# VCE Politics Unit 1 and 2 Explanations

The following are explanations of the key concepts explicitly mentioned in the Key Knowledge of Units 1 and 2 of the VCE Politics Study Design. They are written to support teachers who may be new to teaching this study. These explanations relate to Units 1 and 2 only.

These explanations are not to be considered definitive but rather provide enough information that students are able to understand these important political concepts. Some of the concepts may have contested definitions, and debates around their meaning are welcome.

**Authoritarianism** is a form of government characterised by strong central power and limited political freedoms. Individual freedoms are subordinate to the state and there is little to no political pluralism. This form of governance is marked by the concentration of power in a leader or a small elite not constitutionally responsible to its citizens. In an authoritarian state, the power structure is typically maintained by means of various mechanisms of oppression and a state-controlled media environment. It often includes the suppression of political opposition and the forbidding of dissenting voices.

**Authority is** the right to exercise power. This right can stem from law, office or custom/tradition. Thus, it is based on consent and legitimacy. Authority may also be a significant source of power in itself, such as the authority deriving from the office of the Prime Minister of Australia, which gives the incumbent political, diplomatic, social and cultural power regardless of who it is.

**Causes and consequences** involve understanding the factors or conditions (causes) that lead to certain political events, changes, or outcomes and analysing the effects or results (consequences) of these events on the political system, society, or the international community. It emphasises a deep analysis of the factors leading to political actions and the impact of these actions, which is crucial for comprehensively understanding politics.

**Commitment to a rules-based order** is a political actor’s adherence to the framework of norms and laws that shape the operation of the broader political system. A commitment to a rules-based order typically refers to global politics, rather than domestic politics, and the adherence to and support for international laws, norms, and agreements that govern the relations between states and other political actors. This includes support for institutions of global governance that uphold these rules, like the United Nations.

**Constitutional government** is a system where the government's powers and limitations are defined by a constitution. This system upholds the rule of law, ensuring that no individual or entity is above the law, including the government itself. It features a separation of powers across different government branches, with checks and balances to prevent power concentration. Additionally, constitutional governments often protect individual rights and liberties and may incorporate democratic principles like accountability to the people and fair elections. The constitution can be either written or unwritten and may vary in its flexibility regarding amendments.

**Constitutional monarchy** is a form of government where a monarch (such as a king or queen) acts as the head of state within the parameters of a constitution. This constitution, whether written or unwritten, limits the monarch's powers and typically outlines the distribution of powers among various government bodies. In a constitutional monarchy, the monarch's role is often ceremonial, with real political power being exercised by elected representatives and a parliamentary system.

**Federalism** is a system of government where power is divided between a central (national) government and various regional governments (such as states or provinces). This division of power is typically enshrined in a constitution, which outlines the specific powers and responsibilities of each level of government. Federal systems vary in the degree of power shared between the national and regional governments, as seen in countries like the United States, Canada, Australia, and Germany. This system aims to balance the need for a strong central government with the desire for regional self-governance and local decision-making.

**Global governance** refers to the systems, rules, norms, and institutions that guide political, economic, and social interactions at the global level. This concept encompasses the ways in which global interconnectedness and global issues are managed across states and regions, often beyond the direct control of individual states. Global governance includes institutions, like the United Nations and International Monetary Fund, which facilitate cooperation and provide platforms for dialogue and decision-making on global issues. Global governance is guided by international laws and treaties that states agree to follow, which cover areas ranging from trade and human rights to environmental protection. In addition to states, non-state actors like transnational corporations and non-government organisations can play significant roles in shaping global policies and debates. Global governance addresses global issues and crises that exceed the capacity of individual states, such as climate change, international security, and economic stability and involves the development and adherence to international norms and standards that guide state and non-state behaviour in areas like human rights, development, and environmental protection. Global governance does not imply a global government; rather, it represents a collaborative and multi-layered process involving various global political actors working together to address issues that affect multiple states and regions. The effectiveness of global governance is often influenced by the level of cooperation and consensus among the international community.

**Global interconnectedness** refers to the increasing links and exchanges between political actors and their resulting interdependence. This is due to the process of global economic and social integration (formerly referred to as globalisation) and the establishment of institutions of global governance, which began in earnest after the Second World War and which continues to impact on human affairs in a myriad of ways (socially, economically, environmentally, politically, culturally and technologically). It is concerned with the increasing frequency, speed, range and intensity of cross-border flows – exchanges of people, knowledge and ideas, goods, services, financial transactions, military and cyber transactions, and social and cultural values. It incorporates the role of the globalised media in national, regional and global politics, both as an essential transmitter of political information, and as a key political actor. Transnational corporations also continue to play a significant political role in the interconnectedness and interdependence of the world. Global interconnectedness is essential to an understanding of contemporary political issues in terms of its impact on stability and change, political significance, differing interests and perspectives and questions of power. Additionally, this interconnectedness and interdependence has also led to a simultaneous fragmentation of identities, values and beliefs along with increasing inequalities and potential for conflict.

