

# Chapter 1

## An Introduction to Political Life

### Chapter Summary

Chapter 1 presents a tool kit of the core concepts and terms necessary to understanding political life. The chapter includes definitions on such topics as politics, power, state, government and democracy, political identities and political fault lines.

This chapter provides an introductory outline of political life by defining the basic concepts of political science and considering them in the Canadian context. **Politics** is defined as the activity whereby rival claims are settled by public authorities and is largely about where the boundary between public and private should be drawn. The chapter demonstrates the range of activities that can qualify as politics.

**Power** is defined as the ability to influence what happens. Therefore, in the political realm, power involves coercion, influence, and authority. Those who have been elected to exercise power are known as the **government**. A state is **legitimate** when it has the consent of the governed. In democracies such as Canada, **coercion** is limited to courts, police, and prisons. A **state** has territorial boundaries, a complex set of institutions, and a monopoly on the legitimate use of force. Different perspectives, such as **pluralism**, **class analysis**, **feminism**, and **postmodernism**, believe that state authority benefits certain interests.

**Democracy** is a political system that is based on equality and involves institutions such as majority rule, government by popular consent, and competitive elections. Democracy also involves the activities of the media, interest groups, and political parties. All modern democracies are **representative democracies**, whereby government is carried out by elected legislatures that represent the people and the rights and freedoms of the people are respected. The foundation of democratic government is the **rule of law**. All citizens are subject to and equal before the law.

**Political identities** involve individuals who are connected by a common material stake in how a political conflict is resolved, and/or who share ideas, issues, and values. The most powerful political identity is the **nation**, which also includes a regional consciousness. **Political fault lines** in Canada include the French–English, Canada–US, and various regional divisions. Other issues such as gender equality, Aboriginal rights, and environmental protection have cut new lines in the Canadian polity.

### Learning Objectives

After reading Chapter 1 in *Canadian Democracy*, students should be able to do the following:

- Identify some different meanings of politics and explain which is most useful;
- Explain the differences between power, influence, and authority;
- Discuss the importance of legitimacy and consent in democracies;
- Using a Canadian example, distinguish “state” from “government” and discuss some of the contradictions among these characteristics;

- Identify the characteristics generally associated with democratic government and discuss some of the contradictions among these characteristics;
- Explain the meaning of globalization and discuss some of its consequences for democratic government;
- Identify some of the major identities that shape Canadian politics and explain why they are important;
- Identify the three political fault lines that affect Canada and discuss their impact; and
- Identify potential new fault lines and discuss their influence on the Canadian political landscape.

## Key Terms

Authority	Influence	Power
Class analysis	Legitimacy	Public agenda
Coercion	Marxism	Representative democracy
Cultural hegemony	Nation	Rule of law
Democracy	Operationalize	Social capital
Feminism	Pluralism	State
Globalization	Politics	Totalitarianism
Government	Postmodernism	Tyranny of the majority

## Sample Lecture Outlines

### 1. Power, Influence and Authority

Discuss power, influence and authority with a focus on political institutions in Canada that involve these aspects of Canadian democracy. Focus on the role of the prime minister, the role of members of parliament and other influences to demonstrate discrepancies in levels of power, influence and authority. Example: Discuss the role of the prime minister, the justice minister and SNC Lavalin in the SNC Lavalin affair.

### 2. Key Features of Democracy

How do political scientists think about democracy? Discuss majority rule, universal franchise, representative government, legitimacy and consent, tyranny of the majority, equality, and the rule of law in the Canadian context.

## Ideas for Classroom Discussion

1. Of the four perspectives on the state mentioned in the textbook, which most appeals to you and why?
2. How would you operationalize each of the four perspectives of the state? What evidence might support or challenge each perspective?

3. Which of the four political fault lines mentioned in the textbook most threaten Canada's unity?
4. Is majority rule, a universal franchise and representative government enough to satisfy you that we have a democracy?
5. What are the consequences for democracy if we view the personal as political?

## Ideas for Class Debate

1. One-minute paper: Ask students to give Canada a grade for how democratic they think Canada is: (A, B, C, etc.). Share notes with a partner, explaining the reasons for your grade. Revisit the initial question at the end of the class. Did anyone change their mind? Why?
2. Split the class into two groups to debate: Canada's democracy is seriously flawed. Record the arguments on the board, then discuss how to operationalize this question?
3. Of the two definitions of "nation" offered by the Task Force on Canadian Unity and Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau, the more accurate and more realistic one is that provided by the former prime minister.
4. Democracy cannot exist with significant economic inequality among citizens. Are some inequalities more acceptable than others?
5. Does the state have any business in the bedrooms of the nations? How would each of the ideological perspectives answer this question? (Note: you can substitute other issues for this one).

## Class Activities

1. Ice breaker for the beginning of the course: Using index cards, ask each student:  
**Write:** Describe what shaped your political identity or your first memory of politics?  
**Pair:** Interview a student who has a different political identity from yours.  
**Share:** Introduce your fellow student to the group in terms of what shaped their political identity.
2. Divide the class into smaller groups of three to four. Assign each group several of the key concepts from the chapter and ask them to provide examples from a Canadian context to illustrate each concept. Note: to build familiarity with the features of the text, encourage them to use the glossary and index at the end of the book.
3. Ask students to reflect on how power, influence and authority manifest themselves in families, work or an education context, even in your classroom. (This can be done on index cards or on an electronic feedback forum). Discuss which of these structures build democratic skills.

4. Ask students what media sources they rely on for current events. Discuss the strengths and limitations of respective sources, and the importance of staying informed about current events. Suggest any additional sources that will help stay current with Canadian issues. Perhaps offer to do a weekly ungraded quiz on current events.
5. Muddiest Point (anonymous): Show a list of the chapter's key concepts. Which of the key concepts did you find the hardest to understand? Collect the cards/ideas to review for next class. Ask student to look for examples of these concepts in the coming week's news. The basic question: "What was the muddiest point in today's class?" can be repeated in any future class. Respond to the most common confusions in the subsequent class.

## Teaching Aids

Angelo, T. and Cross, P. *Classroom Assessment Techniques: A Handbook for College Teachers*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1993.

Biggs, J. *Teaching for Quality Learning at University*. Berkshire, U.K.: McGraw-Hill, 2003.  
Centre for Teaching, Vanderbilt University. "Classroom Assessment Techniques (CATs)."  
<https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/cats/>

Geldoff, A. J. *Teaching Large Classes*, STLHE Green Guide No. 1, 1998. Geldoff, Allan J. *Teaching Large Classes*, STLHE Green Guide No. 1, 1998.

## Further Reading

Brodie, J., & Rein, S. & Smith, M. (eds.) (2013). *Critical Concepts: An Introduction to Politics* (5th ed.). Toronto: Pearson.

Dyck, R. (2014). *Canadian Politics: Critical Approaches* (7th ed.) Toronto: Nelson.

Mintz, E., Tossutti, L., & Dunn, C. (2013). *Canada's Politics: Democracy, Diversity and Good Government*. Toronto: Pearson.

Telford, H. (2014). *Rules of the Game: An Introduction to Canadian Politics*. Toronto: Pearson.