattern of exchange can no longer be accommodated under the category of irregular exchanges.

We have been referring to polities as having more or less political stability. But this is rather vague. It is necessary to find some way of talking of political stability in terms of quantities. We might score, say, one unit for every incidence of irregularity, or perhaps differenti-
ate between irregularities according to a scale of importance, scoring more units for some irregularities than for others. By this procedure the total number of units that the polity scores will be a quantitative expression of changes in its degree of political stability. While a series of such readings taken for a given polity at given time intervals will tell us whether the polity’s political stability is increasing or decreasing, and by how much, it will not really tell us the degree to which there is political stability. And it is virtually useless for the purposes of a vigorous comparative study of the political stability of political systems.

If political stability is the regularity of the flow of political exchanges, then the level of political stability should be expressed quantitatively as a proportion: the ratio of regular exchanges to the totality of political exchanges. This is more easily said than done. The problem is how to get additive data from the concept of political exchanges. We can count manifest violations of the pattern of political exchanges to give us the nominator of our fraction. How about the denominator? How do we assign a quantity to the totality of political exchanges? While acts that violate the pattern of political exchanges stand out in fairly clear relief, the other exchanges meet and merge in a confusing manner. To derive a quantity for total political exchanges, we have to make some phenomenally crude distinctions between political exchanges.

An entirely satisfactory solution to this problem is difficult to conceive. It would appear that we have to settle for an oblique and crude measure of political stability. Instead of measuring the level of political stability as a ratio of irregular exchanges to the totality of political exchanges, we could measure it as a ratio of political actors who violate the pattern of political exchanges to the totality of political actors. This measurement is not as arbitrary as it seems. Let us examine some of the objections against this procedure. One is that political actors who are not explicitly violating the pattern of political exchanges may not necessarily be engaged in political behavior or, at any rate, may not necessarily be behaving in a manner that “supports” (actively) the pattern of political exchanges. The strength of this objection is weakened by the fact that regular political exchanges are a residual category. We must note that to refrain from violating the pattern of political exchanges is to behave in a manner that is positively associated with the persistence of that pattern of political exchanges. From this point of view it would be quite legitimate to include all political actors who are not violating the pattern of political exchanges in the denominator of our fraction.

The second objection is that, although violations are ultimately the
act of individuals, the number of violations of the pattern of political exchanges does not necessarily coincide with the number of political actors, because one person can commit many violations. The implication is that by adding the number of violators and using this sum as the nominator, we underplay the level of political instability. This objection is not so serious when we remember the significance of a point we made earlier—that to measure political stability we have to freeze the political structure temporarily. When we do so, the picture we obtain does not show us the process of political exchanges as such, but rather a political population caught between postures of conformity and deviance.

Third, according to conventional usage, the political actor may be an organization rather than a person. Thus, counting political actors may give a totally false picture of the distribution of the members of the society between conformity and deviance. The objection is valid; but it is easily met by reducing political actors to biological persons for the purpose of measuring political stability.

In the fourth place, we cannot simply count political actors on either side of the law, because measurement of political stability has to reflect the fact that, just as some political exchanges are more important, so are some political actors more important than others. This view is quite mistaken. It is based on a misunderstanding of what political stability is. When we measure political stability, we are simply measuring the incidence of conformity or violation in regard to a given pattern of political exchanges. It is rather like watching traffic to determine the incidence of traffic violations. However, if we wanted to transform our measurements into some formula for predicting changes in the level of political stability, some weighting would be necessary. We would want to convert our readings of political stability into a statement about the balance of political forces. We would want to know not only who or how many are conforming to, or violating, the pattern of political exchanges, but also the relative political influence of these two classes of the political population. Obviously, the ability of any group of political actors to cause changes in the propensity to conform to the system of political exchanges will vary with their influence rather than with their number. Be that as it may, we must keep apart questions of measurement and those of prediction and explanation. When we measure political stability, we are only determining the distribution of a given political population between two patterns of manifest behavior.

