

1. What is Politics Anyway?

The word politics gets thrown around pretty loosely these days. People associate politics with everything from national elections to promotions in the workplace to which kids make the all-star team at the end of the season. That's a big range. But once you grasp what 'politics' actually means, you'll understand how politics relates to these things and more.

POLITICS DEFINED

Let's back up and try to define the term. Here's my favorite definition: politics is the way we order our common life. Or, to say it a slightly different way: politics is the process of deciding how we will live together.

In a sense, politics touches everything. It's how we make important decisions about the way our communities function. Whether we're talking about your school's election for class president,

your neighborhood's home owners association, or the way governments relate to other nations, we're always talking about politics.

Because I believe politics is so important, I want to offer a disclaimer up front. You've probably noticed that people often blame 'politics' when they believe something is wrong. We hear things like 'he's playing politics' or 'it's all so political' when things don't work out the way someone intended.

There's no doubt people sometimes take advantage of certain rules or relationships to obtain their preferred outcome in a given situation. Sometimes those actions may even lead to an unjust or illegitimate result. But here's what I hope you'll remember: when this happens, people are to blame—not necessarily politics. Politics is ultimately just the process. People have the power to make politics good or bad.

BACK TO THE POLIS

Now that we've established how broad politics can be, let's narrow our focus a little. Most of the time, when people talk about politics they are thinking about the political process as it relates to government. In this sense, politics relates to issues, political parties, and electing specific candidates

to office. These are the topics we'll be focusing on for the remainder of this book.

To wrap our minds around it, we should look back to the beginning. The English word politics comes from the Greek word polis, which refers to a city-state. In ancient Greece, the polis came to represent the center of intellectual, business, and social activity in a region. Each city-state was independent and developed its own form of government. And it was in this context that the city-state of Athens created the earliest known democracy, which has since influenced the development of democratic governments from ancient Rome to the present.

In many ways, the idea of the polis can help us gain a better picture of what politics is all about. Imagine people gathered together, discussing the business of the day, handling disputes over land, addressing the sale of goods in the market, considering the opportunities for their city's youth to be educated or trained as soldiers.

Such a vision of politics is deeply practical. For the city-state to survive, an army had to be trained, young people had to be educated, goods had to be sold, and crops had to be grown. Whatever else they might be, each of these things

is a political question. Answering them requires a process.

POLITICS TODAY

In the modern West, our political processes are considerably more complicated than the polis of ancient Athens. Of course, we still have to answer the same basic questions that are common to every society. But because God designed us to be creative and innovative beings, our world today is much more advanced than the societies and cultures that existed even a few hundred years ago.

These advances have brought forth new questions. Not only that, but they've also brought forth new *kinds* of questions—sometimes things that no one before us ever thought about. Think about it: who would have thought about property rights in an online world like the metaverse, or free speech issues on social media platforms like X (formerly known as Twitter), or whether we should recognize the personhood of an AI robot?

How do we answer these questions? And who decides? The answer is politics. As we encounter these new and difficult questions and as we continue to deal with the inevitable conflicts and

questions that arise from humans attempting to live and work together, we fall back on our process.

If you're fortunate enough to live in a democracy, you're part of that process. Even if you're not old enough to vote, if you're reading this book you're old enough to form and register an opinion. That means you're old enough to advocate and persuade. In short: if you're old enough to care, you're old enough to play a role in the political process.

DEMOCRACY AND DIGNITY

Winston Churchill once said about democracy, 'No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed it has been said that democracy is the worst form of Government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.' Before we move on to talking about why Christians should care about politics, allow me to follow Churchill by saying a few words in defense of democracy.

There is no perfect form of government. (Well, that's not technically true, but we'll say more about that in Chapter 3.) In the broad sweep of world history, democracy is still a relatively new phenomenon. Most civilizations throughout

history were led by either a single ruler or a small group of powerful individuals.

Governments recognizing the value and perspective of every person in a given culture is a pretty recent innovation. And despite its flaws, that's what democracy is. To keep it simple, democracy essentially means 'the people decide.' It's about seeing the first and final power of government as resting in the hands of the people. This is why I love democracy: allowing every person an equal vote is inherently an endorsement of the equal worth of every individual. I'm convinced that's a good thing.

Regardless of whether you live in a democracy or not, I'm sure you'll agree the political process matters. Every generation faces important questions about how we live together and organize our communities. Christians in particular should care deeply about this process. So, we'll turn our attention there in the next chapter.

SUMMARY

Politics is the process of deciding how we will live together.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- Before you read this chapter, what came to mind when you thought about politics?
- How would you respond to someone who believes 'politics' is unnecessary?
- What kind of government exists where you live? What is the process for ordinary citizens to address the government about the things that concern them?