Chapter 8: Political Geography

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# 8.1 STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of this section, the student will be able to:

1. Understand: how political space is organized.
2. Explain: how states cooperate in military and economic alliances.
3. Describe: the various types of boundaries and how boundary disputes develop.
4. Connect: the electoral process in the United States to ethnic, urban/ rural, and regional affiliations.

# 8.2 CHAPTER OUTLINE

8.3 Introduction

8.4 How Political Space is Organized

8.5 Cooperation Between States

8.6 Boundaries and Boundary Disputes

8.7 The Electoral Process

8.8 Key Terms Defined

8.9 Works Consulted and Further Reading

8.10 Endnotes

# 8.3 INTRODUCTION

When most people think of geography, they think about memorizing the states, state capitals, and perhaps learning the location of various countries around the world. These facts deal with the subdiscipline of political geography because they show how politics is reflected on the surface of the Earth, but political geography is much more than a “trivial pursuit” of such information. Although having knowledge about the locations of countries and states is fundamental and an important foundation for the study of political geography, the subject matter deals with many other topics such as military and economic alliances, boundaries between countries, terrorism and other civil-military conflicts, and the geography of the electoral process.

# 8.4 HOW POLITICAL SPACE IS ORGANIZED

The fundamental unit of political space is the **state**, and this type of state is different than the states that make up the United States. A state is basically synonymous to a country and represents a formal region in which the government has sovereignty or control of its own affairs within its territorial boundaries. The number of states in the world is currently 196, but this number changes through military conquests or the devolution, or breakup, of states. For example, the United Kingdom has devolved over the past 70 years as the Republic of Ireland has broken away from the UK, and a new referendum may occur in the next few years to decide whether or not Scotland will become independent. Another prime example of the creation of new states occurred after the breakup of the Soviet Union, when fifteen states were created in Eastern Europe. Even a terrorist group, the Islamic State, has tried to establish its own state in portions of Syria and Iraq, even though their legitimacy is not recognized by the international community.

States in which the territorial boundaries encompass a group of people with a shared ethnicity are known as **nation-states**. These states are generally homogeneous in terms of the cultural and historical identity of the people, and these groups of people are referred to as a **nation**. A few current examples of nation-states are Japan, Finland, and Egypt. Nation-states are actually in the minority compared to **multinational states**, which are states that have more than one nation within their borders. With international migration being a significant phenomenon worldwide, more states become multinational. In contrast, some nations exist but do not have their own state, and those nations that desire to become nation-states are known as **stateless nations.** In the United States, a prime example of stateless nations are the many Native American tribes scattered throughout the countries. Other examples include the Palestinians living in Israel, Syria, Lebanon and Jordan, and the Kurds found in Iraq, Turkey, Syria, and Iran (**Figure 8.1**). Both the Kurds and the Palestinians are actively seeking statehood, but serious obstacles must be overcome because the countries where they live are reluctant to grant them independent territories.

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Figure 8.1 | Kurd-majority areas in Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran

**Author |** U.S. Central Intelligence Agency

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The solidarity and unity of a state is influenced by both centripetal and centrifugal forces. **Centripetal forces** tend to bind a state together, and **centrifugal forces** act to break up a state. Examples of centripetal forces include nationalism, economic prosperity, and strong, ethical security forces. Centrifugal forces include wars, ineffective or corrupt governments, and market failure. Other factors that can influence the solidarity of a state include types of boundaries, ethnic differences (which may result in unity or discord), and the compactness of a state.

The compactness of a state is related to the shape of a state, and a **compact state** is one that is ideally circular in shape, where the distance from the center to any border is roughly equal. In contrast, a **fragmented state** is one that is discontinuous in nature and may consist of a number of islands. A few examples of fragmented states include Indonesia and the Philippines. Indonesia consists of over 17,000 islands, and in order to increase the solidarity of the state, the government actively encouraged migration to less populated islands in order to assimilate indigenous populations. In the Philippines, control of its southern islands such as Mindanao is problematic because of terrorist groups that are active in those areas.

# 8.5 COOPERATION BETWEEN STATES

In order to provide shared military and economic security as a unified entity, states engage in alliances. Military alliances help protect states from common enemies, and economic alliances allow for the free exchange of goods in a larger market. These alliances are also referred to as **supranational organizations**, and they all involve states giving up some of their sovereign power for the common good. The largest supranational organization in the world is the United Nations (UN). Formed originally as the League of Nations after World War II, the UN now includes 193 states. The work of the UN includes peacekeeping, humanitarian relief, and the establishment of internationally approved standards of behavior. The headquarters of the UN is in New York City, and important subsidiary organizations of the UN include the World Health Organization (WHO), UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Cultural and Cultural Organization) and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO).

