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OBJECTIVES

After reading this chapter, students will:
- understand the scope of politics as reflected in governmental processes
- understand the positive and negative connotations of the term ‘politics’
- recognize the relationship between politics and culture
- understand the relationship between politics and laws
- appreciate the relationship between politics and ethics
- understand how the individual knower develops knowledge of politics.

Introduction

The theme of politics and knowledge has two separate but related dimensions:
- questions about how we develop knowledge of politics and political issues in our respective cultures
- questions about how the politics of knowledge shapes what we can and do know.

In order to understand the difference between those two perspectives on politics and knowledge, we first need to have a good idea of what the word ‘politics’ means.

The technical meaning of ‘politics,’ the meaning with which you are probably most familiar, is the processes by which a society develops the rules by which the members will be governed (Heywood). People who take on official roles in these processes are known as politicians. The methods by which they are assigned to official roles vary depending on the particular system in place in the society. We will investigate some of the different kinds of political systems and how they are structured later in the chapter when we consider scope and methods.

Beyond the strictly technical use of the term ‘politics’ to refer to processes of government, the term is used to describe decision-making hierarchies in other kinds of systems such as businesses, educational systems and sometimes even organized religions. We can speak of the politics of school administration or the politics of a club or a sports team.

We can also speak of the politics of knowledge, by which we mean the decision-making structures in any society which govern how knowledge is developed on behalf of the people of the society. As we shall see, those political forces have a considerable influence on what questions are pursued and answered – and what kinds of answers are developed and disseminated – and which ones are not.

Because political systems determine rules by which people must live – whether in a greater society or in a smaller institution – they necessarily wield a great deal of power, and we therefore entrust politicians with that power. Some people wield their power wisely and benevolently, but history gives us many examples of people who used their power for their own benefit, ensuring their own wealth and success by exploiting the weaker and poorer.

Because of the potential for the misuse of power by politicians, we very often hear the word ‘politics’ referred to with a strongly negative connotation. Someone discussing why one person got a promotion while another person with more experience did not might say ‘that was just
The suggestion in such a case is that the decision about who got the promotion didn’t have anything to do with ability or suitability for the position, but instead was to do with some kind of subversive manipulation of the system – a case of someone in a position of power promoting a friend or ally, regardless of qualifications. Used in situations such as this, the word ‘politics’ suggests an unethical action taken for the individual good of someone in power.

Another common reference to politics can be found in the use of the phrase ‘politically correct’. That phrase was used as early as 1793, when it appeared in a US Supreme Court ruling about what would be appropriate behaviour by politicians – it was, in other words, a literal description (Florence) – that which is correct for politicians. Over the ensuing two centuries, the phrase has taken on several different meanings, but in the twenty-first century it refers to the way people use words. This meaning arose largely out of an attempt in the 1960s by people who wanted to eliminate the inherent bias in everyday English words and phrases and to try to create better understanding and greater inclusiveness for a wider diversity of people. Racial slurs were targeted, as were words with inherent gender bias. Attention was called to the fact that calling full-grown women ‘girls’ was demeaning, as well as to the fact that we don’t call full-grown men ‘boys’. In fact, in the United States, to use the term ‘boy’ to describe an African American male harkens back to slavery and the use of that term by the white master. ‘Boy’ as a word for a man has, therefore, been considered politically incorrect for quite some time. There was a shift from calling American

**ACTIVITY**

Look at the images on the left and think about the political systems and forces that affect what and how you know. The effects could be positive or negative. Work with your classmates to make a list. You do not have to limit yourselves to the elements depicted in the images. How much influence do you have over these aspects of your life?

**Subversive**: The adjective form of the verb ‘to subvert’. To subvert something is to undermine its function or purpose. In this case, when we say that the promotion was a subversive manipulation, we are saying that it undermined the goals of the company, ie, to put the best person forward for each job so that the company would function effectively.

In what ways do political decisions and systems affect what we know?

