

FOR THE
IB DIPLOMA
PROGRAMME

FOURTH
EDITION

Theory of Knowledge

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SAMPLE



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Knowledge and Politics

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.

Learner profile

Knowledgeable

What types of knowledge are valued by society?
How do political factors affect the value of different types of knowledge?

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 that people in positions of political power, who have the authority to make decisions, often control what knowledge gets made and disseminated. Politicians, for example, very often decide what kinds of scientific research gets funded and what does not. 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 politics!’

KNOWLEDGE QUESTION

What kinds of knowledge inform our political opinions?

◆ **Hierarchy:** A structure in which some things are higher up than others. There is a natural progression from bottom to top in a hierarchy, and in general, those at any given level have power over those below them.



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?

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

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.

■ 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 words and phrases and to try to create better understanding and greater inclusiveness for a wider diversity of people.

Today, this phrase is more commonly used by people who are critical of such an attitude. The use of the adjective 'politically', in this context, performs the same function that we saw in the example of the person who said that someone's promotion was political, implying that it was not

◆ **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.

deserved. In the case of ‘politically correct’ or ‘political correctness’, the implication is that the scrupulous attempt to remove racial and gender bias from language is not necessary or genuine – it’s just an effort to appear, in public, to care about equality by people who really don’t.

Those in favour of the idea of racial and gender equality, however, see the effort as being an important one in paying due respect to all people, and they do not use the term ‘politically correct’ to describe their efforts. One could argue that it is not ‘politically correct’ to be inoffensive, it is just unacceptable (and indeed a crime in some cases) in the present day to use sexist, racist or homophobic language.

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.

KNOWLEDGE QUESTION

How do our values and assumptions influence the language in which we express our ideas?

◆ **Loaded:** To say that a word or idea is ‘loaded’ is to say that it has a lot of emotional associations and tends, therefore, to be controversial.

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.

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.

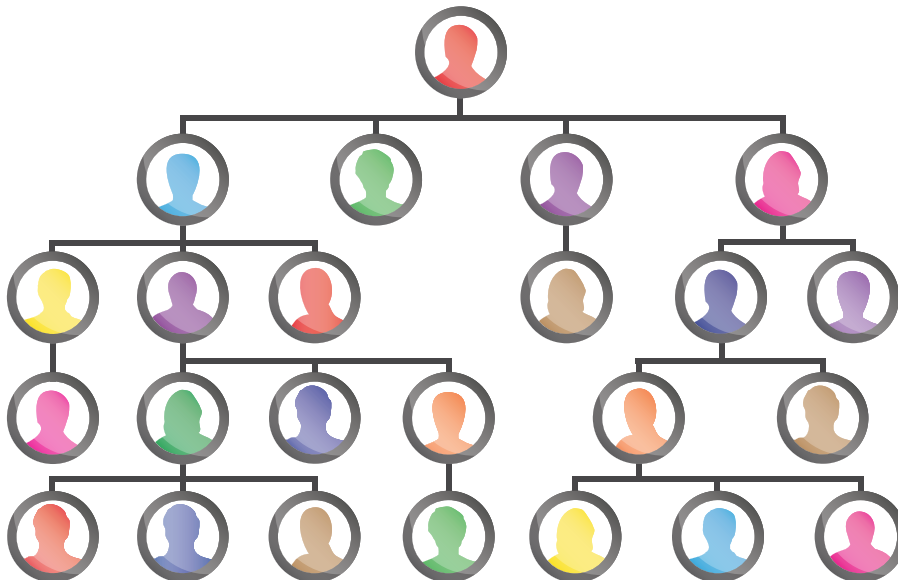
The determination of what makes for the best political system is fundamentally a matter of opinion. Because different people have different *values* (see Concept connection, page 226), they have different ideas about what the role of government is and what rules should be in place for all people. Because 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.

The scope of the politics of a society or a nation is wide and varied. Political decisions must be made about such things as health care, 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



■ An organization's hierarchy will often be represented in an organizational chart, like this one

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.

ACTIVITY

Discuss with your classmates: What is the scope of politics? Is there any part of our lives which is unaffected by political forces?

Perspectives

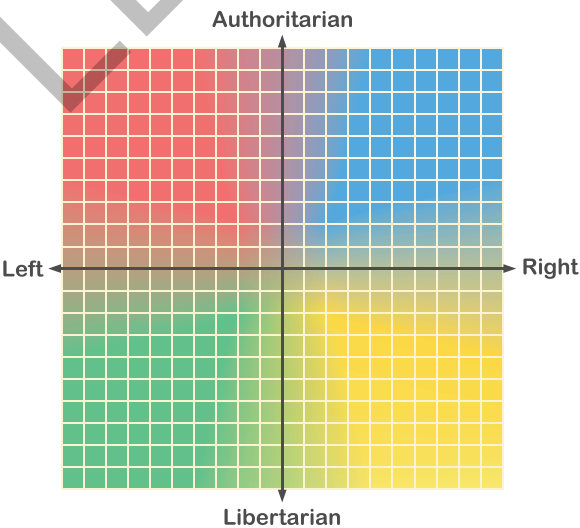
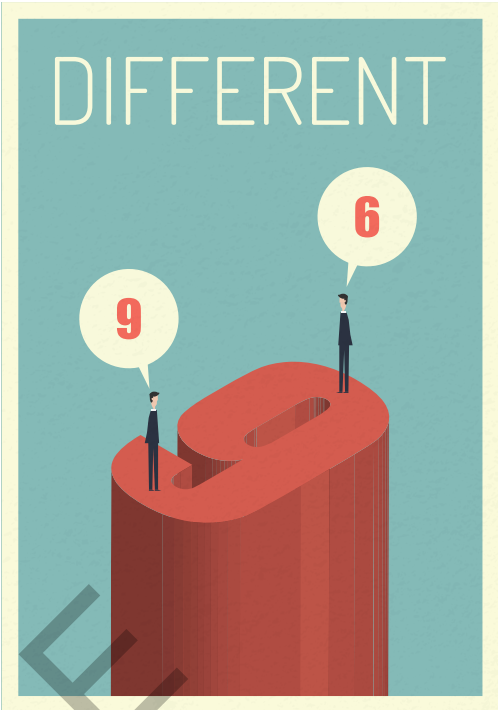
As we have already seen, the perspective of the knower inevitably shapes what we know. In the realm of politics, differing perspectives are responsible both for the difficulty of making good decisions and for the conflict which very often arises out of the decision-making process. In trying to make knowledge 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, and 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.



■ Is the traditional linear left–right axis an adequate model for political differences? Where would you place yourself on this spectrum?

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).