## 8.5.1 Military Alliances - NATO and Warsaw Pact

In terms of military alliances on a regional scale, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) comprises 28 states and was developed after World War II to counter the threat of the former Soviet Union. Member states include numerous Western European states as well as the United States and Canada (**Figure 8.2.**).

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Figure 8.2 | Current NATO map and former Warsaw Pact

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When the Soviet Union existed, the Warsaw Pact was a military alliance between the Soviet Union and seven satellite states of Eastern and Central Europe (**Figure 8.2**). The Warsaw Pact disbanded in 1991, and several of the former Soviet states as well as satellite states have subsequently joined NATO. As a result, Russia has felt isolated and vulnerable, and as a result, has been aggressively acting to seize or control territories in states close to its borders.

For example, in 2008, Russia engaged in a military conflict in Georgia, one of the former Soviet states, in order to support a separatist movement allied with Russia. In 2014, Russia invaded the peninsula of Crimea, within the territorial boundaries of Ukraine, one of the former states in the Soviet Union. Furthermore, Russia has intervened militarily against the rebel forces fighting in eastern Ukraine. In response to these provocations, NATO commenced Operation Atlantic Resolve, an ongoing series of training exercises between the United States and other NATO countries in former Warsaw Pact countries such as Poland, Romania, and Latvia.

## 8.5.2 Military Alliances – Terrorism

Although terrorists are characterized as non-military, non-state actors, they have a tremendous impact on states around the world and involve allied groups in many countries. **Terrorism** is the intimidation of a population by violence in order to further political aims. The first terrorist group with global influence is Al Qaeda, formed in 1988 by Osama bin Laden. Although its influence has waned in the past decade, Al Qaeda was responsible for the 9/11 attacks and had several affiliates including Boko Haram in Nigeria and Abu Sayyaf in the Philippines. With the rise of the Islamic State (ISIS/L) in Iraq and Syria in 2013, terrorist groups such as Boko Haram and Abu Sayyaf have consequently declared allegiance to ISIS/L. ISIS/L is an extremist Muslim group that intends to seize as much territory as possible in the Middle East and force their subjects to adhere to their strict version of Islamic fundamentalism. To facilitate their goal, ISIS/L conducts an extensive campaign on social media to recruit fighters to come to Syria and also conduct individual attacks in their home country. Their media campaign has been successful in recruiting numerous militants to come to Syria and to inspire or instigate attacks in the United States, France, Belgium, England, Sweden, Turkey, Afghanistan, Yemen, and Saudi Arabia (**Figure 8.3**). Furthermore, ISIS/L is conducting regular military operations in Libya and Egypt.

To combat the Islamic State and other terrorist groups, interesting military alliances have developed, and the situation is exceptionally complex. The United States cooperates with numerous NATO allies to train and equip local military forces in Iraq and Syria. Iran, in alliance with Iraq, has provided assistance in driving ISIS/L out of Iraq. Kurdish forces in northern Iraq and Syria, in concert with NATO forces, have conducted much of the military action, and they hope for an independent state because of these efforts. Complicating this situation is the objection of the central governments of Iraq, Syria, and Turkey to an independent Kurdish state. Further clouding the situation is the alliance between Russia and the Syrian central government. Although these two countries do fight against ISIS/L, they are also opposed to other Syrian rebel forces, which the United States supports. The problem of ISIS/L propaganda is being addressed by numerous governments and social media outlets such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. More importantly, though, military success on the ground against ISIS/L forces in Iraq and Syria is decreasing the influx of foreign fighters as well as the proliferation of internet propaganda.

Map

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Figure 8.3 | Map of ISIS/L global influence[[1]](#endnote-1)

**Author |** Corey Parson

**Source |** Original Work

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## 8.5.3 Economic Alliances – European Union and NAFTA

One of the most prominent economic alliances in the world is the European Union (EU), which consists of 28 member states (**Figure 8.4**). What began as the European Community (EC) in 1958, the European Union has grown significantly from the original six members and now includes seven Eastern European states that were formerly in the Soviet Union. The EU has developed a common currency, the euro, for all member countries and a European Central Bank. Furthermore, at most boundaries, a passport is not required to enter another country.