**Political correctness**

Another common reference to politics can be found in the use of the phrase ‘politically correct’. That phrase was used as early as 1793, when it appeared in a US Supreme Court ruling about what would be appropriate behaviour by politicians – it was, in other words, a literal description (Florence) – that which is correct for politicians. Over the ensuing two centuries, the phrase has taken on several different meanings, but in the twenty-first century it refers to the way people use words. This meaning arose largely out of an attempt in the 1960s by people who wanted to eliminate the inherent bias in everyday English words and phrases and to try to create better understanding and greater inclusiveness for a wider diversity of people. Racial slurs were targeted, as were words with inherent gender bias. Attention was called to the fact that calling full-grown women ‘girls’ was demeaning, as well as to the fact that we don’t call full-grown men ‘boys’. In fact, in the United States, to use the term ‘boy’ to describe an African American male harkens back to slavery and the use of that term by the white master. ‘Boy’ as a word for a man has, therefore, been considered politically incorrect for quite some time. There was a shift from calling American
people of African descent ‘black’ to calling them ‘African American’, although the terms ‘black’ and ‘white’ are still commonly used.

**CONCEPT CONNECTION**

**Culture**

Political correctness in language is culturally bound. In the UK, for example, ‘black’ or ‘black British’ are the prevalent and accepted terms. Speakers there do not commonly talk about ‘African British’ people.

As part of this effort, there was a push to halt the common practice of using the pronoun ‘he’ or ‘his’ whenever the antecedent noun was a generic word which referred to an unidentified person. Instead, people were encouraged to use ‘his or her’ or ‘him or her’. So instead of writing or saying something like ‘a politician has a lot of power at his disposal’, there was a shift to ‘a politician has a lot of power at his or her disposal’. That grammatical construction can get quite unwieldy, however, and there has been a subsequent shift to using ‘their’, the plural pronoun, even when the antecedent noun is singular.

In the twenty-first century, moreover, language, along with other cultural practices, has been shifting to try to accommodate people who do not see themselves as being gendered either male or female. In many cases, those people prefer ‘their’ as the pronoun to be used to refer to them. Hodder Education has adopted this practice as editorial policy, and so throughout this book, you will see ‘their’ used as the pronoun for any singular human subject for which the gender – or gender preference – is not known. The developing use of pronouns in English is an excellent example of how culture influences language and how language influences what we know.

We can see, then, that the idea of politics is a **loaded** one. Politics does, however, play an essential role in human experience. We could not get along together without a group of people in leadership positions to help us organize ourselves, make decisions and mediate conflicts. We will, therefore, investigate the neutral idea of politics as well as the more controversial one. We shall explore, later in this chapter, the means by which people develop their political beliefs and values and how those beliefs and values lead to sometimes dramatically different political perspectives. We will also explore questions about how different political perspectives shape our communal and individual knowledge.

**Scope**

■ **Politics of a society or a nation**

As with many other topics that you will consider in your TOK class, politics is a complicated idea and one which is difficult to differentiate among other related ideas. Ideally, we would like to be able to draw clear lines between politics, society, religion and ethics, but trying to do so poses a great deal of difficulty. This is because politics – both at the societal and the individual levels – depends on all of those other features of human experience. Andrew Heywood, a British educator and political scientist, suggests that the best definition of politics is ‘the making, preserving and amending of general social rules’, because it encompasses a lot of different elements of social governance such as the exercise of power, the allocation of resources, and the means by which we make collective decisions (Heywood).

Throughout history, different societies have developed different political systems, and even today, we can find a wide variety of political systems in place in different countries. In Theory of Knowledge, we are not concerned with trying to determine whether any given political system is ‘better’ than any other; we are concerned with trying to understand how different societies come to believe that the political system they have is the best one for them.
The scope of the politics of a society or a nation is wide and varied. Political decisions must be made about such things as healthcare, education, the economy, international relations, national security (including the military), infrastructure such as roads, bridges, wireless capacity, water, electricity and human rights. Laws are the expression of the decisions which politicians make on these matters and all others which affect the members of the community or nation, so politics is related to the legal system of that community or nation. Political decisions are made for communities as a whole, but they affect each individual living in that community. The scope of politics therefore includes everyone and many aspects of everyone's daily life.

**Politics of an institution**

DEEPER THINKING

**Political beliefs vs knowledge**

When we talk about knowledge in relation to politics, we can talk about knowledge of political systems, such as knowing the difference between a democracy, a theocracy, a monarchy and a dictatorship. We can also talk about knowledge of what actions politicians have taken and what issues are of concern in a particular society. The study of the facts of political systems and political actions is called political science. When we want to talk about the 'knowledge' that an individual has about what a political system *should* be like and what actions politicians *should* take, we must instead talk about political beliefs.