**Ideology** refers to interrelated sets of values and beliefs around how things are and how they should be. Throughout the study, students consider how the accumulated range of political ideas is articulated in ideologies which offer insights into how politics, society and the economy operate. Students may analyse constructs such as Left/Right, political spectrum, liberalism, conservatism, progressivism, authoritarianism, nationalism, capitalism, social democracy, socialism, libertarianism, populism, feminism, anarchism, communism, theism and environmentalism. The selection of an ideology to study will depend on the focus of the chosen inquiry and the nature of the case studies being used. Students consider how ideologies express ethical ideals, principles and beliefs that influence and shape political systems, political actors, policy and issues. Political ideology can be used to justify, explain, contest or change society and influence debates. It can be a lens through which contemporary issues may be viewed.

**International law** refers to a set of rules, norms, and standards that are accepted as binding on the international community. It is primarily concerned with the rights and duties of states in various areas and is instrumental in structuring the interactions between global political actors, particularly states. The main sources of international law either written agreements, such as treaties and conventions, and customary international law. Treaties and conventions are formal agreements between states that define and modify their mutual duties and obligations. They are often the most specific and explicit in detailing international legal standards. Customary international law consists of practices that have developed over time and are accepted as legally binding by states. These customs typically have two elements: the actual practice (state behaviour) and the belief that such practice is obligatory (opinio juris). Whereas treaties and conventions only bind states that ratify them, customary international law applies to all global political actors. International law operates in a decentralised system without a universal legislative or judicial body. Enforcement is often dependent on the willingness of states to comply with their obligations, although certain bodies like the International Court of Justice and International Criminal Court can make binding decisions in specific contexts. International law serves as a framework for stable and organised international relations, providing a system for states to cooperate on issues of common concern, resolve disputes peacefully, and establish common norms and standards.

**Legitimacy** is the perception that an act, actor, group or institution is justified in its exercise of power; legitimacy is thought to transform power into authority. Most sovereign states must legitimise their use of power over the governed to achieve stability. It refers to the grounds upon which governments may demand obedience from the citizens, such as winning elections, appealing to a higher authority such as a religion or providing citizens with economic prosperity and security. In this sense, legitimacy transforms power into authority. It is linked to the achievement of consensus among the population about the way they are governed, their willingness to comply for whatever reason and the maintenance of their trust. Legitimacy may also apply to other actors, such as institutions of global governance, whose legitimacy rests on their members’ acceptance of their values and processes, or non-state actors whose power may be legitimate or illegitimate.

**Liberal democracy** is a form of government characterised by fair, free, and competitive elections between multiple distinct political parties, a separation of powers into different branches of government, the rule of law in everyday life as part of an open society, and the protection of human rights and freedoms of all people. Liberal democracies protect civil liberties such as freedom of speech, religion, and assembly, ensuring individuals can express dissent and different opinions without fear of retaliation. Liberal democracies typically have constitutions or legal frameworks that guarantee and protect individual rights, ensuring equality and freedom for all citizens. Governments operate transparently and remain open to public scrutiny and accountability, often supported by a free media. Liberal democracy is based on the idea of political equality, where every citizen has a say in the decisions affecting their lives. It also emphasises the protection of individual liberties and rights as a safeguard against both government tyranny and majority rule.

**Nation** This is an important concept in the study of politics as it is bound up with questions of identity and conflicts over sovereignty and territory. A nation refers to the collective identity of a group of people based on a common culture, history, language, ethnicity and homeland. By definition, a nation does not have recognised sovereignty over defined territory; if it did, it would be referred to as a ‘nation-state’.

**Parliamentary sovereignty** is the concept that a parliament has paramount power compared to other branches of government, such as the courts or the executive. It also means that a parliament cannot make laws that in the future it could not change. The reason for this in a democracy is that the parliament represents the people in government. In this way it connects to the concept of popular sovereignty. This is the case in Australia, based on the Westminster system, and means that legislation made by parliament overrides common law made by courts or decisions of the executive, if they are at odds with one another.