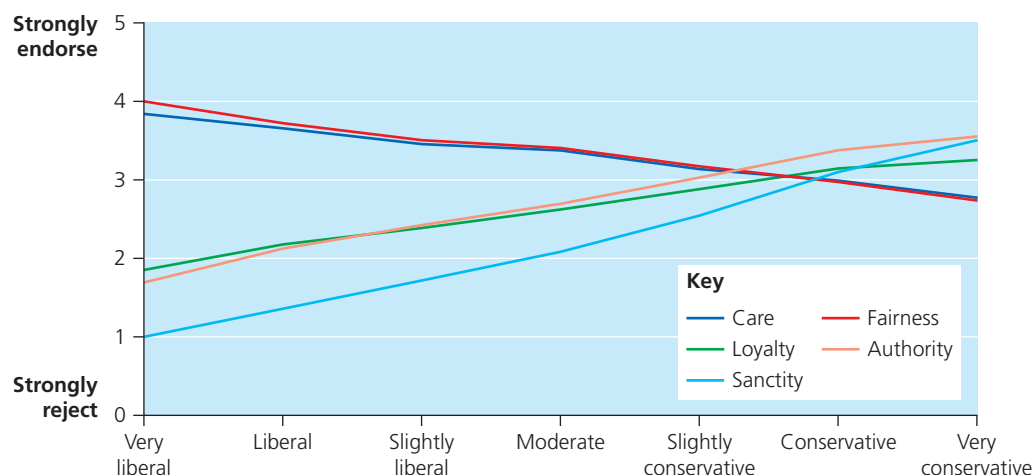
Jonathan Haidt, Professor of Ethical Leadership at New York University's Stern School of Business, has investigated the values which are at the basis of the difference between conservative and liberal beliefs. He helped to develop a theory called the Moral Foundations Theory. The theory proposes five 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 | 4 Authority/subversion |
| 2 Fairness/cheating | 5 Sanctity/degradation. |
| 3 Loyalty/betrayal | |

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.

KNOWLEDGE QUESTION

To what extent are our political views shaped by society, family backgrounds, education or social class?



■ Differing values of conservative and liberal people according to Moral Foundations Theory

(Source: *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion* by Jonathan Haidt)

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?



Optional themes

■ 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, NASA's 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 Thiokol, 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.



■ NASA Space Shuttle Challenger

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.

CONCEPT CONNECTION

Culture

In Chapter 1, we considered the definition of ‘culture’ primarily from the perspective of the culture of a whole country or a whole community. Culture, however, is a concept that can apply in smaller groups as well. We can talk about the culture of a business, a club or a family. In the Space Shuttle example on the previous page, we might consider how the culture of NASA as an organization, which is part of the US government, contributed to the decision-making process. We might consider that the culture of that organization at that time was one which featured competitiveness with space agencies in other countries, as well as a culture which featured significant pressure on people doing the actual work to get the job done quickly. We can, therefore, consider that the politics of an organization can reflect the culture of the organization.

We can also consider how our individual and group politics are reflections of our culture. Some nations have democratic systems of government, and the people who grow up in those countries are likely to have the perspective that a **democracy** is the best form of politics for a government to have. Other people live in countries where religion plays a very prominent role in both daily lives and in government, and those people might have the perspective that a **theocracy** is the best form of government. Some examples of theocracies are Saudi Arabia and the Vatican.

Our culture also plays a powerful and **integral** role in shaping our political beliefs. If you think for a moment about your own beliefs about what is important in terms of contributing to a quality life, you will be able to see right away that those beliefs came from your parents, your peers, your religious institution and your community. When you took Dr Haidt’s survey earlier in this chapter, which of the values did you think were most important? Probably you felt that all were important to some degree, but if you were forced to choose, you would pick some over the others. Where did you get those values? Note that ‘values’ are also a TOK course concept, and now you can probably see the relationship between your cultural experience, what you value, and your political beliefs.

◆ **Democracy:** People in a country can vote for the representatives, the politicians, who will make most of the decisions. In a true democracy, the citizens of the country would vote on all issues that needed to be decided. Most democracies in the modern world are too big for direct input of all citizens, and so most modern democracies, including those in the UK, Canada, the United States and Australia, are representative democracies.

◆ **Theocracy:** A form of government in which the leaders of government are also leaders of the predominant religion, and they are considered to be led in their decision making by divine guidance.

◆ **Integral:** Something that is essential that cannot be separated from the other thing. In this case, to say that our culture is integral to our political beliefs is to say that the two cannot be separated.

EE links

If you are interested in the relationship between culture and politics, you might want to pursue this topic further and investigate the question of how the cultural history of a nation has shaped its political system. You could, for example, choose to write an extended essay about how, historically, cultural attitudes have kept women from rising to the top political roles in many countries. By 2019, Australia has had only one female prime minister, the UK has had two, New Zealand has had three female prime ministers and Canada has had one female prime minister, while the United States has never had a female president or vice president.

The politics of knowledge and the shaping of perspectives

So far, we have looked primarily at our knowledge of politics – the system of decision making for a community or country. We must now also consider the politics of knowledge: the ways in which political decisions and political power affect our ability to make knowledge.

Learner profile

Reflective

How does reflecting on the politics of knowledge help us to understand what it is possible to know?

History

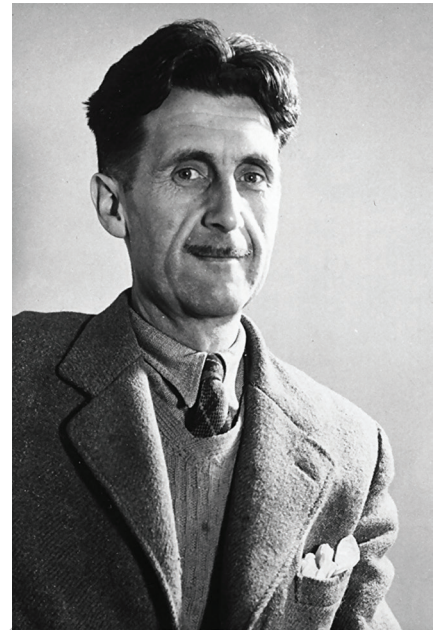
“Who controls the past controls the future; who controls the present controls the past.”

George Orwell, Nineteen Eighty-Four

Politics generally affects knowledge-making on an institutional level, but it is also possible to see how politics can affect the knowledge that you, personally, can make and how you make it. In his 1949 novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, George Orwell depicted a futuristic society in which the government exerted rigid control over all information that was accessible to any member of the society. The government slogan was ‘Who controls the past controls the future; who controls the present controls the past’ (Orwell 313). In the novel, the Party (the political machine) controlled the past by altering news reports and photographs so that individual people couldn’t learn anything about the past that the government didn’t want them to learn. One important reason to know the real past is that it helps us understand how we came to be what we are today, both individually and as a nation, and so when a past is constructed deliberately to suit the wishes of the politicians in control, so is the understanding it is possible to have of the present. Orwell’s vision might seem to be excessive – even **apocalyptic**; however, attempts to control information on this scale have occurred in relatively recent history.

Josef Stalin’s efforts to control the knowledge of history that it was possible for citizens of the Soviet Union to have are widely known. His revisions to historical documents included the doctoring of numerous photographs in order to remove people who had once been his allies but who had become his enemies: ‘Sometimes, official censors had to retouch photos over and over again as the list of political enemies grew longer. In one photograph, Stalin is shown with a group of three of his deputies. As each deputy fell out of his favour, they were snipped out of the photo until only Stalin remained’ (Blakemore). The original photo is shown below; Stalin is the second from the left. The second image is of the revised photo, with no one but Stalin left.

