

Introduction and background

Children in Belfast in the 1970s during The Troubles

Objectives

This introduction will inform you about the following:

- The nature of politics
- The nature of government and the state
- How government and politics relate to each other
- Many of the key concepts which are relevant to government and politics in the UK
- The historical development of the UK political system
- The basic principles that underlie UK government and politics today



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Introduction and

**Politics pre-Enrolment booklet.
Please turn over for task instructions**

Politics pre-Enrolment Task

Welcome to A level Politics

Read this booklet – it introduces you to some of the basic concepts which will underpin your understanding of the political world

We would then like you to use the booklet to answer the following questions. Each answer should not exceed 300 words.

- 1. In what way is politics about a conflict of ideas?**
- 2. Describe ways in which a conflict of interests generates political activity?**
- 3. List 3 ways in which governments can claim 'legitimacy'.**
- 4. Power and authority are not the same thing. Describe three types of power and three types of authority**
- 5. What is the difference between the legislature, the executive and the judiciary?**

Email your answers WITH YOUR NAME ON to andrew.hodgson@astonacademy.org.

See you in September!

What is politics?

The term 'politics' has come a long way since it was coined by the classical Greeks. Originally it was little more than a description of how states were governed. In the modern world, however, 'politics' suggests *conflict* — that is, conflict between ideas, conflict between sections of the community and conflict between individuals.

The alternative to peaceful political activity can involve physical conflict. This may take the form of general disorder and/or terrorist activity (as in Northern Ireland from 1968 to the mid-1990s, in the Middle East or racial tensions in American cities), revolution (as in Russia in 1917, Libya in 2011) or civil war (China in the 1930s and 1940s; Syria, Somalia and Sudan more recently). Such violence can be viewed as a *failure* of politics. If conflict cannot be resolved peacefully within political institutions and processes, groups often resort to violence. In Northern Ireland in the 1990s and 2000s, for example, successive British governments and leaders sought to persuade political leaders — even those who led extreme groups such as Sinn Féin and the Democratic Unionists — to renounce violence and pursue their goals through conventional, peaceful politics instead. In the event, peaceful politics was finally and happily restored to the province after 2007.

Professor Bernard Crick, in his celebrated work *In Defence of Politics* (4th edn, 1992), summed up the meaning and importance of politics thus:

Politics arises from accepting the fact of the simultaneous existence of different groups, hence different interests and different traditions, within a territorial unit under a common rule.

So we can summarise that the term 'politics' refers to three main activities concerning the state. These are the conflict of ideas, the conflict of interests and the struggle for power. Below we examine each of these in turn.

The conflict of ideas

Modern politics would not be politics unless those who take part in it adopt and promote ideas as to how the state should be run and how society should be shaped. When individuals go to the polling station they generally have political ideas in their minds, however mild and unformed these may be, when they vote. The ordinary members of political parties presumably join their party in the first place because they have political ideas and hope to further them through their chosen party. Politicians themselves, whether they be local councillors, members of regional assemblies, national Members of Parliament (MPs) or ministers, are continuously involved in promoting political ideas. At all levels of politics, therefore, we see and hear the clash of ideas. Indeed in 2015–16 the UK was engaged in perhaps the biggest clash of ideas in its modern history — whether to leave or stay in the European Union (EU). This was politics at its most intense.

On a grand scale, political ideas become ideologies. An **ideology** can be defined as a collection of ideas that propose social change and include some 'blueprint' for a future idealised society. These ideas are also based on one or several specific principles such as equality, common ownership of property or individual liberty. Ideologies are often radical, and so those who support them usually flourish on the extremities of moderate Western politics. The most influential and successful ideologies have included, for example, socialism, fascism, feminism and radical forms of liberalism and nationalism. Conservatism is also often described as an ideology, although many

Key term

Ideology A coherent set of well-established ideas that propose specific changes in society and which imply some kind of vision of what kind of society is desirable. Ideologies are also based on certain fixed values and principles such as freedom, equality, order and justice.

people who call themselves conservatives are *opposed* to change. When ideologies come into conflict, politics can become extremely volatile. This occurs because ideologically motivated groups tend to have firmly held views and are especially determined to bring about their political goals. It is for this reason that ideological conflict often breaks out into violence, as described above.