The determination of what makes for the best political system is fundamentally a matter of opinion. Because different people have different values (see Concept connection, page 234), they have different ideas about what the role of government is and what rules should be in place for all people. Because politics are based on people's opinions and values, knowledge of politics is not a matter of trying to discover a reality that exists outside of people. There is no objectively 'right' or 'wrong' system, although there are systems which have, over the course of history, come to be widely seen as prone to abuse and, therefore, not in the best interest of many people. We will explore this process in more detail in the section on methods that follows.
Any institution large enough that decisions cannot be made from direct input of all stakeholders has a hierarchy of decision makers which functions essentially as politics. Community boards, schools and school systems, churches and religions, military forces and large businesses all require some sort of decision-making hierarchy. The politics of an institution are essentially the same as the politics of a nation, except that their scope and power are limited to that institution. We don't call the decision makers within various non-governmental institutions ‘politicians’: that is a term that we reserve for the decision makers in governments. The decision makers in other kinds of institutions have a variety of titles depending upon the institution itself. Titles include Chief Executive Officer, Chair of the Board, President and Vice-President of companies, Superintendent, Principal, Head of School, Chair of Department, Priest, Rabbi, Imam, Pujari, Financial Officer, Technology Officer, and so on. Military forces have many titles for their leadership positions: Commander, Admiral, General, Colonel, Lieutenant, Captain, Major and so on.

### ACTIVITY

Think about an organization you belong to – it could be your school, a club or your employer. Answer the following questions:

1. What political systems are in place within the organization?
2. Could those systems be improved?
3. Where do you feature in the hierarchy?
4. Does understanding the political system in place affect your opinion about the way decisions are made?
5. How does your personal experience with the politics of an institution help you to understand the scope of politics?

The kinds of decisions that the ‘politicians’ must make within any given institution, such as a business or an educational or religious institution, differ considerably from the decisions that a politician makes for a nation. The scope of the politics of an institution is directly related to the overall function of that institution, though there are some kinds of decisions which are common to most, if not all, such institutions. Common functions have to do with hiring practices, financial practices, policies for promotion, hiring and firing and the establishment of the goals and formal values of the institution. Specific decisions have to do with the specific function of the institution: educational institutions must make decisions about what constitutes effective educational practice. Religious institutions must make decisions about how best to embody the teachings of the holy texts and religious traditions. Military institutions must make decisions about how to protect their nations and allies, what weaponry is necessary and so on. The scope of institutional politics is shaped, then, by the nature of each individual institution. Decisions made within one institution do not have any power to control or direct other institutions or people outside of that institution.

### Politics of knowledge

When we talk about the politics of knowledge, we are talking about the ways in which political considerations influence the development and dissemination of knowledge. Since knowledge is developed formally through institutions like the government and universities, as well as by businesses, and since the development of knowledge through these formal structures costs money, political influence is inevitable. One of the things you will explore in TOK is the ways in which politics can shape what we know and how we share and use that knowledge, both positively and negatively.
Perspectives

As we have already seen, the perspective of the knower inevitably shapes what we know. In the realm of politics, differing perspectives are responsible both for the difficulty of making good decisions and for the conflict which very often arises out of the decision-making process. In trying to make knowledge about what is the best or right thing to do for any group of people, the decision makers will ideally take into account the perspectives of all those who will be affected by the decision. Trying to account for everyone’s needs and wishes is always a problem, however, different political systems deal with that problem in different ways.

■ Perspectives in national politics

Some political perspectives are formalized in political parties that represent themselves as supporting particular values (see below). In political systems which include parties, the parties tend to divide along the spectrum of conservative (or right-wing) ideas to liberal (or left-wing) ideas.

In the United Kingdom, for example, nine different parties were represented in the House of Commons following the 2017 general election (‘Political Parties in Parliament’). Three of those parties have historically held the bulk of the available seats: Labour, the Conservative Party and the Liberal Democrats. Two of those parties identify their position in the party name. Labour is a party which identifies itself as being ‘centre left’, which is slightly more liberal leaning than the Liberal Democrats, who describe themselves as ‘centre/centre-left’. In the United States, there are two dominant political parties: the Democrats, who are the more liberal party, and the Republicans who describe themselves as conservative. Naturally, within those parties, there are people with a range of views, with some people expressing more extremely liberal or conservative values, and some who hold more moderate beliefs.