Changing historical documents such as photographs results in people who try to learn history from those documents taking away a completely wrong understanding of historical events. We know now what Stalin tried to do, because in the years following the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, Stalin’s secrets became known to the rest of the world and original documents were recovered. Many people, however, lived their entire lives during Stalin’s rule, and those who lived beyond it had to relearn the history of their country.



■ George Orwell

◆ **Apocalyptic:** As described in the book of Revelation in the Christian Bible, the apocalypse refers to the complete destruction of the world. The idea of an apocalypse has come to refer metaphorically to any catastrophic event which would destroy civilization as we know it.



■ Josef Stalin famously had photos doctored to remove allies that had become adversaries

Education

The deliberate rewriting of history is an extreme example of how politics can shape people's knowledge. As we have already seen, politics very often determines what knowledge is pursued because of the allocation of funding. That process also naturally affects what individuals can know. If knowledge doesn't get developed, it isn't available to be learned.

One of the most significant ways that politics can help or hinder individuals' knowledge is by the control over who has access to education. The provision of education is a significant decision that must be made in virtually every modern society. If education is an entirely private venture, for which individual people have to pay, then only the wealthy can afford to educate their children. If the government is going to provide education for everyone, then the problem becomes how to pay for it and whether the same education can be provided to everyone. In trying to make that decision, politicians must take into account many different perspectives.

Schools

In the United States, for example, the goal is to provide publicly funded education for everyone. A portion of the funding comes from the federal government, and a portion comes from the state governments. Trying to determine how much money will be spent requires a consideration of how many school-aged children there are in any given state, how much money each state can afford to provide (some states being poorer than others) and so on. A very common problem is that areas with a high percentage of low-income families end up with school systems which are underfunded. If one school can provide all the students with access to laptop computers, fully-stocked science labs and up-to-date equipment for health and physical education, and another school in another city or state can only provide five computers in the library (or none), a science lab with only four microscopes and no access to lab specimens for dissection, and jumping ropes and balls for physical education but no weight machines or monitors for heart rate and counting steps, then the kind of education that the students will get is very different.

In many countries, such as the United States, Canada and the UK, families who can afford to do so can send their children to schools which are privately funded, which means that they are not funded by the government. In some cases, private primary and secondary schools are very well funded, and, because parents pay high fees, can provide many more resources than public schools can. It is sometimes the case, therefore, that people who can afford these schools can get a better education than people who must rely on state-funded schools for their education. At any rate, in any system where there are both publicly and privately funded schools, the systems are inherently different, and which one you attend shapes what you can learn.

Historically, inequalities in school systems have sometimes been based in an overtly racist political situation. Official government policies, such as the Jim Crow era 'separate but equal' laws in the United States and apartheid in South Africa, meant that white children had access to much better funded schools than black children had access to. During the Jim Crow era, the races were certainly separated, but they were not, despite the claim in the slogan, by any means provided with equal facilities or resources. Black schools were often housed in old, run-down buildings and lacked books and other materials. Carter G. Woodson, one of the first scholars to study African American history '... told how some black children in southern schools were not allowed to use books that included the Declaration of Independence or the US Constitution' (Brooker). Although in both of those countries the laws have been changed, the inequalities are often still reflected in the poverty of some cities and neighbourhoods.

One more important political factor that shapes what young people can learn in schools has to do with the fact that every school system must decide what content should be taught. One decision

KNOWLEDGE QUESTIONS

With regards to politics, do we know as much as we think we know?

How can we know whether we have sufficient knowledge before voting in an election?

Learner profile

Caring

How might knowledge of inequalities in a country's educational system contribute to our ability to take action in the world?

to be made is which subjects will be offered. If you go to a school where, say, Chinese is not taught, then you won't be able to gain knowledge of Chinese, unless you take it upon yourself to find a private Chinese language school. Perhaps your IB Programme offers philosophy but not psychology, or biology and chemistry but not physics. All of these choices, which can be seen as political at least to the degree that there are decision makers who have the power of choice for everyone, and to the degree that money is involved in the decision, shape what it is possible for you to study.

A second, less obvious decision that must be made is what content will be taught within the courses that have been chosen. No secondary school in Canada could, for example, teach everything there is to know about Canadian history. High school calculus can only cover so many topics over the course of a year. What are the most important topics to be taught in physics? Someone has to make choices, and each system has a different means of determining course content.

One powerful influence on what will be taught in any given class is the production of textbooks. Textbook publishers cannot afford to publish many different textbooks for many different situations, schools or states, so each publisher usually has only one textbook for each level of each subject. Depending on how many textbook publishers there are in any country, school systems are limited to a very few choices of which book to buy.

For the last Theory of Knowledge curriculum, for instance, there were several choices of textbooks for the TOK course, including the Hodder book which preceded this edition, a book published by Oxford University Press, a book published by Cambridge University Press and a book published by Pearson. All the books were written for the published IB curriculum, but the authors of each one determined what aspects of the curriculum should be featured prominently and how to explain each of the ideas that would be included in the course. Each book was, therefore, different from all the others. Different schools chose different books, and some schools chose no books. Students at those different schools, therefore, had access to different ideas about what was important knowledge in Theory of Knowledge.

In the case of Theory of Knowledge, the differences in the books seemed to be relatively minor. No large political interest group got involved in trying to determine what could or could not be

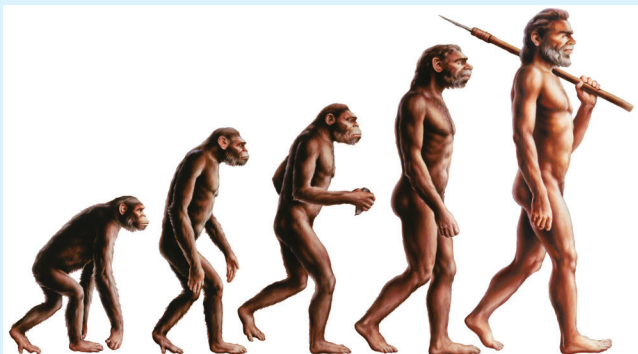


■ To what extent do textbooks, such as the one you are reading, affect what you know or think?

included in the TOK books. For many textbooks, however, different groups of people have very strong opinions about what should and should not be taught. These groups sometimes get involved in lobbying textbook companies to have certain information included or excluded from student textbooks. If they are successful, then those textbooks are what are available to everyone, even in places where the community and the school officials wish to teach the excluded information.

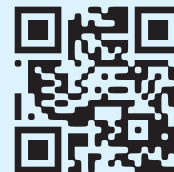
CASE STUDY

Evolution in schools



One topic which is often the target of special-interest groups is the teaching of evolution. In 2016, Biology textbooks in Alabama schools in the US were still required to include a sticker with a message to students which claimed that evolution is a 'controversial theory' supported by 'some scientists' (Schlanger). You can use the QR code to read the entire statement which is presented to students in that state who take biology.

Opponents of the use of such stickers are concerned that they harm students' understanding of both science and of religion (Glaze).