One of the weaknesses of the EU is the need to subsidize poorer countries, creating financial difficulties for the more wealthy members. For example, Greece has experienced large debts that have required rescue funding from the EU. Another issue confronting the EU is whether or not to allow Turkey to join, as Greece has long-standing disputes with Turkey over territory in Cyprus, and the Turkish central government has been accused of anti-democratic practices. Perhaps most concerning for the EU is the imminent departure of the United Kingdom (UK) from the alliance in an action termed “Brexit.” In 2016, the UK voted by referendum to leave the EU, and is on schedule to formally break away in 2019. The UK’s decision to leave the EU is not solely related to economics, as not only is the EU an economic alliance, but agreements on social and political policies are involved as well. The majority of British citizens are generally against the subsidizing of poorer states and the increasing number of immigrants who use scare public resources, and they generally desire greater autonomy. With the exit of Britain from the EU, EU members are concerned that other states may follow suit.

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Figure 8.4 | European Union

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An important economic alliance for the United States is the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Established in 1992, this alliance integrates the United States, Mexico and Canada and facilitates the flow of goods and services across borders. The Trump administration has repeatedly criticized this agreement, as manufacturers have relocated production to Mexico which has resulted in the loss of manufacturing jobs in America. Whether or not the United States withdraws from NAFTA or simply renegotiates the agreement remains to be seen.

Another significant alliance that is being considered is the Trans-Pacific Partnership, an agreement between 11 countries that border the Pacific Ocean, and originally included the United States. The proposal was signed in February 2017, but the United States had already withdrawn from the agreement in January of the same year, making ratification virtually impossible. The goal of the agreement is to promote economic prosperity by lowering tariff barriers, but also promote environmental and labor protections as well as protect intellectual property. Critics say that it would result in the loss of U.S. jobs and weaken the sovereignty of the U.S.

# 8.6 BOUNDARIES AND BOUNDARY DISPUTES

*“Good fences make good neighbors.”*

-Robert Frost

As mentioned in Section 13.4, boundaries can influence the solidarity of a state, as boundaries disputes can result in conflict. A **boundary** is essentially an invisible, vertical plane that separates one state from another, so it includes both the airspace above the line on the surface and the ground below. Boundaries can be both physical and anthropogenic, and while it is difficult to categorize all boundaries, some prominent boundary types exist.

**Physical boundaries** are natural features on the landscape such as rivers, lakes, and mountains. The Rio Grande is an important physical boundary on the southern border of the United States. Like most rivers, the Rio Grande shifts gradually (and sometimes abruptly) through time. As a result of the fact that the course of a river is not fixed, a river boundary can be problematic. In fact, because of the gradual shift in the Rio Grande in the vicinity of El Paso, the United States and Mexico established the Chamizal Treaty which reestablished the boundary and included a more permanent relocation of the river channel by engineering (**Figure 8.5**). Some examples of mountain ranges as boundaries include the Zagros Mountains between Iraq and Iran, the Pyrenees between Spain and France, and the Andes Mountains between Chile and Argentina.

Map

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Figure 8.5 | Chamizal Treaty map

**Author |** Mike Hayes

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In contrast to physical boundaries, **geometric boundaries** and **ethnic boundaries** are not related to natural features. Instead, in the case of geometric boundaries, they are straight lines. These straight lines could coincide with latitude or longitude, as is the case with the northwestern boundary of the United States with Canada along 49o north latitude. Likewise, Indonesia and Papua New Guinea is separated by another geometric boundary along the 141st meridian.

For ethnic boundaries, they are drawn based on a cultural trait, such as where people share a language or religion. The border between India, which is predominantly Hindu, and Pakistan, which is predominantly Muslim, is one example. Some borders split ethnic groups that are more closely related to the people on the other side of the border. For example, in eastern Ukraine, the majority of the population speaks Russian and is sympathetic to Russians on the other side of the border. As a result, the current conflict between Russia and Ukraine has been problematic for the Ukrainian central government because of the Russian affiliation with eastern Ukraine. Russian influence in eastern Ukraine is an example of **irredentism**, or an effort to expand political influence of a state on a group of people in a neighboring state.

Another prime example of where boundaries do not coincide closely with ethnic groups is in Africa. Almost 50 percent of the boundaries in Africa are geometric, and at least 177 ethnic groups are split in two or more states. If all ethnic groups in Africa were to be enclosed in their own boundaries, Africa would have over 2,000 countries (1). Because ethnic groups straddle many boundaries in Africa, this situation has led to considerable cross-border trade, but also has created numerous conflicts. For instance, several wars have occurred because the Somali ethnic group is split between five different countries.

