

# THE EVOLUTION OF POLITICS

Peter A. Corning, Ph.D.,

Institute for the Study of Complex Systems  
119 Bryant Street, Suite 212  
Palo Alto, CA 94301 USA

E-mail: [PACorning@Complexsystems.org](mailto:PACorning@Complexsystems.org)  
Ph. (650) 325-5717; Fax (650) 325-3775  
Website: [www.complexsystems.org](http://www.complexsystems.org)

(In Franz Wuketits, and Christoph Antweiler, eds., *Handbook of Evolution*, Vol I. Wiley-VCH Verlag GmbH & Co., 2004)

*This chapter summarizes, updates and augments a theory of political evolution – known as the “Synergism Hypothesis” – that was first proposed in 1983. This theory is based on a definition of a political system as the cybernetic aspect, or “subsystem” of any socially organized, cooperating group or population. Politics in these terms refers to social processes that involve efforts to create, or to acquire control over, a cybernetic social system, as well as the process of exercising control. The underlying thesis, in a nutshell, is that synergistic effects of various kinds have been the “drivers” of the broad evolutionary trend toward increased complexity at all levels of living systems, including social systems, and that cybernetic decision-making, communications, and control processes are a necessary concomitant. This model of politics can be related to the so-called “tradition of discourse” (and to the various “schools” of modern-day political science), and it is proposed that the cybernetic definition provides a “bridge” between “idealist” (or holistic) theories and “realist” (or individualistic/egoistic) approaches. The relationship of this theory to Neo-Darwinism and Sociobiology is also discussed, and the shortcomings of the “selfish gene” paradigm are critiqued. In contrast with models of social life (and politics) that are gene-centered and depend on inclusive fitness theory, the Synergism Hypothesis is quintessentially an economic (or bioeconomic) theory of social/political organization. It is focused on the synergies that are produced by the “phenotypes” and their functional (adaptive) consequences. I also briefly review the accumulating evidence in support of this theory – including a plausible scenario for the evolution of humankind, ethological studies of politics among various social animals, and cross-cultural studies of political evolution in ancient and contemporary human societies.*