Anti-evolution sentiment, in fact, extends well beyond the political pressure put on textbooks. In India, in 2018, the Minister for Higher Education, Satyapal Singh, called for the removal of evolution from schools, claiming that Darwin's work is 'scientifically wrong' (Dixon). In Turkey, claims have been made that evolution cannot be taught because it is beyond the ability of secondary students to understand, while in Israel teachers were claiming that there is pressure from the education ministry to teach subjects other than evolution in biology (Dixon). All of these examples demonstrate the effects of political decision-making on the personal knowledge of individuals through the influence those decisions have on the educational process in any given country.

ACTIVITY

Consider the political decision-making in your country. How does it affect what people can learn in schools and can, therefore, know?

- 1 Do you think that people of all races are treated the same way in terms of their education?
- 2 Do you think that immigrants have access to the same kind of education that native-born citizens do?
- 3 Do you think that young women get the same kind of education as young men?
- 4 Is there a different educational path for students who wish to go to college and students who wish to go into a trade or into the military?
- 5 Can all students at your school choose to study the IB curriculum? Are all students at your school required to study the IB curriculum?
- 6 Do you think that such differences are always necessarily negative? Why or why not?

Learner profile

Principled

What principles should underlie the creation and implementation of an educational system?

CAS links

If you are interested in finding out more about how educational decision making takes place in your community, you could organize a field trip to the nearest state-run education office. You could arrange for an official to make a presentation to you and your classmates about the process that is used in your area for determining what curriculum is to be taught in your schools.

Higher education

Access to higher education is also often influenced by political factors. In China, access to higher education is determined by the *gaokao*, an examination which students must pass to be eligible for university. When it was first developed in 1952, under the rule of Mao, only students who were seen to be sufficiently communist could apply to take the exam (Qin and Hernández). In the twenty-first century, the test is available to many more people and is perceived as offering opportunity to anyone who is willing to work hard enough; however, it can also be seen as a ‘tool of social control’ (Qin and Hernández), which happens because those who benefit from the education are expected to **acquiesce** with government policies. One mother, who dropped out of school herself, has big dreams for her son, who will, she thinks, raise the family out of poverty.

To achieve all this, Ms Gong and millions of other Chinese like her have an unspoken bargain with the ruling Communist Party. The government promises a good life to anyone who works hard, even the children of peasants. In exchange, they stay out of politics, look away when protesters climb onto rooftops to denounce the forced demolition of their homes, and accept the propaganda posters plastered across the city. (Qin and Hernandez)

Interestingly, in terms of how politics influences knowledge, because the *gaokao* is now seen as offering pretty fair opportunities for anyone who wants to take it, even those students who fail the exam do not complain about the politics of their country. The blame for failure rests on the students who, as they see it, simply did not work hard enough.

Information sharing

Another example of how politics can influence knowledge reveals how, depending on the political goals of a government, knowledge can be deliberately kept from the public, even when the public has paid, through taxes, for that knowledge to be gathered or developed.

◆ **Acquiesce:** To go along with. It has the connotation of allowing someone else to do something that you might not entirely approve of, but you let it pass for some reason or another. In this case, whether the parents and students like the government or not, they have decided to go along with the political decisions without complaining because they will get an education out of keeping quiet.

◆ **Innocuous:** Something that is of virtually no importance and which has no meaningful consequences. In this case, a change from allowing scientific models to project change to the end of the century to allowing them only to project change for the next 20 years doesn’t seem very significant; however, the appearance is deceiving.

CASE STUDY

Climate change

Global climate change has been a politically contentious topic for some years, because the cost of engaging in a dedicated effort to combat climate change is quite high. Those costs include the money that would have to be expended to develop new technologies as well as the costs to businesses and industries of modifying their factories and changing their practices for things like disposing of waste. Some political groups place the value of caring for the environment higher than the value of promoting business profits, while others believe that free enterprise and capitalism are of greater value.

In recent years, this clash of beliefs has led to dramatic changes in policies regarding the sharing of information about global climate change with the public. In September 2016, for example, under President Barack Obama’s administration, the United States joined the Paris Accord, a multi-national agreement to commit to



an effort to keeping global warming below 2°C in this century, as well as participating in other efforts to cope with the effects of climate change (‘The Paris Agreement’). You can read the text of the Paris Agreement using the QR code.



In signing the accord and committing the US to meeting the standards it lays out, Obama said this:

One of the reasons I ran for this office was to make sure that America does its part to protect this planet for future generations. Over the past seven and a half years, we've transformed the United States into a global leader in the fight against climate change. (Somanader)

Obama states directly that protecting the planet was a political goal under his administration. Just a few months later, however, after Donald Trump's election in November 2016, there was a dramatic change to the political values guiding the decision making in Washington. Under the new administration, significant changes were made to the Environmental Protection Agency. Environmental protections passed by previous administrations were rolled back, and Trump's White House withdrew the United States from the Paris Accord (Davenport and Landler). The Trump administration has also put into place regulations about what information about climate change can and cannot be released to the public:

the White House-appointed director of the United States Geological Survey, James Reilly, a former astronaut and petroleum geologist, has ordered that scientific assessments produced by that office use only computer-generated climate models that project the impact of climate change through 2040, rather than through the end of the century, as had been done previously. (Davenport and Landler)

While this limitation on what knowledge can be disseminated seems, at first glance, to be fairly **innocuous**, the implications are actually pretty significant, as the models show that the greatest effects of climate change will occur after the year 2040 (Davenport and Landler). By limiting the models to the years in which the effects of climate change are likely to be the least problematic, the government is ensuring

that people do not hear about the most devastating consequences.

The United States is not the only country with a government which has taken active steps to stop the spread of knowledge about global climate change. In Canada, when Prime Minister Stephen Harper consolidated power in 2011 with the election of more members of the Conservative Party to Parliament, his administration set in place specific new rules denying government scientists the right to speak directly to the press. All requests for information about climate change had to go through a special media centre which dealt with those communications. Often responses were stalled until the reporters' deadlines were past (Learn). Other times, they were simply tied up in a long back-and-forth of emails. In one case, a request by a reporter from *The Canadian Press* to speak with Max Bothwell, a government scientist with Environment Canada, an environmental watchdog, was bogged down in what ultimately turned out to be 110 pages of emails involving 16 different government agencies (Learn). The reasons for the change to regulations in Canada were based on the fact that Harper's administration opposed spending money to fight climate change and favoured developing energy resources:

Early on in his administration, Harper boasted that Canada would become an 'energy superpower' built on the growth of the Athabasca oil sands in the western part of the country. This oil-rich region would subsequently become a driving economic force for the country, until low global oil prices caused the loonie (the Canadian dollar) to crash. Climate change science – and environmental regulations – posed a hindrance to that ambitious vision. (Learn)

Harper's political goals were different from the goals of the government which preceded him, and the decisions that he and his administration made resulted in a change to the knowledge readily available to the Canadian public.

Both of these examples show how the values which underlie political decision making influence the kind and amount of knowledge which is available to the public.