**Participation** in the context of democratic principles and practices, particularly in the Australian political system, refers to the active involvement and engagement of citizens in democratic processes. This includes exercising the right to vote in free and fair elections, engaging in public discourse and policy debates, being a part of various political parties, and contributing to the political culture that values and upholds democratic norms. This can include joining social movements, campaigns and protests, joining political parties, making submissions to parliamentary committees, and consuming and being a part of the media. Participation is fundamental to the functioning of democracy, as it ensures that the government remains accountable and transparent to its citizens, and it supports the rule of law and the protection of rights and freedoms.

**Political change** is the alteration in the way power is exercised or distributed within a political system. This change can occur in various forms, such as shifts in government, policy amendments, modifications in political relationships, or transformations in the structures and functions of political institutions. It can be influenced by a range of factors, including social movements, economic developments, technological advancements, and cultural shifts. Political change is a dynamic process and is a key focus in understanding the evolving nature of politics.

**Political culture** refers to the collective attitudes, values, and practices that are foundational to the functioning of a political system. In Australia it encompasses the expression and implementation of democratic principles, such as holding free and fair elections, maintaining accountability and transparency, and upholding the rule of law. It also includes active participation in democratic processes, equality, and the division of powers between federal and state governments. Furthermore, a democratic political culture is characterised by trust in government, the existence of multiple political parties, political ideologies, and the acceptance of democratic values. The influence of the media and other political actors can also play significant roles in shaping political culture​​.

**Political interests** refer to the specific objectives or goals that political actors, such as individuals, groups, or states, seek to achieve within the political arena. These interests are typically driven by a combination of factors like economic gains, power, security, ideological beliefs, and cultural values. The ‘interests’ of political actors refers to what those actors perceive to be desirable in any situation or at any time. Interests can change depending on circumstances. They are often material and self-serving rather than altruistic or other-directed, as ‘aims’ tend to be. Aims are the established and published goals of political actors, such as the objectives of many transnational corporations to uphold the UN Sustainable Development Goals, which may conflict with their interests in certain circumstances.

**Political perspectives** are understood as the ways individuals or groups conceptualise and interpret political events, policies, and issues. These perspectives are shaped by a variety of factors such as culture, history, and personal experiences. Unlike political interests, which are about specific objectives or goals in the political realm, political perspectives refer to the broader viewpoints, ideologies or belief systems that inform how people understand and engage with political issues. Political perspectives may inform political interests, and vice versa.

**Political significance** refers to the importance and impact of political actors, issues, or crises in relation to concepts of political stability and change, as well as their causes and consequences. This characteristic of thinking politically sits at the apex of students’ skills acquisition. It requires students to think through the possible criteria for assessing significance and then come to a judgement and provide supporting arguments. There are several ways in which an event, issue or actor could be judged to be politically significant or important. To establish relevant criteria, students should ask questions about the event, issue or actor, such as, “Who has power in this situation? Who does not?” or “What is the scale of the issue itself – geographically and temporally? How many people are affected?” and/or “Which political actors are involved and are they working towards change or stability?” and/or “How common or uncommon is the event, action or issue? What are the immediate and ongoing consequences?” Once the student has identified the causes and consequences, interests and perspectives and supporting evidence on both sides, they should be able to mount an argument that something is or is not politically significant.

**Political stability and/or change** Political stability can refer to a number of things: widespread acceptance of the values, institutions and processes which underpin a functioning society; a lack of change over time in responses to political issues or arrangements or the ability to ‘bounce back’ or revert to the status quo in the face of upheaval or disturbance. Political change refers to any alteration or modification in political institutions, processes or values and it usually occurs when there is an unforeseen event or a significant amount of disagreement with prevailing norms.

**Popular sovereignty** is a fundamental principle in democratic systems where the authority of the government is created and sustained by the consent of its people. This is most often provided through elected representatives of the people. It is the idea that the source of all political power lies with the people. The people exercise their sovereignty by participating in democratic processes, such as voting in elections to choose their representatives. These representatives are tasked with enacting and implementing policies that reflect the will and interests of the people. Elected officials are accountable to the people for their actions and decisions in office. This accountability is maintained through regular, free, and fair elections, and other democratic processes. Laws and policies enacted by the representatives of the people are seen as legitimate and binding, as they are based on the expressed will of the electorate. Under the principle of popular sovereignty, citizens retain the right to alter or abolish their government if it becomes unresponsive or oppressive, typically through democratic means. Popular sovereignty is a cornerstone of democratic governance, ensuring that the government reflects and serves the interests and will of its people, rather than ruling through arbitrary or autocratic power.