A good example of *ideological* conflict occurred within the UK Labour Party in 2015. Having suffered two consecutive election defeats, the party needed to elect a new leader to succeed Ed Miliband. To everyone's surprise Jeremy Corbyn, a radical socialist candidate, emerged as a front runner. The leadership election within the party became a bitter ideological conflict. Corbyn won, so socialism triumphed in this case against a more moderate form of social democracy that had dominated the Labour Party since the mid-1990s.

On the whole, however, in the stable, well-established 'democracies' of the world, politics remains a more moderate, and certainly peaceful, activity. Most political activists wish to create changes in society which are not fundamental. Jeremy Corbyn and his followers were an unusual exception to this reality. Such moderate changes may be based loosely upon ideological thinking, but they may also be viewed as ways of improving the general welfare and security of the people. Table 1 identifies a number of political ideas that have emerged in the UK in recent years, together with their opposing beliefs.

Activity

Research the following current political issues. What are the main points of conflict?

- Policy concerning energy generation in the UK
- Policy concerning conflicts in the Middle East
- How the government should tax the very wealthy

Table 1 The conflict of ideas – some political conflicts in the UK in 2016–17

Proposal	Opposing idea
Britain should renew its Trident nuclear submarine fleet despite its very high cost.	Britain should abandon its nuclear deterrent on the grounds of both cost and morality.
A system of selective grammar schools should be introduced in various areas to allow the most able pupils to study in a more challenging environment.	All schools should be open to pupils of all abilities and be genuinely comprehensive.
The level of income tax should be systematically reduced to create more disposable wealth and create more incentives to growth in incomes.	Income taxes should be relatively high, especially on the wealthy, to reduce the income gap between rich and poor and to be able to pay for better public services.
Immigration should be strictly controlled to protect jobs and public services in Britain and to avoid social conflict.	Britain should remain open to immigration to boost the economy and make society culturally more diverse.

The conflict of interests

When we use the term 'interests' we mean sections of the community that have an interest in their own concerns. Various groups may feel they need special protection, that they do not receive their fair share of the national wealth, or are not treated fairly by government. The nature of such groups, or interests, varies considerably. They may be occupational groups, such as firefighters, students or junior doctors; they may be regional, such as those who live in the countryside, or inhabitants of regions that are economically depressed; they may be representatives of industries such as tobacco manufacturing, brewing or horse-racing. An 'interest', as far as politics is concerned, is any group that seeks to act to achieve some improvements in its own circumstances. Most groups believe that politics can provide a solution to their concerns.



Junior doctors on strike in Nottingham, April 2016

Interests use the political system and members of the political community to further their own cause. They sometimes attach themselves to a political party. Trade unions, in particular, used to work closely with the Labour Party (indeed, Labour emerged from the trade union movement at the start of the twentieth century). More recently the Countryside Alliance, which defends the interests of members of rural communities, saw the Conservative Party as its most traditional supporter. In more general terms, interests will use a variety of methods to further their aims. This may involve public demonstrations, internet and media campaigns, influence in Parliament and so on. Their methods will be explored further in Chapter 1.

So, part of politics is about the clash of such interests. Often their aims conflict with each other and, when this happens, politics becomes the process of resolving these conflicts. Examples of the conflict of interests are shown in Table 2.

Table 2 Examples of the conflict of interests, 2016-17

Interest(s)	Counter-interest(s)
Business groups and the North of England region support the development of HS2, high-speed rail links between London and the north.	Environmentalists oppose the destruction of the countryside, while rural communities on the routes fear they will suffer.
Oil companies seek government permits to allow 'fracking' in various locations.	Environmentalists and local communities oppose fracking on the grounds that it may be dangerous.
Current old-age pensioners wish to preserve the value of their pensions.	Younger people believe their living standards are being eroded to pay for the older generation and so wish to see a more balanced provision between them and the older generation.
Junior NHS doctors opposed reform to their working hours.	Groups representing patients wished to see a more comprehensive, 7-day health service.
Representatives of poorer sections of society support a more generous welfare benefits system.	Representatives of taxpayers resist higher benefits to keep down the tax burden.