At the heart of the difference between liberal and conservative perspectives is a fundamental difference in values.

CONCEPT CONNECTION

Values

Values, as we saw in Chapter 1, are those beliefs around which we shape our lives. Values, therefore, play an extremely important role in our lives, and our attachment to them is deeply emotional. We feel that the things we value are essential to a good life. We invest the same emotional attachment to our political values as we do to any other value. It can become very difficult, then, for people to listen to other political viewpoints with an open mind. For many people, political values other than their own represent not just different thinking, but wrong thinking. Their ‘knowledge’ of other people’s political beliefs is shaped by their own perspective, and the deeper their commitment to their own beliefs, the harder it is to accept, or even listen to, different beliefs with any degree of objectivity (see Chapter 1, page 21).
Jonathan Haidt, Professor of Ethical Leadership at New York University’s Stern School of Business, has investigated the values which are at the basis of the difference between conservative and liberal beliefs. He helped to develop a theory called the Moral Foundations theory. The theory proposes five values as being foundational to our political beliefs. The values are presented as pairs of opposites on a spectrum (Haidt, et al). Those foundational values are:

1. Care/harm
2. Fairness/cheating
3. Loyalty/betrayal
4. Authority/subversion
5. Sanctity/degradation.

Haidt and his colleagues do not suggest that any people – whether liberal or conservative – think that some of those values are not important. Rather, that different people value some more than others. In his book, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion*, Haidt argues that we are born with an innate disposition to value these things (Haidt 152). Those predispositions are then shaped by our experience as we grow up. Haidt and his colleagues have developed a profile which shows that conservatives and liberals value these five things to differing degrees, and that some are more important for people who identify themselves as conservative, while others are more important for people who identify themselves as liberal: ‘liberals try to create a morality relying primarily on the Care/harm foundation, with additional support from the fairness/cheating and liberty/oppression foundations. Conservatives, especially religious conservatives, use all six foundations, including loyalty/betrayal, authority/subversion, and sanctity/degradation’ (Haidt).

The following graph shows the differences in the way that conservative and liberal people value five of these aspects of human relations. (In later work, Haidt added a sixth value: liberty vs oppression):

The data on the graph is from data accumulated between 2007 and 2011, involving more than 130,000 subjects (Haidt 160–1). You can see that people who identify themselves as being liberal or very liberal identify care and fairness as being extremely important, while people who identify as conservative or very conservative identify loyalty, authority and sanctity as being very important. In general, liberal people are more tolerant of changes that allow for more people to have more rights, while conservative people value traditions, security and loyalty to their group. We can see that no one could reasonably fault anyone for holding these values – they are all positive features of human experience. The difficulty arises because people care about them to differing degrees, and people make their political judgments based on what they believe is most important to living a good life. People’s beliefs about what kinds of decisions politicians should make, in other words, depend on the underlying values that they hold.
In addition to the perspectives of various degrees of conservatism or liberalism, people have many other perspectives which bear on their understanding of politics. People of different genders, races, sexual orientations and nationalities have differing ideas about what is important in terms of ensuring a good life. People with different kinds of education see things differently. Immigrants very often have different needs than people who were born in a particular country. Young people might see the world differently from the way older people see the world. And so on. All of these perspectives are informed by the personal experiences and values of the people who hold them.

Let’s consider an example using the question of taxation. Many countries, including Belgium, Turkey, Denmark, The Netherlands, Germany, the United States and the United Kingdom (Fontinelle) have an income tax that all members of the society must pay to help fund the cost of running the government and providing services which the government delivers to everyone. Politicians are the ones who determine how much tax people will have to pay. If we want to determine what an acceptable amount of tax is, we look at it from the perspective of what we value. If we value caring and equality, then we want to fund services for people who might not be able, for whatever reason, to take care of themselves as well as others. We might want to fund universal health care, free public education and job training services.

If, however, we value loyalty and fairness, we might see these things quite differently. It might not seem fair to us that we have to pay high income taxes to fund health care and education for people who don’t hold down jobs or who have many children or who have only been in the country for a few years, while we have been working hard for many years to educate ourselves and to get jobs with good salaries. Our sense of unfairness might be aggravated if we perceive that the reason some people can’t hold down jobs is due to their own choices – maybe someone was a drug addict or had a high-paying job and quit and now can’t find another one. We want to be loyal first to our families, before we fund services for other people.