This kind of influence of politics on knowledge is not, of course, particular only to the United States and Canada. Politicians must make choices between options – indeed, that is their function in a government. Whichever choice they make will have consequences in terms of what knowledge does get made and disseminated and what does not. Therefore, all countries

in which politicians make decisions for the populace at large will experience the fact that those political decisions affect the way that knowledge gets made and distributed within that country.

Funding

A final way in which politics influences knowledge has to do with funding. Much of our knowledge is developed by professionals – biologists, psychologists, mathematicians and so on. These people are almost without exception employed either by the government, by universities or by private industries. As employees, they are not free to do whatever work they want to do. Rather, they do the work that their employer is willing to pay for.

ACTIVITY

Can you think of examples in your country of how political decision making has resulted in your having access to either more or less knowledge of a particular subject?

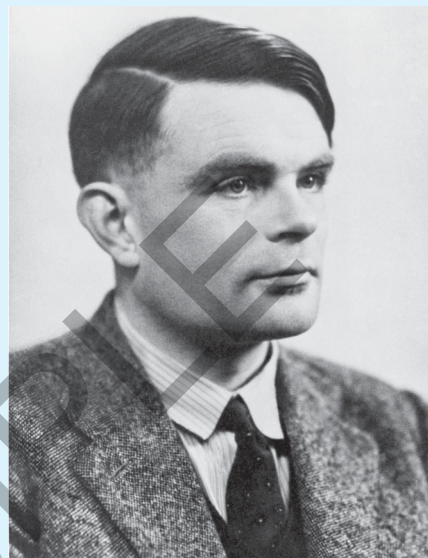
CASE STUDY

Alan Turing

An example of the way that funding determines what knowledge gets made can be found in British history. During the Second World War, the Germans developed a cyphering system that they could change every day, and which the British and their allies could not crack. They were able to pick up messages, but they could not understand them. Breaking the enigma code, as the cypher was known as, became a top priority for the British military, and the government set up a department at Bletchley Park, in Buckinghamshire, devoted to finding a way to crack the code (IWM Staff).

Alan Turing, a brilliant mathematician, was instrumental in helping to crack the code, which he did by inventing a machine he called 'Bomba'. In the post-war years, Turing continued to work on his computing machines, using what he had learned during the war. It wasn't until long after he died that Turing's contribution to modern computing was recognized, but his work is now seen as foundational to the development of computers and computer science, and the highest award in computer science is named after him (IWM Staff).

The example of the high value to the British of being able to intercept German messages



during the war and their subsequent funding of a very expensive project to develop the necessary knowledge shows how powerful the allocation of money is in the effort to generate knowledge. We might imagine that had the British government not funded Turing's work, he would not have learned what he needed to learn in order to advance the invention of computers as far as he did. Had he not done his work, the development of modern computer science might have been delayed or it might have taken a very different path from the one that it did. Knowledge is often power, but so is money.

Methods and tools

■ Making knowledge about politics

The history of politics reveals how a society came to have the political system that it has now. In England, for example, the political system began as a monarchy in the ninth century. Parliament was formally convened in the thirteenth century with the signing of the Magna Carta, which established a body of wealthy landowners who were chosen by the King and who served as advisers to him (History.com Editors). Parliament gradually gained more power over the next

several centuries, and in 1688 the Glorious Revolution led to the formation of a constitutional monarchy (British Monarchist League). The system has gradually evolved further in the intervening centuries so that today the monarch holds a largely ceremonial position and the governing of the nation is done by the prime minister and parliament. The history of politics in England reveals a change from early beliefs that the monarch was God's representative on Earth, and so infallible, to a contemporary belief that all people in a society have rights to be protected, one of which is to have a say in how they are to be governed.

This description is, of course, very simplified; 13 centuries of history cannot be represented adequately in a paragraph. You can get an idea, though, of how the history of politics in England would reveal all the gradual changes and how they came about. Perhaps more importantly, from a TOK perspective, it also reveals the changing values which drove those changes. The history of politics reveals the history of people's knowledge and their beliefs about how the country should be governed.

Different countries' political systems have undergone different kinds of political change, and so reflect different beliefs and values about how a country is to be governed. There are still, in the twenty-first century, a number of countries whose political system is an absolute monarchy, one in which there is no parliament or other governing body, and in which the king's or queen's word is law.

ACTIVITY

Identify one time in your country's history when there was a change in the political system. This change might be a dramatic one, such as the adoption of a constitution, or it might be a simpler one, such as a shift from a more conservative government to a more liberal one. Identify the events and values that led to that change in the political system.

CASE STUDY

Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia is an absolute monarchy. During the twentieth century, there was considerable talk about moving the country toward a constitutional monarchy, and several documents were drafted over the years which could have formed the basis for such an arrangement. However, none of these plans came to anything, and the current monarch, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (commonly known as MBS) has firmly denounced any such plans. Saudi Arabian Abdullah Alaoudh, writing for *The Washington Post* in July 2018, had this to say:

The change of mind-set with MBS toward embracing eternal absolute power marks a dramatic shift from past democratic promises that offered some hope for the

future, even though none of them were ever fulfilled.

The new Saudi administration has gained positive press for its futuristic rhetoric, including talk of a robotically manned city, and for allowing women to drive. But make no mistake: We are witnessing a return to Saudi Arabia's past. In abandoning the promise of democracy, the crown prince may actually be on his way to making Saudi Arabia more medieval than ever. (Alaoudh)

The history of the politics of Saudi Arabia reveals the fact that when a nation has a leader with absolute power, it requires the cooperation, and possibly the active leadership of that monarch, to move the country toward something more democratic, regardless of what the political beliefs of the people of that society may be.

History is full of examples, however, of people rising up in revolution to overthrow an absolute ruler who refused to make any such changes. The American Revolution which began in 1776 is one such example and resulted in a new nation being formed when the 13 British colonies broke away from the rule of King George III of England. The French Revolution of 1789 removed the monarchy in that country, and in 1917, the Bolshevik Revolution removed the Emperor of Russia from power and ultimately established, in its place, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics – the USSR (The Learning Network). The USSR, in turn, fell in the late twentieth century when President Mikhail Gorbachev instituted a series of reforms during his time as leader of the Soviet Union. Each one of these revolutions arose out of changing beliefs and values.

Knowledge about the history of politics is made by historians, using the methods of history, which you will read about in Chapter 11.

IA prompt

33 How is current knowledge shaped by its historical development?

Political facts and laws

Politics has a close relationship to the legal system in any government, because the decisions that politicians make are disseminated to the public in the form of laws. Laws are, of course, creations particular to a given society, and they are the formal statements of what people living in that society can and cannot do. One way to think about the laws of the country, then, is that they are the knowledge claims about what is politically acceptable in the country as a whole.

In general, federal laws (those passed by a country's national government) apply to all places and all citizens of that country. Smaller governmental entities, such as states or provinces, also pass laws, but those laws may not contradict any federal law. Many issues, however, are not addressed by federal law, and so there may be actions which are legal in some places within a given country, but which are not legal in others. In the United States for instance, the age at which it is legal to marry without parental consent is set by the individual states. In almost all states, the age is 18. However, in two states, people must be older: in Nebraska, you must be 19 to marry without parental consent, and in Mississippi, you must be 21 (Free Advice Staff). As with federal laws, state or provincial and local laws are, in effect, knowledge claims about the political decisions of that geographical area. So how is this knowledge made?