In cases like those described in Table 2, politicians face the difficult task of mediating between conflicting interests.

The struggle for power

Arguably, the desire for power is a natural human characteristic. This is a contentious view and some ideological groups, anarchists in particular, may deny it. However, we need not concern ourselves with psychology or philosophy here. What matters to us in our study of political behaviour is that modern society clearly produces many people who do have a drive to achieve and exercise power. Many will say, of course, that their motives for achieving power are altruistic. They have a desire to improve society in some way and must therefore gain power to be able to do so. Yet some may seek power *for its own sake*. Whichever is true — and perhaps both are true — there can be no doubt that politics is about the struggle for power between individuals and groups.

This struggle takes many forms, some of which are shown below:

- Parties compete against each other for power at national, regional and local elections.
- Individuals compete at elections to become representatives in local councils, regional assemblies or the Westminster Parliament itself.
- Individual politicians compete to be appointed to senior positions, either in the government or on the opposition front bench.
- At the very highest level of power, there is a struggle to be prime minister within the governing party.

These struggles for political power are what many of us think of when we use the term 'politics'. This is partly because the media tend to concentrate on such issues when reporting on politics and partly because the struggle for power does, to some extent, reflect the other conflicts we have described. Clearly, which party wins an election will determine to a degree which political ideas become dominant and which interests are more likely to be favoured.

When Margaret Thatcher was elected leader of the Conservative Party in 1975 the policy direction of her party began to change and the nature of British society was transformed during her premiership in the 1980s. The election to power of the Labour Party in 1997 after 18 years of Conservative government also began to change the balance of power in the UK. Under Thatcher, for example, financial and business interests found themselves more influential, while trade unions lost much of their political impact. Under Labour, after 1997, Britain became more closely integrated within the EU and the interests of the poor were more favoured.

In 2010 a new kind of struggle emerged when the UK saw its first coalition government since the Second World War. This meant that the struggle between parties was taking place both *inside* and *outside* government. The two coalition partners — Conservatives and Liberal Democrats — were forced to compete with each other to have their policies adopted.

The struggle to become party leader is also a permanent feature of British politics. When David Cameron resigned as Conservative leader and prime minister in 2016, following his defeat in the EU referendum, there was an immediate contest to replace him within the Conservative Party, ultimately won by Theresa May. Jeremy Corbyn replaced Ed Miliband as Labour Party leader in 2015 and Tim Farron replaced Nick Clegg as Liberal Democrat leader in the same year.

So, when individuals seek political power, the effects of the outcome can be far reaching. At the same time, however, the struggle for power is, to some extent, merely a reflection of a natural desire of some individuals to gain status and influence.

Activity

Research the following former prime ministers. In each case establish why they lost power and who replaced them:

- James Callaghan
- Margaret Thatcher
- Tony Blair

What is government?

Before we attempt definitions of government and the state, it may be useful to consider a number of concepts that are related to such institutions. In particular, it is important to understand the principles that lie behind the activity of governing. These are legitimacy, power, authority and sovereignty.

Legitimacy

Here we are asking the question: what gives any government the *right* to rule? This refers both to the *system* of government — for example, monarchy, single-party rule, parliamentary democracy etc. — and to the individuals who hold office within the government. It is a difficult question to resolve because it has a number of answers, all of which are plausible.

There are several possible ways in which legitimacy can be claimed.

