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Defining 'Opportunism'

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opportunism

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Op·por·tun·ism

n.

[Cf. F. *opportunisme*.]

The art or practice of taking advantage of opportunities or circumstances, or of seeking immediate advantage with little regard for ultimate consequences. [*Recent*]

MERRIAM-WEBSTER'S COLLEGIATE DICTIONARY, TENTH EDITION (© 2000)

The art, policy or practice of taking advantage of opportunities or circumstances often with little regard for principles or consequences.



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Note: click on a word meaning below to see its connections and related words.

The *noun* opportunism has one meaning:

Meaning #1: taking advantage of opportunities without regard for the consequences for others

Synonyms: [self-interest](#), [self-seeking](#), [expedience](#)



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opportunism

Opportunism is a term used in [politics](#) and [political science](#). It forms an important rationale as well for [transaction cost economics](#). It is interpreted in different ways, but usually refers to one or more of the following:

- a political [style](#) of aiming to increase one's political influence at almost any price, or a political style which involves seizing every and any opportunity to extend one's political influence, whenever such opportunities arise.
- the practice of abandoning in reality some important political principles that were previously held, in the process of trying to increase one's political power and influence.
- a trend of thought, or a political tendency, seeking to make political capital out of situations with the main aim being that of gaining more influence or support, instead of truly winning people over to a principled position or improving their political understanding.

... Principles

The term "opportunism" is often used in a [pejorative](#) sense, mainly because it connotes the *abandonment* or compromising of political principles, if not formally, then in reality. Thus, the implication is usually that opportunist behaviour is *unprincipled*: political means to achieve an end have become ends in themselves. In that case, the original relationship between means and ends is lost.

In politics, it is sometimes necessary to insist on political principles, while at other times it is necessary to insist on political unity among people who may *differ* or conflict to a greater or lesser extent in their beliefs or principles.

... Assessment

Typically, *opportunist* political behaviour is criticized for being short-sighted or narrow-minded. That is, in the urge to make short-term political gains or preserve them, the appropriate relationship between the means being used and the overall goals being aimed for is overlooked. The result might well be, that "short term gain" leads to "long term pain".

... Source

Some political analysts find the source of opportunism in a specific political *methodology* that is applied to maintain or increase political influence. An example might be so-called *suivisme* (a French word for political "tail-ending" or "tailism") where people try to follow

and infiltrate any movement that shows signs of being popular. [Populism](#) is sometimes regarded as an intrinsically opportunist form of politics, catering to the "lowest common denominator".

Other analysts see opportunism as originating in perceptions of the relative magnitudes of [risk](#) associated with different policy alternatives. Here it is argued that the larger a political organisation grows and the more influence it has, the less likely it is that it will pursue policies that could potentially result in the loss of the gains it has previously made. It would be more likely that an organisation will compromise its principles to some degree, in order to maintain its position, than to continue pursuing its principles regardless of the consequences. Or, at the very least, the greater political influence obtained, the more pressure exists to compromise one's political principles.