Laws are initially written by people, and they can be changed by people, using the processes allowed in that particular society. In December 2017, for instance, 245 laws were formally repealed by two acts of the Indian Parliament. Among the laws which were repealed was one which regulated hackney carriages, vehicles which were in common use in the nineteenth century (PTI).



■ An Indian hackney carriage

The repeal of this law doesn't have much significance in terms of day-to-day life in India, as no one uses hackney carriages anymore. Another law which was repealed in these acts, however, has more interesting ramifications. The bill repealed the 'Dramatic Performance Act' of 1876, which outlawed theatrical performances because they were being used as protests against British rule (PTI). Since theatrical performances are certainly being given in India in the twenty-first century, some or all of these performances may be technically in violation of the law. Formally repealing the law means that no one can try to challenge a theatrical performance they don't like using that 1876 law as the basis for the suit. The process in this case was the normal process for passing laws in the Indian Parliament. This process is typical of countries in which there is a representative government.

In the case of governments with absolute monarchies or dictatorships, the process of knowledge-making is quite different. In those cases, the leader determines what is to be permissible and what is not, and their decree is sufficient to establish law. The common term for ‘laws’ in these nations is ‘edict’. There are no procedures for repealing edicts. In North Korea, for example, an edict was issued in 1972 which is called the ‘Three Generations of Punishment’ rule. Under this edict, if a person is convicted of a crime which results in his being sent to a prison camp, his entire family and all members of the next two generations can be sent to the prison camp as well (Wright and Urban). As of 2017, this rule was still in place.

The laws and edicts of any country function as the embodiment of beliefs about what is right and what is wrong and about how things should be. This fact accounts for the controversy that often surrounds the proposal and passage of laws. Consider, for example, the emotional debate over gun control laws, particularly in the United States. The fight stems from disagreements such as whether it is right for individuals to be able to own even military-grade weaponry, as well as being about what kind of society should exist.

One very familiar role that the legal system of a government plays at any level is to determine (ie, to make knowledge of) whether or not a person has broken a law. How this process works differs somewhat from country to country, but it generally involves lawyers, witnesses, evidence, a judge and, often, a jury. The decision is very often communally made.

Another very significant function of the legal system, however, is to hear challenges to laws which someone or some people feel violate the higher law of the constitution of the state, province or nation. As we saw, in the case of dictatorships or absolute monarchies, there is no process for launching this sort of appeal. In other countries, however, where the governmental structure includes a system of checks and balances, courts do take up the question of whether some laws are legal according to the higher authority, and ought, therefore to be allowed to stand, or whether those laws violate the constitution, and must therefore be struck down. Knowledge of whether a law is fair or not, in other words, lies with the court system in many instances.

Sometimes the process of challenging a law on legal grounds can be quite tricky for the courts, because situations and facts that did not exist previously now require new thinking about the implications of the constitution. In the United States, for example, a group of young people filed a suit in 2015 to require the government to combat human-caused climate change on the grounds that such change violates young people’s ‘constitutional right to a clean environment’. By early 2019, the courts had been denying government challenges requesting that the suit be dropped, but in June 2019, a new challenge from the government claimed that there is no constitutional right to a stable environment and that the lawsuit brought by the young people is an effort to get around the separation of powers that is a fundamental aspect of US government. The latest challenge claims that the students are asking the courts to take on the job which normally belongs to the legislature by asking it to make new law (Dennis).

This particular case gives us a very interesting example of trying to make knowledge in politics, because the fundamental question in this latest challenge is about where the line is between applying existing law to new facts and creating new law. In the US, it is not the job of the courts to make new law. It is the job of the courts to perform the check of new situations against existing law. In this example, the government is claiming that the student suit requires new law to be made, while the lawyer for the students says, specifically, ‘We’re asking the court to apply bedrock constitutional law and principles to a wholly new set of facts’ (Dennis). The first question which needs to be decided is who actually has the right to make the knowledge needed in this instance: the legislature or the courts.

ACTIVITY

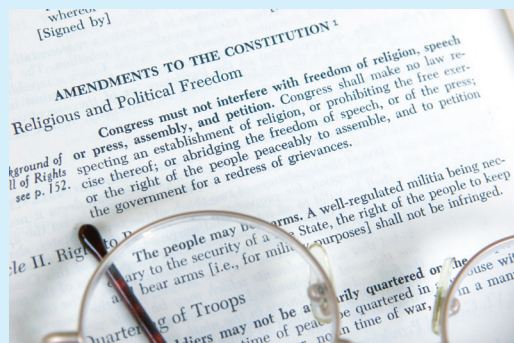
- 1 Working with several of your classmates, each of you choose a country and do some research about how laws are made in that country and then compare notes.
- 2 Remember that the process of making laws is a process of making knowledge, since the resulting laws are knowledge claims. How do these processes shape the kind of knowledge that is possible in each country?

DEEPER THINKING

The foundations of present-day law making

Notice that the entire system of making, testing and repealing laws rests on the honesty and integrity of those responsible for applying the procedures. The constitution, or other underlying document of any country, was written, at some point in history, by people who committed to trying to establish the guidelines by which all future decisions would be made. The constitution was then ratified, or approved, by some significant portion of the people who were alive at that time. A constitution is, therefore, an agreement made by specific people and by which all ensuing people have agreed to abide, unless formal amendment is made to it. All laws written and tested since the adoption of a constitution are required to comply with the constitution, and the legal system is the means by which the constitutionality of any given law can be tested.

We depend, in a very fundamental way, on politicians, lawyers and judges to act in accordance with their vows to uphold the constitution or other foundational document. The power, in other words, of a constitution to express what we know about what can and



cannot be done in any given nation, depends on people abiding by it. If people in the present day simply decide that they are not going to operate within the rules as set out in a constitution, and if the people who are responsible for legal decisions decide that they are not going to hold others to the rules as set out in the constitution, a constitution has no power at all. Since we must put great faith in those we choose to represent us, we might argue that all individuals have a responsibility both to educate themselves about the people who would represent them and to participate in the electoral process of choosing those representatives.

■ How politicians make knowledge about the problems that must be addressed

Professional politicians require a great deal of knowledge on a wide range of topics. Local politicians must know about the kinds of people who live in their constituencies, the problems that those people face, and which come under the scope of the politicians' work: education, health care, **infrastructure**, crime, water supply, management of sewage and garbage and so on. A database search for the bills under consideration in the first half of 2019 in just one state in the United States, Virginia, turned up 6085 bills (Virginia Legislative Information System).

◆ **Infrastructure:** Refers to the physical structures which people in a given city or country need in order to be able to carry out the regular business of their lives. This includes things such as bridges, roads, power supply and communication networks.

ACTIVITY

Do some research and find out how many bills have been considered by your local legislature so far this year. You can choose to investigate either for your city or town or for your state or province. If you cannot find the information on the internet, you can probably telephone your local legislator's office to find out how you can gain access to that information. Make a list of general topics that the politicians have been considering recently.

