

UPT

UNIT 1

# What is Politics: Theorizing the 'Political'



# What is Politics?

- Politics is a deeply embedded aspect of human existence. It governs how power is exercised, how resources are distributed, and how decisions are made within a society.
- Whether we consider the workings of the state or the protest of a marginalized community, politics is involved wherever humans seek to organise collective life.
- The study of politics is not confined to elections, parliaments, or leaders alone; it spans the full range of power dynamics, identity negotiations, value claims, and social conflicts.
- Political theory, as a branch of political inquiry, helps us engage with these issues in a systematic, critical, and reflective manner.
- It asks fundamental questions like: What is justice? What is power? Why obey the state? Who gets to decide the rules of society? Why are some inequalities justified and others condemned?
- In essence, political theory is both an intellectual pursuit and a civic necessity, especially in plural and democratic societies.

- Politics is often understood in its most conventional sense as the domain of government, elections, laws, and policy-making. This institutional understanding of politics views it as the functioning of the state and its various branches; legislative, executive, and judiciary. In this view, politics is about who holds office, how decisions are made, and how rules are enforced. This was the dominant view until modern theorists began to expand its meaning.
- However, modern and contemporary thinkers have shown that politics is not limited to formal institutions.
- **Harold Lasswell** famously defined politics as "who gets what, when, and how," drawing attention to the distributive and conflictual aspects of political life.
- **David Easton** defined it as "the authoritative allocation of values in society," broadening the scope to include value-based decisions.
- **Feminist and critical theorists** have expanded it further by arguing that politics occurs in families, workplaces, and even cultural narratives, anywhere power is exercised or contested. For instance, when women's groups protest gender injustice, or when communities demand rights or recognition, these are deeply political actions, even if they do not directly engage the state.
- Therefore, politics includes all forms of power relations that shape collective life, not just those enacted through government.

# The ‘Political’

- The concept of "**the political**" goes deeper than the day-to-day practice of politics.
- While politics refers to the activity, the political refers to the conceptual domain where issues of power, justice, identity, and legitimacy are debated.
- **Rajeev Bhargava** describes the political as the arena where normative claims, collective identities, and conflicting interests interact. It is the space where people not only struggle for material interests but also make moral claims and imagine new social worlds.
- German philosopher **Carl Schmitt** defined the political as the distinction between friend and enemy, a zone of existential conflict.
- On the other hand, **Hannah Arendt** saw the political as the public realm of speech and action, where human beings appear before one another as equals and create a shared world. For Arendt, politics is not about domination, but about freedom and new beginnings, what she calls natality.
- Thus, while politics can be instrumental, the political is often ethical, imaginative, and constitutive of community life. Understanding "the political" allows us to go beyond surface-level political events and reflect on the structures and ideas that make those events possible.

# Political Theory

- Political theory is the systematic and critical reflection on political life. It is an intellectual activity that seeks to clarify key political concepts: justice, liberty, equality, rights, democracy, power; and reflect on their ethical and practical implications.
- Rajeev Bhargava outlines three central functions of political theory: explanation, evaluation, and speculation. First, it explains complex political phenomena by making visible the concepts and assumptions that underlie them. Second, it evaluates political actions and institutions by subjecting them to moral scrutiny. Third, it speculates about future possibilities, imagining new ways of organizing society.
- Political theory bridges both the empirical and normative dimensions. It uses reasoning and reflection to understand not only what is but also what ought to be.
- In this sense, it is essential for democratic citizenship because it allows individuals to question authority, challenge injustice, and participate meaningfully in public life.

# Theorising Politics

- Theorising politics means developing frameworks that allow us to make sense of political reality. Theory involves identifying patterns, discerning relationships between concepts, and explaining the rationale behind political events and practices. A theory is not just a casual opinion, it is a rational and systematic attempt to uncover deeper truths about society.
- For example, when studying a practice like the sati pratha, a political theorist does not stop at description. They ask: Why did this practice exist? Who benefited from it? What values justified it? What power structures maintained it? Such questions move beyond surface observation to normative evaluation and conceptual analysis.
- Political theory, in this way, is both critical and constructive: it critiques the existing order and offers visions for a better one.

# Philosophy, Science, Theory

- While these terms are sometimes used interchangeably, they have distinct emphases.
- **Political philosophy** is a branch of philosophy concerned with normative questions of what is justice? what is a good society, often based on reasoning. Thinkers like Plato, Locke, Rousseau, and Rawls fall into this tradition.
- **Political science**, by contrast, is a social science that studies political behavior, institutions, and systems through observation, surveys, and data analysis. Thinkers like David Easton and Robert Dahl have advanced this empirical approach.
- **Political theory** occupies a middle ground. It draws on both philosophy and science. It engages with empirical reality while also offering normative critique. It seeks conceptual clarity, evaluates values, and reflects on meaning. It is, as Bhargava puts it, “an interpretive, explanatory, and speculative discipline”, essential for understanding the political in a plural and changing world.

# Key Thinkers

- A number of foundational thinkers have offered important definitions and insights that shape how we understand politics and the political.
- **Plato** believed politics should aim at justice and be governed by philosopher-kings who possess true knowledge of the Good (The Republic).
- **Aristotle**, in contrast, grounded politics in empirical observation and argued that the polis is the natural environment for realizing human virtue (Politics).
- **Thomas Hobbes**, in Leviathan, emphasized the need for a strong sovereign to prevent the chaos of the state of nature.

- **John Locke** viewed politics as the means to protect life, liberty, and property through consent.
  - **Jean-Jacques Rousseau** introduced the idea of the general will, whereby individuals realize freedom by aligning with the collective interest (*The Social Contract*).
  - **Karl Marx** argued that politics is rooted in material relations and class struggle; the state is a tool of capitalist domination.
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- In contemporary times, **Hannah Arendt** reconceptualized politics as a space of freedom and public engagement. For Arendt, politics is not about control but about creating new beginnings through action and speech.
  - In the Indian context, **Rajeev Bhargava** has emphasized the importance of political theory for managing diversity and disagreement in a democratic framework.

# Conclusion

- To theorise the political is to move beyond surface-level political analysis and engage with the deeper structures and values that shape our collective lives.
- Political theory helps us understand the meanings and implications of power, justice, and freedom. It allows us to evaluate political institutions, practices, and ideologies critically. It gives us the tools to imagine better societies and more just futures.
- In a world marked by conflict, inequality, and rapid change, political theory remains a vital discipline. It challenges us to reflect, question, and act; not just as students or scholars, but as thinking citizens.
- Whether we are interrogating the power of the state, the ethics of protest, or the meaning of democracy, political theory equips us with the intellectual and moral resources to navigate the political world with insight and responsibility.

# Previous Year Questions

- What is the distinction between the political and political theory? Why do we need political theory?

राजनीतिक और राजनीतिक सिद्धांत के बीच क्या अंतर है? हमें राजनीतिक सिद्धांत की आवश्यकता क्यों है?

- (c) Relevance of Political theory

राजनीतिक सिद्धांत की प्रासंगिकता

- What distinguishes political theory from political philosophy ? Provide examples to clarify the distinction.

राजनीति सिद्धांत को राजनीतिक दर्शन से क्या अलग करता है ? अंतर स्पष्ट करने के लिए उदाहरण दीजिए।

# shukriya