- **Tradition** is the first option. It suggests that a system of rule is legitimate if it has existed for a long period of time. This is a form of legitimacy often claimed by hereditary monarchies. Such monarchies still flourish in the Gulf States in the Middle East.
- **Force** is a more controversial basis for rule. The argument here is that *any* government, no matter how it is constituted, could be seen as legitimate if it is able to maintain peace and security within a country. This is sometimes described as 'might is right'. In the democratic world, however, this kind of legitimacy is not normally acceptable.
- **Consent** has become the most important criterion for legitimacy. Indeed, where power is exercised with the broad consent of the people, expressed specifically through elections, we can describe it as **democratic legitimacy**. The principle itself is simple: if a regime enjoys the broad consent of its people, it can be considered to be legitimate. Consent can be shown by widespread peaceful participation in politics as well as by a lack of open dissidence.

Power

In a general sense, *power* can mean the ability to make other people or groups do what one wants them to do, even if this is against their will. But this is too simple a definition. We use the term 'power' to signify a whole variety of means by which one individual or institution is able to exert its will over others. In particular, we need to consider different *levels* of power. These are set out below.

- **Coercive power** is the strongest form. This can also be described as *force*. Coercion involves the use of physical force, or at least the threat of physical force. In extreme cases, coercion can involve the use of execution, torture, terror and imprisonment of opponents, as has occurred in many totalitarian regimes. Of course, most states do not need to go to such extremes. It is sufficient to reserve the use of force against those who refuse to conform to the laws or who threaten the security of the state itself.
- **Political power** is perhaps how we generally understand the concept of power. This is the power exercised by members of the political community, including parties, their leaders and other institutions. Political power includes the ability to persuade, but it normally involves the use of rewards and sanctions. Thus prime ministers in the UK have power because of their use of patronage. Since a prime minister controls the appointment of all ministers and many other senior positions

Key terms

Consent In democratic politics consent means that government is founded upon the authority of the people. Normally consent is demonstrated in free elections. However, it can also be indicated by widespread support for the institutions of government.

Democratic legitimacy
A key principle in modern democratic life – government may be considered legitimate if, first, it is elected and, second, it is accountable to the electorate. In this way the consent of the people is implied.

Synoptic link

This section on power should be revisited when you read Chapter 7, where the sources of prime ministerial power are explored.

in the apparatus of the state, such as top civil servants and judges, he or she is able to exercise power. This is particularly true when we consider the way in which the party whips in Parliament are able to control MPs. By making it clear that loyalty to the party line may improve an individual's career prospects, power is effectively being exercised.

The strongest form of political power, however, is that which is granted by Parliament — the ultimate source of all political power in the UK. Thus, government departments, their ministers, devolved governments in Scotland and Wales, local authorities and other public bodies have all been granted powers by Acts of Parliament. The powers of the prime minister, meanwhile, have been established largely by tradition or *convention*, as such traditions are often known. This means that a prime minister exercises power simply because everybody in the political community accepts that he or she has the traditional right to do so.

- **Influence** is the weakest form of power. We often use the word 'power' when we really mean influence. Thus it is said that the newspapers have power, or that public opinion is powerful, or that trade unions have power within the Labour Party. In each of these cases it is *influence* that is being referred to. In such examples, the press, the people and the unions may have some influence over what government and Parliament do, but they cannot enforce their wishes. In 1974 Steven Lukes also identified three forms of political power which mirror these distinctions. The first is power is exercised *openly* (through cabinet and parliament, for example); the second is *secretive* power (behind closed doors in negotiations among ministers, officials and outside parties); and the third is *manipulative* power (which involved persuasion and the use of incentives). Both secretive and manipulative power may involve links between decision makers and the media, as described in Chapter 4 of this book.

Key term

Authority Authority is the right to exercise power. It is closely associated with the idea of legitimacy. In a democracy, authority is normally granted by the electorate or by the legislature.

Authority

Authority is a more difficult term than power. Often the terms 'power' and 'authority' are used interchangeably, but in politics it is essential to distinguish between them. Put simply, authority is the *right* to exercise power, it is not power itself. When we say a teacher has authority, for example, we mean that he or she has been granted power over the students by the head teacher and, more indirectly, by the parents and the wider community. Thus, the source of the authority allows the teacher to exercise power.