- 1 How many different bills have been considered?
- 2 How many different topics have come before the legislature for your local politicians to make decisions about?
- 3 How would you characterize the knowledge that your local politicians must have in order to perform their jobs well?
- 4 Which of the topics under consideration would you have sufficient knowledge about to be able to make responsible decisions for your community? How did you acquire that knowledge?
- 5 If you wanted to know more about the topics you don't have a lot of knowledge about, how would you go about learning what you need to know?

KNOWLEDGE QUESTION

Is being knowledgeable an important quality in a political leader?

Depending on their role, politicians who have responsibility over larger geographical regions need to have knowledge about all these topics for that larger region and many more. At national levels, politicians have to be concerned about the need for such larger issues as military services, diplomacy with other nations, immigration policy, global warming and human rights. They may have to concern themselves with problems faced by other countries, because those problems have consequences which affect the home country. Peace in the Middle East, for instance, becomes a significant issue for many other nations in the world, because if the severely troubled relationship between Israel and Palestine cannot be resolved, many other nations may find themselves ultimately drawn into, or at least significantly concerned with the dangers of, a war between those two groups.

Just as worldwide concerns can expand to draw in individual nations who would not appear to be immediately affected by them, national and international concerns can become significant local problems as well. In nations where immigration has come to be a vital national concern, places in those nations in which immigrants settle must deal with immigration questions locally, such as how to provide for the education and health care of immigrants. If there is a large body of illegal immigrants in a city, state or province, how will that locality address that issue? Will the local authority offer the immigrants asylum in their area? What are the effects on the economy of a number of immigrants settling in a particular place? Similarly, in localities in which the effects of global warming are likely to be extensive or even catastrophic, politicians in those localities must learn about the issue and must involve themselves in trying to solve the problem.

In addition to needing to know facts about all these various topics, politicians at all levels must have a set of coherent political beliefs (more on this in the Ethics section below), upon which they can base their decisions. All of this knowledge is ultimately made by each individual. The methods that they use are the same methods that you, or any other individual, can use to make political knowledge, and we will investigate these in the next section.

■ How individual knowers make knowledge about politics

As we have seen from previous chapters, much of what we learn is learned directly from other people. We listen to what people have to say, and we believe what we hear, particularly when the people who are telling us things are people we know well and trust – parents, teachers, peers and people in authority, such as news broadcasters and politicians. We gain much of our political knowledge in this way.

KNOWLEDGE QUESTIONS

With regards to politics, do we know as much as we think we know?

Why do facts sometimes not change our minds?

CONNECTION TO THE CORE THEME

The formation of a general political stance

Earlier in this chapter, we learned that we form our political beliefs based on more fundamental beliefs about what things matter in a human life. Some of those deeper values, as Jonathan Haidt has shown (see page 227) are caring, loyalty, authority, fairness and sanctity. You can imagine other important values such as safety and economic security which might form the basis for your personal definition of the things that are required for a successful and happy life. You are going to develop your personal values – your personal beliefs about which of these you care about and which

you care about the most – from your life experience. You will be influenced by family, friends, religion and culture. Initially, you will likely accept the viewpoints of those people you respect without questioning them.

As you live your own life, however, you may find that your initial views are solidified by your personal experience interacting with the world, or that your views may change, and that your beliefs may eventually differ in greater or lesser degree from those of your parents. You may have experiences that they did not have. Perhaps you go to school with many people from different countries, and

you, therefore, have experience seeing the world from different perspectives. Perhaps you get a summer job working for a company which is dedicated to cleaning up beaches in your area, and you learn to develop an appreciation for preserving the environment, while your friends, who worked in the city, did not necessarily develop the same perspective. As you meet people you respect, your beliefs are likely to be influenced by their beliefs. If people you respect let you down in some way, you may come to question the attitudes that they hold and which you formerly accepted without question.

All of your experiences together help shape your basic values. These values in turn form your worldview, your understanding of what it means to be human and what it means to have a good and successful life. That worldview shapes your knowledge in all areas of your experience. Since politics are a direct expression of what we believe is the right way for people to live together, our political beliefs are necessarily a direct expression of our worldview.

Professional politicians develop their general political stance the same way that you develop yours: based on their personal experience throughout their lives.

ACTIVITY

Use the QR code to visit the website for the Political Compass. You can take a survey on that site, and it will produce for you a profile of your political views based on your answers to a number of questions. After you take the survey, answer these questions:



- 1 Do you think that the questions you were asked were relevant to revealing your political views?
- 2 Do you agree with the result of the analysis of your answers? Why or why not?
- 3 Do you think that categorizing people's political views in this way is useful? Why or why not?

IA prompt

- 6 How does the way that we organize or classify knowledge affect what we know?

Developing knowledge about current political events

Political scientists

Political scientists study the nature of political systems at all levels from the local to the national and international. They study all different types of political systems – monarchical, totalitarian, democratic, theocratic and so on. Political scientists also study political theory, examining the basis for the political beliefs that people hold as well as the historical trends that lead to a country's having a particular sort of government. The history of political thought includes the study of theory dating back to Aristotle and Plato, so you can see that the nature and mechanisms of politics has been a human concern for many centuries.

After university, political scientists work in a variety of careers related to politics, including serving as policy analysts, legislative assistants, consultants working on political campaigns and so on. Some political scientists work on administering polls to gather information about people's political beliefs and concerns as well as on analysing the data gathered in these polls. Results of the polls – knowledge of public opinion – can be used by politicians to shape their policies and it can be used by news media to convey to the public information about how a campaign is progressing.

Individual citizens

People who live in societies with governmental systems that require the participation of the citizenry need to keep themselves informed about current political events so that they can make good decisions when they vote. Voters need to be aware of which political issues play a central role at any given time, and they need to know what is involved in those issues. In some

KNOWLEDGE QUESTION

To what extent can polls provide reliable knowledge and accurate predictions?

communities, for example, immigration might be of concern. In others, the need to improve education might be of pressing importance, while in still others, the problem of ensuring that all community members have clean water might be the most important issue of the day. Of course, all communities will have multiple needs, and decisions about which politicians to vote for will be based on those politicians' stances on multiple issues.

In order to find out what politicians intend to do, once in office, about the various problems that concern a community, individuals need to educate themselves. Often communities will provide for formal means by which that education can take place: groups or organizations will arrange forums in which politicians can answer questions from members of the public or engage in debates. Politicians have organizations working on their behalf which will publish formal statements of policy. In the present day, these policy platforms are often published on the internet. People who desire to learn more about any given politician's policies can seek out that information on those websites.

A lot of political knowledge-making, however, takes place in less formal ways. In most places, the news media is the primary source of information about current political events. News media in the twenty-first century takes myriad forms: newspapers, radio and television are still active sources of political news. There are also many websites which are dedicated to producing commentary on political topics. Some of these are written by political experts – people who have studied politics formally. Some are written by statisticians – political scientists who work with polls. Other websites publish politicians' voting records. Use the QR codes in the margin to look at some examples from the UK, the US and Canada.

