UNDERSTANDING POLITICS · CHAPTER 1

Thinking Politically

Concepts, arguments and the political canon

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OPENING PUZZLE

One decision, several political questions

Who decides?

Authority and procedure.

Who gains and loses?

Distribution and power.

Is it justified?

Legitimacy and rights.

A single decision raises questions of explanation, interpretation and evaluation.

TWO KINDS OF CLAIM

What is, and what ought to be

Empirical

Testable by evidence: ‘PR produces more coalitions.’

Normative

About what ought to be: ‘Governments should protect minorities.’

No ‘ought’ follows from an ‘is’ without a normative premise.

CONTESTED CONCEPTS

Define before you argue

Liberty

Non-interference, self-mastery or nondomination?

Democracy

Procedure, quality or outcomes?

Power

Decisions, agendas or preferences?

Each later chapter returns to one of these disputes.

BUILDING AN ARGUMENT

Three parts of a practical argument

Factual premise

What is happening, or what would a policy cause?

Normative premise

Why does that fact count as a reason?

Conclusion

What should be done, given reasons and alternatives?

COMMON FLAWS

Five ways arguments fail

Equivocation

A key term shifts meaning.

Circularity

A premise assumes the conclusion.

False alternatives

Two options when there are more.

Also: unsupported generalisation and unexamined assumptions.

THREE TASKS

Explanation, interpretation, evaluation

Explain

Why did it happen?

Interpret

What does it mean to those involved?

Evaluate

Is it justified?

An explanation of a policy is not a justification of it.

THE CANON

Whose arguments count?

Reading well

Reconstruct before you evaluate.

Context

Historical setting explains concerns without settling validity.

Inclusion

Wollstonecraft, Fanon and others change familiar concepts.

What is just, and what to do now

Ideal

What a just arrangement would be under favourable conditions.

Nonideal

What to do amid injustice, partial compliance and constraint.

Both are needed: ideals guide; nonideal reasoning acts.

PUBLIC JUSTIFICATION

Arguing with people who disagree

The demand

Offer reasons others can accept despite deeper disagreement.

The worry

Is it too demanding, excluding sincere convictions?

Ask: can a religious reason justify a law for everyone?

SEMINAR TASK · 30 MINUTES

Reconstruct, diagnose, revise

1. Groups reconstruct one Part A argument with explicit premises.
2. Groups swap and attack the weakest premise.
3. Groups revise to survive the attack and state decisive evidence.

FIRST ESSAY

Can political science be value-free?

Plan

Distinguish empirical and normative claims.

Test

Where do values enter concepts and measures?

Judge

Not value-free, but value-disciplined?

1,500 words maximum · Student Pack: essay questions