To summarize, we measure political instability in the following way:

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Degree of political stability at a given point in time = \( \frac{p}{\pi} \)

Where \( p \) is the number of political actors (persons) violating the system of political exchanges, and \( \pi \) is total political population.

Degree of political stability over a time period = \( \frac{1}{N} \sum_{i=1}^{N} X_i \)

Where \( N \) is number of readings and \( X \) is score of reading.

All other things being equal, \( \frac{1}{N} \sum_{i=1}^{N} X_i \) is more accurate as \( N \to \infty \)

**Merits of Definition**

What are the merits of the definition of political stability suggested here? First, our definition avoids the presumption that some political acts are intrinsically or universally destabilizing. Among the political acts that are usually given that status are political assassinations, coups d’état, and frequent changes of the executive of the state. The presumption is misleading. A form of behavior that is stabilizing relative to one political structure or pattern of political exchanges may be destabilizing relative to another. If we have a political system in which the law requires that elections must be held every five years, we may describe an occasion when the leaders in power refused to obey this law and continued to exercise power as an instance of political instability. The refusal of the leaders in office to seek mandate at the appropriate time is a disruption of the political structure. On the other hand, if there is a political system in which inheritance is the only legitimate form of succession, the substitution of succession by election can be politically destabilizing, depending on how the new mode of succession is introduced.

The point is elementary. But it is necessary that it be emphasized because contemporary writings on political stability invariably reflect no consciousness of it. The general trend in writings on political stability is to designate some forms of political behavior, such as frequent changes of government, as instances of political instability. As a rule they reflect no awareness of the fact that, in calling these forms of behavior destabilizing, we are describing their relationship to a particular pattern of political exchanges. Similarly, in comparative studies of political instability, some forms of behavior designated as instances of political instability are quantified and used as a basis for comparing the political stability of different political systems. There is no recognition of the fact that such a procedure will be legitimate only if we can assume that all polities, or at least all the
polities being compared, have exactly the same political structure. Our definition of political stability avoids this elementary but significant error.

Second, the definition offered here avoids the confusion of political instability with political change and political stability with absence of political change. If political stability is the regularity of the flow of political exchanges, then it is compatible with any amount of change as long as the change occurs in accordance with established role expectations—that is, as long as it does not violate established expectations about whether the type of change in question ought to occur and, if so, how it is to be brought about. Political change becomes destabilizing only when it violates the pattern of political exchanges. The distinction between change that is compatible with political stability and change that is destabilizing is made according to the same criteria that we use for sorting out irregular political exchanges.

The measurements of political stability must reflect our consciousness of the difference between lack of change and political stability. In particular, when we want to measure political stability over time, we must avoid the presumption that the political structure or the pattern of political exchanges remains constant over that period. For these reasons, we have suggested the pluralization of the base systems of political exchanges. The procedure ensures that we do not interpret all political change as political instability.

While there is nothing profound in all this, writings on political stability somehow manage to neglect these simple but important points. To be sure, one does not usually find the assertion that political stability is the same as lack of change. But such an assertion is, in fact, implicit in many of our more influential treatments of political stability. Consider the studies that bring longevity into the definition of political stability, such as S. M. Lipset’s Political Man. Once we build the idea of longevity into our notion of political stability, we are already confusing stability with lack of change. Such conception of stability amounts to rejection of the idea that change in itself is not an instance or a manifestation of instability. The confusion of change with instability nurtures the popular notion that modernization is destabilizing, that “developing” nations are highly unstable. We would be far less impressed by the political instability of “developing” nations if we were to remember that the fact that a political structure or part of it is changing considerably tells us nothing about its political stability.

Third, this definition is relatively free from the error of making
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statements about levels of political stability without seriously taking into account the totality of political exchanges. It will be readily conceded that, when we talk of political stability, it is political structures or patterns of political exchanges whose stability is at issue. But the way we discuss and measure political stability rarely reflects such awareness. The usual method of measuring political stability is to look at the incidence of certain kinds of political acts, such as coups d’etat, political violence, constitutional crisis, corruptions in high office, assassination of political leaders, and civil disobedience. These phenomena are treated as if they had to be destabilizing for all political systems. But that is only one of the dangers of this procedure. The procedure raises yet another question: Why consider these particular political acts or phenomena and not others?