Some sites track the votes of individual politicians and some track the votes of individual bills. There are many others besides the ones we have offered here; if you want to know more about how politicians vote in your country, you should have no trouble finding many online resources. However, social media increasingly has become a forum in which people exchange ideas about politics. Twitter and Facebook have been popular forums in the past few years on which people post their personal political views. Politicians, too, have taken to posting on social media, which has the power to reach many people in a very short amount of time.

People who are interested in learning about contemporary political issues, therefore, have many resources at their disposal in order to be able to do so. The problem is that these social media platforms are available for people to post to with little or no restraint. This means that not only can people post whatever they want (which may be true or not), but they can also do so while hiding their true selves behind a fake identity. The reader of the posts has no way of determining whether the person posting the message has an ulterior motive. You saw, in Chapter 3, how algorithms are used to determine what appears on your Facebook and Twitter feeds, which results in people having little or no exposure to ideas other than those they already have. If you have a particular political belief, then, and you post a few things that express that belief, the technology will begin funnelling your way other posts which are like the ones you posted. Included in those posts are likely to be some statements which are not true – either because the person posting them didn't bother to check and passed on what they just assumed was accurate – or because the person posting them deliberately lied. If you do not check the accuracy of the posts that you read, you will likely begin believing things which are not true.

■ Political knowledge and technology

One problem for people trying to make political knowledge by using what they read on the internet is that our modern technology has outstripped evolution. We have evolved, as a species, to depend on each other.



Humans' biggest advantage over other species is our ability to cooperate. Cooperation is difficult to establish and almost as difficult to sustain. For any individual, **freeloading** is always the best course of action. Reason developed not to enable us to solve abstract, logical problems or even to help us draw conclusions from unfamiliar data; rather, it developed to resolve the problems posed by living in collaborative groups (Kolbert).

In other words, we couldn't have survived as individuals living alone among wild animals and the many other dangerous forces of nature half a million years ago, so we developed into a species which cooperates with each other. Once we depend on cooperation, then we have a system in which some people are responsible for some knowledge and other people are responsible for different knowledge. We survive when everyone delivers the necessary knowledge at the right moment.

Modern society absolutely depends on our being able to believe much of what we are told, and to believe that other people, who have jobs that create things we use – like cars, bridges, cell phones, computers, hot water heaters, refrigerators and so on – know what they are doing, even though we don't know or understand what that is. You probably know how to operate your computer. You can boot it up, run programs, write papers. Maybe you can create spreadsheets. You can access the internet to do research. Most students, however, have no idea how the computer actually works. They cannot program it, and they cannot explain why, when they push 'send' on an email message, the message actually shows up on someone else's computer, no matter how far away that person is physically located. (Try it. Can you explain how that works?) Both historically and in terms of our personal, individual experience, we have learned to count on other people.

The problem for knowledge and the internet, and especially for social media, however, is that we are no longer dealing just with experts. If someone who is not an expert in building a computer tries to build one, and someone else who is not an expert in programming that computer tries to program it, it simply will not work. We are not, therefore, in any real danger of being misled by the lack of expertise. If someone who is not an expert in politics – or any other subject – posts a claim on the internet, however, it looks just like a post by an expert would look. Finding out whether posts on social media are like broken computers requires a completely different kind of mental work from what we have been used to, and most of us have not been alerted to the need for the work, nor have we been given the tools to do that work. Thus, people who have been used to trusting what they hear, go right on trusting it, and false information spreads rapidly on the internet.

ACTIVITY

Evaluate your own personal use of social media.

- 1 Which platforms do you rely on the most?
- 2 Are there people whose posts you just believe without checking their validity?
- 3 Why are those people trustworthy?
- 4 Have you seen a post on social media that was clearly untrue? How often does this happen?
- 5 How often do you take steps to find out whether what you are seeing online is true? What steps do you take?

In recent years, another problem has arisen, particularly with regard to political 'information' on social media: bots. Bots are automated programs that run on the internet and they can act like people. They can post things to Facebook accounts, for example, and they can be programmed to post whatever the person who programs them wants. They are, therefore, a particularly powerful tool for manipulating people with false information.

◆ **Freeloading:** People who are freeloaders are those who take advantage of other people's work so they don't have to work themselves. They get benefit for 'free' and they are themselves a 'load' on others around them.

IA prompt

- 24 How might the context in which knowledge is presented influence whether it is accepted or rejected?

CAS links

You could organize a survey of classmates or a school-wide survey to collect information about how much students rely on social media and how often they check the validity of the information that they see online. You could then organize an event at which you share the findings and provide the audience with some tools for how to make better judgments about claims which have been posted online generally and on social media in particular.

Bots were unleashed on consumers in the United States through Twitter and Facebook during the 2016 election to spread false information, in an effort, apparently, to influence the election. Studies have been ongoing in an effort to try to figure out just how much false information was spread and whether it did actually have an impact on the outcome of the election. The extent of the problem is still not known, but in early 2018, Twitter admitted that more than 50 000 Russian-linked accounts were used to post automated material to Twitter (Swaine).

KNOWLEDGE QUESTION

What impact has social media had on how we acquire and share political knowledge?

CONCEPT CONNECTION

Power

We can see from this situation that technology gives unscrupulous people power to persuade people who are unaware of the ways in which technology can be manipulated, especially because of the human tendency to believe what we hear. Anyone who tries to learn about politicians and politics from social media, and who does not take the extra step of checking what they read against other sources to see if they support each other, runs the risk of being manipulated by someone who has a particular interest in one certain outcome. The same is true of anyone who doesn't

analyse what they read carefully and thoughtfully in order to determine whether it is plausible and logical. The people using the technology in such an unscrupulous way wield it to gain power over others, and they don't care whether that outcome is good for the readers of those posts or not.

Consumers can take the power back, but they have to do it consciously, by taking the extra step of checking the accuracy of what they read. This is one of the important aims of Theory of Knowledge: to arm you with the tools to do that so that you have the power of your own opinions, and you do not cede it to someone else.

ACTIVITY

Choose a politician in your community, state, province or country. Work with some classmates to locate some good resources for finding out what politicians claim and what they actually do. Use the QR code to see one example of many. Many politicians also have an individual webpage on which they publish their platform and beliefs. Look up the policy claims that that politician made when they were running for election. Compare those claims with the actual voting record of that politician. Do their actions reflect the early promises?



We have been looking at ways in which individuals can try to educate themselves about contemporary political issues. For a more extensive and more formal understanding of politics, however, students at university can make political science the subject for their degree.

Problems of knowledge in politics

The methods of making knowledge in politics are similar to the methods of human scientists, which you will study in more detail in Chapter 10. When the person making knowledge is a political scientist administering a poll, for example, they are functioning as a human scientist. When the person is not a trained political scientist, but is, rather, a person such as yourself, a member of a society who simply wants to know more about the politics of the region and the day, the methods are much less formal. Both methods, however, pose significant problems for trying to develop certain knowledge.

You will learn more about the problems of the methodology of the human sciences in Chapter 10; however, we will look at one example here in order to demonstrate the kind of difficulty that political scientists face in trying to make knowledge.