In pure democracies all political authority has its source in the people. The situation in the UK, however, is more complex. While it is true that many of those working in the political system exercise power because they have been directly or indirectly elected by the people, this cannot be said of either the prime minister or the monarch. Their sources of authority have been described as *charismatic* or *traditional*. The ruling party, meanwhile, rules because it has won a general election. This is known as *elective* or *rational* authority. The German sociologist Max Weber (1864–1920) clarified the nature of political authority by identifying its nature in three ways:

- **Traditional authority** The right to govern exists because authority has existed over a long period of time. This applies particularly to hereditary monarchies, such as the sheikhdoms of the Middle East. It can be assumed that if the people have allowed such monarchies to exercise power over a long period of time, they are, by implication, consenting to such rule.
- **Charismatic authority** The term 'charisma' refers to an individual's ability to inspire and persuade, and attract a following, by the force of their personality.



Members of the Saudi Royal family enjoy traditional political authority

Here authority is granted by acclaim, because the people wish to be governed by a particular leader. Charismatic authority is typically combined with other forms and so increases the quantity of authority, allowing more power to be exercised. We can say, for example, that President John F. Kennedy in the USA enjoyed charismatic authority in addition to his elective authority (US presidents are directly elected, so enjoy direct elective authority). Donald Trump was elected US president in 2016 to some extent because, to his supporters at least, he was a charismatic figure.

- **Legal-rational authority** This refers to any rational way of granting authority. In practice, in modern democracies, this is always by election and so is best described as 'elective authority'. In current politics, elective authority is the most powerful justification for the exercise of power.

Table 3 shows the relevant sources of authority of four UK governing institutions.

Table 3 Sources of authority in the UK

Parliament	The authority (which is limited) of the House of Lords is traditional. The Commons' main source of authority is by election and, therefore, the people. However, the fact that Parliament as a whole is sovereign has its origins in tradition.
The government	Clearly the government's authority is elective.
The monarch	Though the power of the monarchy is very limited, the Crown enjoys considerable traditional authority.
The prime minister	Much of the PM's authority is traditional, but he or she also enjoys indirect elective authority in terms of being the leader of the ruling party. Some prime ministers, such as Winston Churchill and Margaret Thatcher, were also said to enjoy charismatic authority to reinforce the other two sources.

Key term

Sovereignty Ultimate power that cannot be overruled. Sovereignty can be either legal or political, depending on whether it is legally enforceable or whether it is a political reality.

Sovereignty

Before we examine the meaning of **sovereignty**, it is important to note and avoid a point of potential confusion. The monarch of the UK is sometimes described as the 'Sovereign' or even the 'Sovereign Lord'. This appears to indicate that the monarch holds supreme power. While in the past, historically, the monarch was indeed the sovereign power, a situation which held true up to the seventeenth century, it is no longer the case. However, although the term is no longer valid, it is often still used out of tradition. We must, therefore, ignore this anomaly.

It is useful to divide sovereignty into three main types — legal, political and popular:

- **Legal sovereignty** means the ultimate source of all legal authority. In practice, it amounts to the ultimate source of all laws and of all legal power.
- **Political sovereignty** refers to the location of real political power. Instead of thinking only about where legal power lies in theory (*de jure*), political sovereignty allows us to consider who ultimately makes political decisions *in reality* (*de facto*). Thus, at elections, the people are politically sovereign because they decide who will form the next government. Between elections it is more realistic to think of the prime minister and the government as being politically sovereign.
- **Popular sovereignty** is a form of political sovereignty. It relates to those occasions when the people themselves seem to be making ultimate decisions. At elections, the people become sovereign for a day, when they choose governments and representatives, and grant a mandate to a government. Referendums are another obvious example. With the increasing use of internet polls and petitions, it could be argued that a new form of popular sovereignty is in the early stages of development. The UK's momentous decision to leave the EU in the 2016 referendum was a perfect example of popular sovereignty at work.

Synoptic link

The concept of sovereignty is explored in Chapter 8.

