

Introduction to Political Science

Focus Questions: Unit 1

The concept of “political science”: What do we mean by the term “politics”? What are the main sources of what we know about politics? What does research have to do to be considered “scientific”? What advantages come from studying politics “scientifically”?

Some other basic concepts: What is the difference between a “state” and a “nation” or a regime? What is the difference between “power,” “authority,” and “legitimacy”?

Writing analytically about politics: What is a thesis statement, and what purpose does it serve in an analytical essay? What is a topic sentence, what two things should an effective topic sentence do, and why are good topic sentences so important? Why do social scientists put page-specific citations in their written research?

Is the distrust of politics in the US something new and/or a serious problem (be able to contrast the views of Robert Putnam, the Economist’s “Politics as Warfare,” Martin Luther King, and Federalist 10)? Based on your course materials, what evidence is there to suggest that profound moral outrage in politics may be useful in some instances?

What are the best known political “utopias”? At a minimum, you want to be familiar with Plato’s Republic and its “philosopher kings,” Karl Marx’s thoughts on how the world would operate if we eliminated private property, and “the state of nature” as described by Thomas Hobbes in his explanation for why people form governments in the first place.

What are “political ideologies,” and why do they matter? What are the core assumptions about the way the world works according to classical liberalism? What are the basic assumptions of the main ideological competitors to liberalism (nationalism, communism, socialism, and theocracies)?

In what sense are almost all Americans classic liberals (and how does our country’s dominant ideological tradition differ from that of most European democracies)?

What are the main differences between *American* liberals and conservatives? How are these two ideologies distinct from other major belief systems deeply rooted in US political culture (populism and libertarianism)? To what extent are today’s Democratic and Republican parties ideologically pure?

Where did the modern international system of “states” come from? Where did the idea that states should be “sovereign” come from, and what are the costs and benefits involved with making state sovereignty a cornerstone of international law and global politics?

What are the most important international economic and security organizations, and when/why were they created? What does the UN and its Security Council do, how are these institutions organized, and what are their limitations? Do international organizations and international law make strong states like America less powerful than used to be the case?

How has “globalization” impacted the centrality of states in the organization of the world’s politics? Has globalization harmed the ability of national governments to organize their politics, taxes,