One has only to raise this question to see how illegitimate this procedure is. Could it be that these acts are chosen because they exhaust the class of destabilizing acts? Obviously not. The choice of these acts or phenomena may be defended by saying that they are more important instances or manifestations of political instability than are others. This position, too, will require elaborate theoretical justification. What can “important” mean in this context? Important “for” political stability? But that cannot be. For the implication would be that political instability is something other than these phenomena. Such implication is incompatible with the use of these phenomena as measures of political instability, although it is of course not incompatible with their use for predicting changes in the level of political stability. Could it be that they are important in the sense of representing a larger quantity of political instability than other phenomena? That cannot be because measurement of political stability is the determination of the relative frequency of a certain pattern of manifest political behavior.

Another difficulty with this procedure is that when destabilizing acts are limited to a few that are supposedly “important,” the ones we select tend to be associated with political behavior on the level of elites. An examination of factors that are conventionally regarded as manifestations of political instability—such as coup d’etat, constitutional crisis, frequent changes of regime, electoral violence, political assassinations, abuse of high office—shows that they are indeed primarily political interactions associated with elites.

What elites do or what happens to them is very important for understanding a political system; and there are many good reasons for giving special attention to interactions associated with elites. If, for instance, we want to predict how far the level of political stability
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will change in future, we must pay special attention to the propen-
sities and patterns of interaction of elites, since it is axiomatic that the
political system is most likely to change in the direction of their
wishes and propensities. To put it more concretely, in a political
system in which assassinations and automobile thefts are irregular
political exchanges, the assassination of the prime minister is certain
to lead to more disruptions of the pattern of political exchanges than
the theft of an automobile. The measurement of political stability
does not, however, call for special attention to what elites do or what
happens to them, because the level of political stability is the inci-
dence of the pattern of political exchanges. Thus, the assassination of
the prime minister is an instance of violation, just as the theft of the
automobile is. For the purposes of measurement of political instabil-
ity, both acts have the same status, regardless of the strong probability
that the assassination is more likely to lead to further violations of the
system of political exchanges. Since we are measuring the incidence
of a manifest pattern of behavior at a point in time, this probability is
irrelevant. If the assassination leads to other violations of the pattern
of exchanges, these will naturally be considered when we take
another reading at the time they occur.

We have now seen some of the difficulties of designating certain
acts as the manifestations of political instability and of measuring
political instability according to the incidence of these acts. Inasmuch
as this conception and measurement of political instability have deter-
mined much of our conventional beliefs about the phenomenon of
political stability, we must reexamine these beliefs. We are entirely
too sure that some political systems are more stable than others. The
belief that the Western democracies are highly stable is very strong.
Few people are not convinced that the industrialized countries are
more stable than the “underdeveloped” countries. If we look at the
totality of the political exchange, the validity of these beliefs is not so
evident. Once we grant that phenomena such as coups d’etat are
only some of the manifestations of political instability, then we
cannot conclude that polity A is less stable than polity B just because
such phenomena occur more frequently in A. In any case, this type of
comparison is problematic because that which destabilizes one politi-
cal structure may not necessarily destabilize another.

We must reexamine more fundamentally the belief that there is a
problem of political instability. The belief rests on a fuzzy conception
and inadequate measurements of the phenomenon of political instabil-
ity. Is a palace revolt of the military in Ghana, or the collapse of
another coalition government in France really significant as political
instability, if we consider the totality of political exchanges and the total political population? Why are we so concerned about the problem of political instability in the face of the array of forces which brutally curb the propensity to disrupt the political structure in contemporary society?

Not surprisingly, the main biases in contemporary scholarship on political stability happen to be the types of biases that political elites would have—the confusion of change with instability, the tendency to reduce politics to elite interactions, the tendency to exaggerate the "problem" of political stability. The scholarship on political stability reflects—less subtly than usual—the class consciousness of contemporary political science.