A note on the role of the monarchy

We cannot leave government without referring to the position of the monarchy in the UK. Historically, of course the monarch *was* government in England and indeed Scotland. This was the case until the seventeenth century. Since then, gradually but inexorably, the monarch has ceased to be the government and has ceased to have any political role at all. Yes, the monarchy and all that goes with it *seems* to be important, but, in a political sense, it is not. How does this come about?

The answer is that everybody in the political system pays lip service to the authority of the monarch out of traditional respect, but everybody also understands that this does not really mean anything. The monarch exercises no power and is not permitted to involve herself in politics at all. She is a figurehead who represents the *idea* of the United Kingdom, but not the substance, a symbol of unity and strength, but not of political direction.

The state and the government

As with many political concepts, the terms 'state' and 'government' can be misunderstood and used as if they have the same meaning. In reality they are very different and should be employed with great care.

The state

If we refer to 'a state' or 'the state' we mean different things. A state is a country, a territory within which sovereignty can be identified and is widely recognised both within the country and abroad. There is no doubt that France, Italy, the USA and Nigeria are 'states'. Other countries recognise them as states and understand who represents their government.

When we say 'the state', however, we are referring to institutions within the country. The state normally refers to the permanent collection of institutions that administers a territory. Normally we would include the following within the state:

- The armed forces and the security and intelligence establishment
- Law enforcement agencies, including judges, courts, the police and the prison service
- The bureaucracy or civil service — politically neutral bodies which may stay in office even when political governments change
- Other institutions that may or may not be parts of the permanent apparatus of the state, depending on the arrangements within the country (in the UK, the National Health Service, most educational organisations, the BBC and the Benefits Agency are all parts of the state; in the USA, healthcare is largely in the private sector and there is no state-run broadcasting; in France, the railways are part of the state, while in the UK they are not)
- Bodies that exist at sub-central level, such as local authorities and devolved administrations

So, we can make two assertions about the state: first, it is normally politically neutral and, second, it is permanent.

Government

The government is a collection of individuals and bodies that are political in nature and that are not permanent. In the UK the government consists of the prime minister, cabinet, junior ministers and political advisers. Should the governing party lose power, all these individuals will cease to be the government and will be replaced by a new team. Normally we expect the government to give political direction to the state. Indeed, the senior members of the state are usually appointed by members of the government.

MPs, peers and Parliament in general do not fit neatly into either the 'state' or the 'government'. Instead they form the legislature (see below), whose role is to provide consent and accountability to government.

Branches of government

It is customary to divide the activity of government into three branches.

Legislature

In broad terms the legislature means the law-making body. However, this can be misleading, especially in the UK. Parliament, the UK's legislature (known as Congress in the USA, the *Chambre de Députés* in France and the *Bundestag* in Germany), does not normally make law. This is the responsibility of the government. In the UK, the legislature is primarily concerned with providing formal consent to

Synoptic link

Parliament, the UK legislature, is described and analysed in Chapter 6.

proposed laws — an activity known as 'promulgation'. Parliament also has limited powers to amend proposals and may, on rare occasions, reject proposed legislation. Legislatures in other countries sometimes *do* develop their own laws, notably the US Congress, but governments are usually more significant than legislatures in this law-making role.

Executive

The executive branch has three main roles.

- The first is to develop new legislation and present it before the legislature for approval (this includes identifying the need for new legislation and drafting the laws themselves).
- The second is to arrange for the implementation of the laws.
- Finally, the executive runs the state and so administers the country, making decisions when they are needed and organising state-run services.

Synoptic link

The UK executive branch is described and analysed in Chapter 7.

Synoptic link

The UK judiciary is described and analysed in Chapter 8.

Judiciary

The judiciary refers to the legal system and the judges in particular. Most of the judiciary is not concerned with politics but rather with criminal matters and disputes between individuals and organisations. But at the high levels of the judiciary — in the UK this includes the High Court, the Court of Appeal and the Supreme Court — some legal cases involve politics. When there are disputes about the meaning of laws, when citizens' rights are in jeopardy, or when there are disputes concerning the behaviour of the government or the state, the judiciary has political significance. Nevertheless, as we shall see below, judges are expected to adopt a neutral stance, even though they are concerned with political matters.