**Power** is defined as the capacity of political actors to affect and influence other actors. Thus, it is fundamentally relational. For example, states have military power if they have significant military capacity. They may choose to exercise this military power in a number of different ways and to varying degrees, or they may choose not to use it at all. Transnational corporations have significant economic power because of their revenue, control of foreign assets or number of employees. As a result, they have global influence and may exercise their economic power over others to pursue their interests. Students develop an understanding of the difference between legitimate and illegitimate uses of power. Students should also be aware of the different forms of power available to political actors, including political, military, economic, technological, diplomatic, and cultural forms of power. These forms of power could be used as either soft power, where compliance is voluntary and based entirely on attraction, or coercive power based on persuasion or force.

**Responsible government** is a principle of governance in parliamentary systems where the executive branch is accountable to the parliament. This system ensures that the government must maintain the confidence of the majority in the parliament to remain in power. The government is responsible to the parliament, particularly the elected lower house, and must answer to it for its actions and policies. This includes answering questions in parliamentary sessions and participating in debates. The government must retain the confidence of the majority of the members in the lower house of parliament. Losing this confidence, typically through a vote of no confidence, often leads to the government's resignation or a call for new elections. In many systems with responsible government, the head of state (such as a monarch) is separate from the head of government (such as a prime minister). The head of state's role is often ceremonial, while the head of government is responsible for running the country. Ministers, usually members of parliament and heads of government departments, are collectively responsible for government policies and actions. They must defend their policies in parliament and may be required to resign if their department or the government as a whole loses parliamentary confidence. Members of parliament are elected democratically, ensuring that the government's accountability to parliament reflects its accountability to the people. Responsible government is a key feature of Westminster-style parliamentary systems, promoting transparency, accountability, and the principle that the government must serve the people's interests and not the other way around.

**Rules-based order** refers to an international system where norms, rules, and laws, agreed upon by the global community, govern the behaviour and interactions of states. This system aims to ensure predictability, stability, and fairness in international relations. The foundation of a rules-based order lies in international law, including treaties, conventions, and customary international law, which set clear guidelines for state behaviour. International organisations, such as the United Nations, the World Trade Organization, and the International Criminal Court, play a pivotal role in establishing, maintaining, and enforcing the rules. States are expected to act in accordance with international norms and laws, and their actions are subject to scrutiny and potential sanction if they deviate from these rules. A rules-based order provides mechanisms for peaceful resolution of disputes, such as international arbitration and court rulings, to prevent conflicts. By adhering to a set of agreed-upon rules, states contribute to global stability, peace, and cooperation, reducing the likelihood of arbitrary actions and conflicts. This order respects the sovereignty of states while also upholding human rights and fundamental freedoms as enshrined in international agreements. A rules-based international order is seen as a means to manage global interdependence and address transnational challenges effectively.

**Separation of powers** refers to the division of government responsibilities into distinct branches to limit any one branch from exercising the core functions of another. The intent of this division is to prevent the concentration of power and provide a system of checks and balances. In the context of Australian politics, the separation of powers is an essential principle for organising formal power within the state and demonstrated in the division between the branches in the Australian Constitution. This principle divides the state's governance into three branches: Executive Power, which is exercised by the Prime Minister and Cabinet, and their departments, this branch is responsible for implementing and administering the laws and policies of the state; Legislative Power, which is held by the Parliament, this branch has the authority to make and amend laws; and Judicial Power, which is exercised by the courts, this branch interprets and applies the law, ensuring justice is administered. Each branch operates independently and has distinct responsibilities, ensuring a balance of power within the government's structure​​.

**Sovereignty** There are a number of different types of sovereignty depending on the context. In the global arena it refers to the basis on which states claim the right to govern over their territory and their citizens, without interference from other political actors and to represent their territory and citizens in the global arena. The Charter of the United Nations upholds the sovereign equality of its member states (Article 2), so it is tied to the concept of statehood. In the domestic political sphere, it may refer to a sovereign – a monarch with supreme power – or the sovereign power of a parliament in the Westminster system or popular sovereignty in liberal democratic theory. The sovereignty of First Nations peoples may refer to these definitions or transcend them. Sovereignty is often contested both within societies and by those outside them.

**State** There are various ways of theorising the state in political science. What is common to all of them is that a state has recognised and sovereign control over a defined territory, where this control entails the ability to regulate many aspects of citizens’ lives through public institutions, ensure compliance with the state’s laws, maintain order, monopolise the legal use of coercion, impose public funding through taxation and represent the citizens on the international stage.