



What is Politics?

Homework activities for after your first A Level Politics lesson

COMPLETE THE HOMEWORK TASKS IN THE GREEN TABLE

"**Politics: Who Gets What, When, How.**" That is the title of a famous 1936 book by the American writer Harold Lasswell (Lasswell, 1936). It is a simple way of putting it, but it is a good starting point. **Politics** is about how a society decides who gets things, and who has the power to make that decision happen.

You have just finished your first **Politics** lesson. This short reading will help you understand what politics actually means, and introduce a few key words you will keep using throughout the course. Once you have read it, complete the questions and activities at the end.

What Does Politics Mean?

Ask different people to define politics and you will get different answers. Some think of politics as government, elections and Parliament. Others think politics is really about power, wherever it is found.

There is no single correct definition. **Politics** is what is sometimes called a contested concept (a term where people genuinely disagree about what should count, not just about wording). Before looking at two different views of politics, here are some key words to know.

Key terms
Politics: the process by which people make collective decisions, often about who gets power, resources or influence.
Power: the ability to make someone act differently to how they would otherwise have acted.
Authority: power that people accept as rightful, so they obey it willingly rather than simply out of fear.
The state: the organisation that governs a country, made up of institutions such as the government, police and courts.

Two Different Views of Politics

The German thinker Max Weber gave one of the most famous narrow definitions of politics. He said **the state** is the only body that can rightfully use force within a country (Weber, 1919). On this **narrow view**, politics only happens in places such as Parliament, government and the courts.

Other thinkers disagree. Feminist writers have argued that politics happens anywhere there is power, including inside the home. This idea is often summed up by the phrase "**the personal is political**", first used as the title of an essay by the American feminist Carol Hanisch in 1970 (Hanisch, 1970). On this **broad view**, an argument about housework can be political too, because it is really about power.

View	What counts as politics
Narrow view (Weber)	Politics only happens in the state , for example Parliament, government, elections and the courts.
Broad view (feminist writers)	Politics happens anywhere there is power, for example in the home, the workplace and relationships.

Table 1: Two different views of where politics happens.

- Most of your **Politics** course focuses on the **narrow view**: institutions such as Parliament and government.
- You will meet the **broad view** later, when you study feminism as a political idea.

Power and Authority

It helps to know the difference between power and authority. **Power** is simply the ability to make someone do something, whether they want to or not. A robber has power over a victim, even though nobody thinks the robber has the right to act that way.

Authority is different. **Authority** is power that people accept as fair, so they obey it willingly. A police officer has authority because people generally accept the officer's right to give instructions, not just because they are afraid.

- **Power** does not need to be fair or accepted in order to work.
- **Authority** only works because people believe it is rightful.

Back to Lasswell

Lasswell's phrase, "who gets what, when, how", is a good way to remember what politics is about. Every topic on this course, from elections to the powers of the Prime Minister, is really a version of this same question: who has power, and how did they get it?

HOMEWORK – MUST BE HANDWRITTEN, ONE SUBSTANTIAL PARAGRAPH FOR EACH TASK

1. What does Harold Lasswell mean by "who gets what, when, how"?
2. What is the difference between the narrow view and the broad view of politics?
3. What is the difference between power and authority?

h OPTIONAL EXTENSION Activities -

The activities below all check that you have understood the reading above. Those of you aiming for high A Level grades – A*/A – should always consider completing extension/check your understanding tasks in your own time. Hand them in and get extra feedback.

Activity 1: Match the Key Words

List the four terms from the Key terms box (politics, power, authority, the state) in one column, and the four definitions in a jumbled, different order in a second column. Match each term to its correct definition from memory, then check your answers against the reading and correct any mistakes.

Activity 2: Complete the Comparison Table

Using the reading, complete the blank grid below. Fill in what each view (the narrow view and the broad view) says counts as politics, and note which thinker or group of thinkers is linked to each one.

View	Who says this	What counts as politics

Activity 3: True or False?

Mark each statement below true or false, then correct every false statement so that it becomes true. All six can be answered directly from the reading.

1. Harold Lasswell's 1936 book was called Politics: Who Gets What, When, How.
2. Max Weber's definition of politics is an example of the broad view.
3. The phrase "the personal is political" was the title of a 1970 essay by Carol Hanisch.
4. According to the reading, most of the A Level Politics course focuses on the broad view.
5. A robber has authority over their victim.
6. Authority only works because people believe it is rightful.

Activity 4: Sort the Examples

The six everyday scenarios below do not appear in the reading. For each one, decide whether it counts as "political" under the narrow view only, the broad view only, or both, and explain your answer in one sentence.

- A trade union negotiating a pay rise with an employer.
- Two flatmates arguing over whose turn it is to do the washing up.
- A backbench MP voting on a new bill in the House of Commons.
- A parent deciding how much pocket money to give each of their children.
- A local council setting the rate of council tax.
- A couple disagreeing over who takes time off work to look after a sick child.

Activity 5: Power or Authority?

For each scenario below, decide whether it is mainly an example of power, authority, or both, and explain your answer in one sentence using the definitions from the reading.

- A robber threatens someone to hand over their phone.
- A teacher asks a class to sit down, and the class does so without argument.
- A blackmailer forces someone to pay money to keep a secret.
- A police officer directs traffic after an accident, and drivers follow the instructions.
- An armed soldier orders a group of civilians to leave a building.

Sources

Hanisch, C. (1970) 'The Personal Is Political', in Firestone, S. and Koedt, A. (eds) Notes from the Second Year: Women's Liberation. New York: Radical Feminism.

Lasswell, H. D. (1936) Politics: Who Gets What, When, How. New York: Whittlesey House.

Weber, M. (1919) 'Politics as a Vocation'. Lecture delivered at Munich University.