# 8.7 THE ELECTORAL PROCESS

## 8.7.1 Gerrymandering

In the United States, boundaries play an important role in the electoral process, but in this case, district, and precinct boundaries are significant in contrast to the country boundaries that have been previously discussed. Political parties in power will sometimes rearrange the boundaries of voting districts in order to ensure victory in elections, and this practice is called **gerrymandering**. Gerrymandering strategies can involve drawing the boundaries so that the majority of voters in a district favor the party in power. Another method is to segregate the opposition voters into several different districts (**Figure 8.6**).

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Figure 8.6 | Gerrymandering Methods

**Author |** Steven Nass

**Source |** Urban Milwaukee

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While gerrymandering is not generally illegal in the United States, it can be challenged in court when it appears to clearly discriminate against minority populations. For example, when legislative districts where redrawn in 2015 in Gwinnett and Henry counties in Georgia, the NAACP filed a federal lawsuit because of the perception that the adjustment violated the rights of minority black voters. A 2013 Supreme Court decision, however, declared that a requirement in the 1965 Voting Rights Act for federal oversight of redistricting is not constitutional, and this decision may have an impact on such lawsuits.

## 8.7.2 Presidential Elections

One of the more intriguing aspects of political geography in the United States is presidential elections and how the Electoral College process has a decidedly spatial component. An examination of the presidential results from the 2016 election reveals interesting regional affiliations (**Figure 8.7**). Northeastern and Mid-Atlantic states, as well as far Western states, all tended to vote Democrat, while the rest of the electoral map is Republican. Although it appears that the Republican victory was decisive from a spatial and Electoral College perspective, from the standpoint of the popular vote, Democrats actually had more votes than Republicans. The dichotomy is explained by the very large populations in both California and New York, predominantly Democrat states. California’s large population is reflected in a high number (55) of Electoral College votes, more than any other state.

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Figure 8.7 | Presidential Election of 2016

**Author |** User “Gage”

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Another marked trend in the voting map is evident when the election results are examined by county (**Figure 8.8**). Ethnic groups tend to vote in particular voting blocks, and the impact of ethnic groups can be seen more clearly by looking at individual counties. For example, a crescent of blue (Democrat) can be seen running through south-central Alabama and into eastern Mississippi. African Americans tend to vote Democrat, and these blue counties contain predominantly African American voters.

Similarly, the blue counties in western Mississippi have a majority African American population. Another example of the influence of ethnic groups is evident in extreme southern Texas. Hispanics generally vote Democrat, and most counties in southern Texas are dominated by Hispanics.

Map

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Figure 8.8 | 2016 Presidential Election by County

**Author |** Users “Ali Zifan” and “Inqvisitor”

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Related to ethnic affiliations by county is the trend for rural voters to lean toward Republican and urbanites to vote Democrat. Rural areas tend to have white majorities, and whites tend to vote Republican. Rural voters also have lower numbers of college graduates compared to urban areas. In the 2016 presidential election in both Georgia and Texas, urban counties tended to vote Democrat, and rural counties went to the Republicans. With increasing urbanization and diversity in the United States, the electoral map will continue to undergo significant changes in the future.

# 8.8 KEY TERMS DEFINED

**Boundary** – an invisible, vertical plane that separates one state from another, which includes both the airspace above the line on the surface and the ground below.

**Centripetal force** – a force that tends to bind a state together.

**Centrifugal force** – a force that tends to break a state apart.

**Compact state** – a state where the distance from the center to any border does not vary significantly; roughly circular.

**Ethnic boundary** – a boundary that encompasses a particular ethnic group.

**Fragmented state** – a state whose territory is not contiguous, but consists of isolated parts such as islands.

**Geometric boundary** – a boundary that follows a straight line and may coincide with a line of latitude or longitude.

**Gerrymandering** – the process of redrawing legislative districts in order to benefit the party in power and ensure victory in elections.

**Irredentism** – an effort to expand the political influence of a state on a group of people in a neighboring state.

**Multi-national state** – state that has more than one nation within their borders.

**Nation** – group of people bonded by cultural attributes such as language, ethnicity and religion.

**Nation-state** – state in which the territorial boundaries encompass a group of people with a shared ethnicity.

**Physical boundary** – a boundary that follows a natural feature on the landscape such as a river, mountain range, or lake.

**State** – a formal region in which the government has sovereignty or control of its own affairs within its territorial boundaries.

**Stateless nation** – a nation that aspires to become a nation-state but does not yet have their own territory.

**Supranational organization** – an alliance involving three or more states who have shared objectives that may be economic, political/military, or cultural.

**Terrorism** – intimidation of a population by violence in order to further political aims.

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1. Adapted from <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/06/17/world/middleeast/map-isis-attacks-around-the-world.html> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)