

Unit 1: What is Politics? — Class Notes

Undergraduate Political Science — Easy English Notes

1. What Does "Politics" Mean?

Politics is the way a group of people makes decisions together, uses power, and settles disagreements. It is one of the most basic parts of human life, but people still argue about its exact meaning.

In simple words, politics means three things:

1. **Making group decisions** — how a family, school, company or country decides what to do.
2. **Using power and authority** — who has the ability to influence the result.
3. **Balancing different interests** — bringing together people who want different things, for the common good.

The Greek thinker **Aristotle** called politics the "**master science**". He meant that politics organises every other part of life in the city-state (*polis*) and helps citizens live a good life.

Remember:

- Politics is **not only about government**. It is also found in families, schools, offices and between countries.
- Politics has two sides: **cooperation** (agreeing and working together) and **conflict** (handling disagreement).

2. How the Idea of Politics Changed Over Time

The meaning of politics changed from **ethics** (Greeks) to **religion** (Middle Ages) to **power and the state** (modern period).

Greek period	→	Medieval period	→	Modern period
Politics = good life		Politics = God's order		Politics = power and state

a) The Greek (Classical) View — Aristotle

- Politics was the **rational study of the state and government**. Its aim was to improve citizens' lives and build a good society.
- Politics took place in the **polis** (city-state), where free citizens took part in decisions.
- It was **normative**: it asked not only "how things are" but also "how things **should** be".
- Aristotle said humans are "**political animals**" (*zoon politikon*). We naturally live in groups and need politics to become good and to reach the common good.
- Politics is about **justice, law and a moral order** in society.

b) The Medieval (Religious) View

- In the Middle Ages, politics became **theological** (linked to religion). Christian thinkers connected political order with God's order.
- A major question was the relationship between the **Church and the State**.
- Rulers were believed to get their authority **from God**, not only from people's agreement.
- Rulers and subjects both had **moral and religious duties**. Politics was part of a larger cosmic and moral order.

c) The Modern View

- From the 16th century, thinkers like **Machiavelli** and **Hobbes**, and later **liberals** and **Marxists**, changed the focus.
- Politics became **practical and based on facts** (empirical). It focused on the state, law, sovereignty, power and authority.
- "The political" now meant: control of the state, sharing of power and resources, and conflict and compromise between groups.

Modern thinkers see politics in three main ways:

Approach	Simple meaning
Politics as power	Who gets what, when and how (Harold Lasswell)
Politics as public policy	Making decisions for the welfare of the community
Politics as struggle	Conflict over values, resources and identity

3. Different Definitions of Politics

Scholars define politics in five main ways, and each one looks at a different part of political life.

Definition	What it focuses on	Weak point or key idea
Politics as government activity	Institutions: parliament, executive, judiciary	Ignores politics outside formal government
Politics as power	Influence, force (coercion), decision-making	Lasswell: "who gets what, when, how"
Politics as public policy	Policies for the common good	Links politics to welfare, development, regulation
Politics as reconciliation of interests	Managing different and conflicting interests	Aim is a collective decision
Politics as "the political"	Collective decisions and conflict in any group	Includes gender, culture, economy, everyday life

The Concept of "the Political"

"The political" is wider than government. A situation is political whenever:

- **power** is used,
- **decisions** affect the group, and
- **interests clash** and need negotiation.

Everyday examples:

- **Family** — who decides how money is spent.
- **Workplace** — management versus workers over pay and rules.
- **Social movements** — people demanding rights and justice.
- **International relations** — countries negotiating or going to war.

This idea shows students that politics happens not only in parliament but in daily life.

4. Why Should We Study Politics?

Studying politics makes us better-informed citizens. It helps us to:

1. Understand **how power works** in society.
2. See how **laws, policies and institutions** affect people's lives.
3. Think critically about **justice, rights and equality**.
4. **Take part in democracy** more effectively — voting, activism and public debate.
5. **Compare** political systems and ideologies such as liberalism, socialism and fascism.

5. The Indian Conception of Politics

In Indian thought, politics is part of a **moral and spiritual order** guided by **dharma**. It is not mainly a fight between the state and the individual, as often in Western thought. The ruler's power is limited by moral duties, and power is never an end in itself.

a) Core Idea: Politics as Dharma

- **Dharma** does not simply mean "religion". It means **moral law, duty and right order** for individuals, society and the state.
- Politics is a branch of dharma. The king's duty, called **rajadharma**, is to uphold dharma, protect the people and ensure everyone's welfare.
- The state is **not separate from ethics**; it lives inside a moral universe.

Three key features follow from this:

- **Moral basis of power** — authority is legitimate only when used according to dharma.
- **Welfare focus** — the state should work for the welfare of all (**sarvodaya**).
- **Spiritual idealism** — politics is seen from a higher, spiritual view, not only a material one.

b) Ancient Sources

1. Vedic and religious texts (Vedas, Upanishads, later Manusmriti)

- **Rta** means cosmic order; **dharma** is its human form.
- Kingship is seen as partly **sacred**, but the king is bound by moral duties.
- Religion, ethics and politics are joined together.

2. The Epics (Ramayana and Mahabharata)

- They give models of ideal kingship.

- **Rama** is the ideal king (*maryada purusha*) who follows dharma even at personal cost.
- The stories show conflict, duty, justice, and what happens when dharma is broken. Politics here is a **moral drama**.

3. Kautilya's Arthashastra

- Kautilya (Chanakya) wrote a systematic book on **statecraft, power and administration**.
- It is **realist**: it deals with power, sovereignty, diplomacy, war and spies (intelligence).
- Yet Kautilya also stresses **rajadharma** — the king must work for the people's welfare, not only for himself.