If we value caring and the reduction of harm, we might be willing to pay more from our personal income to help others, but on the other hand, it might seem very unfair that we have to pay for foreign aid or welfare for people who have not earned their own money. This would be the more conservative viewpoint.

A person with a more liberal viewpoint might argue that it is fair to help people who cannot help themselves, because they began from a position of innate unfairness – maybe poverty or lack of effective parenting, or the consequences of problems like Fetal Alcohol Syndrome – all problems which make it much more difficult for people to achieve a high-quality education and a well-paid job. Neither viewpoint can be said to be ‘correct’, both are matters for interpretation.

We can see that in many political situations, there is no ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ answer. In the best-case scenario, politicians, and those who contribute to political decision-making in any capacity, are trying to determine the right thing to do based on human beliefs and opinions, which are not subject to a factual determination of accuracy. My personal perspective is going to shape my understanding of any decision that politicians make – as well as determining whether I approve of the decision or not.

When we think about how our perspective affects our knowledge of political values, then, we can see that we are influenced to see six important elements of human experience in certain ways based on the experiences we have in our lives. We develop emotional attachments to those values in differing degrees. We also form our beliefs about which values ought to be considered to be the most important when it comes to making decisions about how the whole group should be treated and how all members of that group should be required to act. It is not easy to get people to change their fundamental values, which is why so many political decisions are contentious.

Use the QR code to read more about these foundational values on the Moral Foundations Theory website.

**ACTIVITY**

Investigate how taxes are spent in your country or local area. Are you surprised by your findings? Do you agree with the way money is distributed? How does this research help you to understand the values and governmental processes in your country?

**ACTIVITY**

To learn more about Haidt’s work on Moral Foundations Theory, use the QR code to take a survey to map your own moral values.

1. Do you think that the result of the survey accurately represents your personal political beliefs? Why or why not?

2. What does this study help you understand about the basic differences between essentially conservative and essentially liberal political beliefs?
Perspectives in institutional politics

Perspective is going to be similarly important in institutional politics. Our view of what policies a company should have, and what actions it should take, will depend on our role in the company, as well as on any number of other factors, such as our education, our total income, the number of children we might have and so on. Our understanding of whether the leadership of a company or institution is making good decisions will likely be based in large part on the goals of that institution. If, for example, someone is a teacher in a school, we might judge their decisions to be effective or not effective based on our perception of whether they have a positive effect on the ability to help students learn or not. If we perceive that decisions about who is assigned to teach particular classes are being made in order to ensure that people in power positions have the most desirable schedules, rather than in order to ensure that the most qualified teachers are teaching each course, we are going to believe that the decisions being made are a matter of ‘politics’ in the negative sense, rather than a matter of trying to achieve the goals of the institution. If you are a member of a church, and you perceive that decisions about how to allocate funds are being made in order to best help people in the community who are in need, you are likely to believe that the decisions are being made wisely.

CASE STUDY

The Challenger disaster

Sometimes poor decisions are made within an institution because of pressure that is applied by people who have power, but who lack real knowledge.

In 1986, the American Space Shuttle Challenger lifted off from Cape Canaveral in Florida and 73 seconds later, it exploded, killing all seven of the astronauts on board. The night before the scheduled launch, five engineers who worked for the NASA contractor Morton Thiakol, and who helped design and build the Shuttle, tried to stop the launch, warning the decision makers that it was not safe to fly the Shuttle in cold temperatures because the rubber gaskets on the booster rockets wouldn’t seal properly (Berkes).

No one is absolutely certain as to the reasons why the decision makers decided to ignore the warnings from the people who built the craft, but political pressure seems to have played a significant role: ‘The space shuttle programme had an ambitious launch schedule that year and NASA wanted to show it could launch regularly and reliably. President Ronald Reagan was also set to deliver the State of the Union address that evening and reportedly planned to tout the Challenger launch’ (Berkes).

In the case of the Shuttle Challenger, the politicians had one perspective and the engineers had another. 

It turned out to be an example in which the two perspectives were not equal; clearly the engineers’ warnings should have been heeded. Although they did not have the power of decision making, they did have the knowledge that should have formed the basis of the decision. The failure in that case was catastrophic.