In short: early Indian thought mixes **idealism** (epics, Dharmashastras: politics as moral duty) with **realism** (Arthashastra: politics as strategic power), both within dharma.

c) Key Concepts

Saptanga Theory (Seven Limbs of the State) — the state is like a living body with seven parts:

No.	Sanskrit term	Meaning
1	Svami	King
2	Amatya	Minister
3	Janapada	Territory and people
4	Durga	Fort
5	Kosha	Treasury
6	Danda	Army / force
7	Mitra	Allies

This shows the state is not just land. It is a complete system of people and institutions.

Dandaniti (Science of Governance and Punishment)

- Keeps **law and order**.
- Protects dharma through the **fair use of force**.
- Power is legitimate only when it gives justice and **protects the weak**.

Sarvodaya (Welfare of All)

- The goal of politics is **collective welfare**, not only individual gain.
- The idea is ancient, and **Gandhi** revived it in modern times.

6. Special Features and Later Development of Indian Political Thought

Indian political thought is holistic, ethical and harmony-seeking, and it grew from ancient dharma into modern constitutional democracy.

a) Distinctive Features

1. **Holistic and universal** — economy, society, family, religion and politics are discussed together, not as separate areas.
2. **Ethical and spiritual** — even the realist Kautilya insists on rajadharma. Spiritual thinkers like **Aurobindo** saw politics as a path to self-realisation and social change.
3. **Harmony, not conflict** — Western thought often starts from conflict (state vs. individual, liberty vs. authority). Indian thought stresses **agreement, harmony and synthesis**.
4. **Substantive democracy** — democracy is judged by **justice, welfare and ethics**, not only by procedures like voting.

b) Medieval Period

- Under Islamic rule, thinkers like **Barani** and **Abul Fazl** mixed Indian dharmic ideas with Islamic ideas of justice and kingship.
- The king was still seen as a **protector and promoter of welfare**, though in different religious language.

c) Modern Indian Thinkers

Thinker	Main idea about politics
Mahatma Gandhi	Politics based on truth (satya) and non-violence (ahimsa); moral self-discipline; welfare of the poorest (antyyodaya); politics as spiritual and social change
Jawaharlal Nehru	Secular and rational, yet guided by Indian ideals of justice, equality and national unity
B. R. Ambedkar	Criticised caste hierarchy; saw dharma as social justice and equality; supported constitutional democracy as modern political morality

So Indian politics moved from ancient dharmic ideals to modern constitutional values, while keeping its focus on justice, welfare and moral responsibility.

d) Indian vs. Western Conception — Summary

Aspect	Indian conception	Western conception (typical)
Core principle	Dharma (moral duty, right order)	Liberty, rights, individual freedom
State and religion	Soft line; politics inside morality	Often a sharp separation (secular state)
Main focus	Self-liberation, morality, leadership, welfare	State–individual relation, power, institutions
Approach	Harmony, ethical idealism	Conflict, procedures and rules
Goal	Welfare of all, justice, cosmic and social order	Protecting rights, promoting liberty

7. Revision, Glossary and Practice Questions

a) Quick Revision Points

- Politics = group decision-making + use of power + balancing interests.
- Aristotle: politics is the "master science"; man is a "political animal".
- Change over time: ethics (Greek) → religion (medieval) → power and state (modern).
- Lasswell: politics is "who gets what, when, how".
- "The political" exists in families, workplaces, movements and between nations.
- Indian view: politics is part of **dharma**; the king follows **rajadharma**.
- Kautilya's Arthashastra = realism within dharma.
- Saptanga = seven limbs of the state.
- Gandhi (satya, ahimsa, sarvodaya), Nehru (secular, rational), Ambedkar (social justice, constitution).

b) Glossary of Key Terms

Term	Meaning
Polis	Greek city-state
Zoon politikon	"Political animal" (Aristotle)
Normative	About how things ought to be
Empirical	Based on observation and facts
Sovereignty	Supreme power of the state
Dharma	Moral law, duty, right order
Rta	Cosmic order (Vedic idea)
Rajadharma	Duty of the king
Dandaniti	Science of governance and punishment
Saptanga	Seven limbs of the state
Sarvodaya	Welfare of all
Antyodaya	Welfare of the poorest

c) Questions for Discussion and Exams

Short-answer questions

1. Why did Aristotle call politics the "master science"?
2. What does Lasswell mean by "who gets what, when, how"?
3. Name the seven limbs of the state in the Saptanga theory.
4. What is rajadharma?

Long-answer and discussion questions

1. Is politics only about government, or does it exist in everyday life? Give examples.
2. How does Aristotle's view of politics differ from the modern power-based view?

3. Identify "the political" in a classroom decision or a family discussion.
4. Why do some people think politics is "dirty"? Is this view justified?
5. How does understanding politics help a citizen in India today?
6. How is the Indian idea of rajadharma different from the modern idea of "responsibility of the state"?
7. Can a political system be both realist (like Kautilya) and ethical (like Gandhi)?
8. Is the Indian focus on harmony compatible with fighting injustice such as caste and gender discrimination?
9. How do India's constitutional values (equality, justice, liberty) reflect or change traditional dharmic ideas?
10. Compare the Indian and Western conceptions of politics.

d) Suggested Readings

- Aristotle, *The Politics* (selected chapters).
- Harold Lasswell, *Politics: Who Gets What, When, How*.
- Unit 1 of any standard B.A. Political Science textbook on "What is Politics: Theorizing the 'Political'" (e.g., Delhi University, IGNOU or Gauhati University materials).