

# Unit 3

## Understanding politics

### 1. Introduction: what must students learn?

The objective of EDC/HRE is to enable students to take part in decision-making processes that affect their interests and the community as a whole.

I can only take action when I have made up my mind, that is, when I know what I want. In somewhat more analytical terms, I must have identified or prioritised my interests or must have judged an issue, a conflict or a problem and decided which line of action to support. Judging in turn requires understanding, and understanding requires sound information.

Students should therefore understand important political topics – both for their own sake (learning “about” politics), but also to learn the competences that enable them to work independently in taking the necessary steps themselves: acquiring information, analysing and understanding a political issue or problem, and judging. This then enables a young citizen to participate and take action (learning “for” democratic participation).

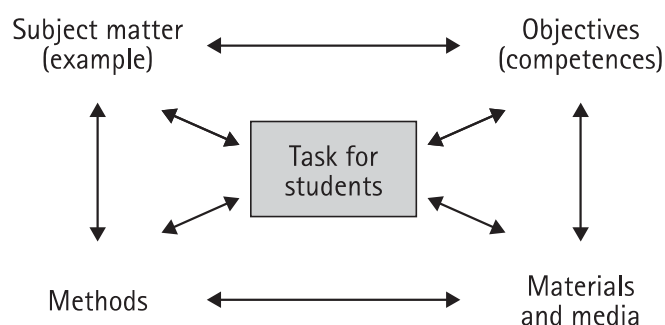
### 2. Task and key questions to understand politics

#### 2.1 Task for teachers in EDC/HRE

In all domains of teaching and learning, not only in EDC/HRE, students understand complex subject matter best by studying well-chosen examples. The teacher’s manuals in this EDC/HRE edition for elementary, lower and upper secondary level (Volumes II-V) demonstrate this principle in every unit and show different possible approaches. The manuals also show that these examples can be taken from the context of school governance or political decision making from any level – depending on the age of the students, the material that is available or can be produced by the students, and the desired learning outcome.

These examples are basically of two types – the analysis of a political problem or issue, or the analysis of a political decision-making process. The teacher must decide what examples are suitable and clarify what material is at hand or can be obtained.

The EDC/HRE teacher’s task is to link the following elements in planning a lesson sequence on politics:



No lesson planning is possible without thinking about all of these teaching and learning elements and linking them. A change in one position will affect the others. On the other hand, the subject matter can be exchanged to achieve a certain objective, and vice versa.

## 2.2 Key questions

- What should my students be able to do after this teaching unit? What should they have understood and be able to explain to others, and what criteria should they be able to use in judging a political issue?
- In what way can I assess their competence development?
- In what way can students draw on their experience in everyday life or in school to understand politics?
- How do my students perceive political decision making?
- To what extent are my students aware of their interests?
- What current issues affect my students?
- What current issues are my students able to understand?
- Are these issues linked to school governance, or politics on a local, regional, national or international level?
- How can I encourage my students to participate in the choice of an issue?
- What media or materials will I choose to present different opinions on the issue?
- What tasks will I set my students to work by themselves?
- What inputs can my students give?
- What key concepts can they apply to the topic or issue?
- What opinions do I expect my students to express on an issue?
- What is my opinion? What criteria have I given priority to in my judgment?
- How will I ensure that I will not overwhelm my students by persuading them to adopt my point of view?
- In what way could my students take action?

## Understanding politics

### Work file 1: How can I address politics in my EDC/HRE classes?

In EDC/HRE, students should learn how to understand politics. But what is politics? What makes a topic a political one? The following example may serve as an introduction.

#### A case story

A small town in a rural area has one school that serves not only students who live in the town, but also up to 20 km away. They use a bus service to shuttle between their homes and school. The municipal government supports families with a low income, particularly if they have two or more children at school. The families receive a relief on the bus fare, ranging from 25% to 75%.

The economic crisis has now led to a sharp drop in tax revenues. The representatives in the municipal parliament are now discussing how spending can be cut to avoid financing by credits as far as possible. Some influential politicians and commentators have suggested reducing the bus fare allowance, or even cutting it completely. They argue that the total spending cuts are considerable, but it is spread among many families who would hardly “feel the pinch”. But many parents disagree with this view and want the system of family allowances to stay as it is.

This case story is fictitious, but probably quite typical for the discussions on reducing public spending in times of economic recession. What is political about this story?

#### A three-dimensional model of politics

Different definitions for the concept of politics are possible. A quite common one that is useful for teaching and learning applies a three-dimensional model of politics: issues, decisions, and institutions.

The dimension of political issues: in politics, people argue for their interests or about the question how a problem or a dilemma is to be identified and solved. Sometimes people organise themselves in groups in order to express their collective interests. Debate and controversy are something normal in politics; they reflect different interests and opinions in a pluralist society, and no one need fear them if such issues are resolved peacefully.

The dimension of political decision making: in politics, problems are urgent – they affect the interests of the community as a whole, or a big group of people. They demand action to be taken, so the discussion must lead up to a decision, with subsequent action.

The institutional dimension of politics refers to the framework in which politics take place. What powers are given to whom? How are elections held? How are laws made? What rights does the parliamentary opposition have? How do individuals and special interest groups influence these political processes? This dimension therefore includes the constitution, rules and laws that define how political issues are dealt with peacefully in democratic decision-making processes. A wider concept also includes a cultural dimension, the values and attitudes that govern the citizen’s political behaviour.

#### Key questions from three political perspectives

The three dimensions allow us to view politics from different perspectives. This helps to bring order to the complexity that political subject matter may have. Each of these three political perspectives leads to interesting key questions. The questions asked here serve as an example and should be adapted as the case being studied requires.

The dimension of political issues		Answers	
What is the problem that must be solved?	The danger of rising public debt in times of economic recession		
Who is involved, and what objectives or interests do they advocate?	Local politicians: avoid credits by reducing public spending Families with low income: continue support for families in need		
What human rights are at stake?	Equality and non-discrimination Right to education Right to social security		
What solutions have been suggested or are being discussed to solve the problem?	Reduce or cut school bus fare allowances for families		
<b>The dimension of political decision making</b>			
Who is taking part in the process of decision-making?	Politicians	Media commentators	Families
Who is in agreement or disagreement with each other?	Agree in suggesting cuts on family allowances		Oppose cuts
What chances do different players have to influence the final decision?	Direct access to members of municipal parliament		May find support among citizens or in the media
Who has more power, who has less?	That depends. The case story gives no information on this point		
Who has bigger or smaller chances to find a majority?	Politicians may find a majority in parliament quite easily; however, if the decision is unpopular, they may lose support at the next election and may therefore be careful		
<b>The institutional dimension (framework)</b>			
What key principles of the constitution or legislative environment are relevant or are being applied?	Checks and balances, rule of law, social security, freedom of the press, freedom of expression (parents)		
What are the relevant international and/or regional human rights standards?	Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) European Convention on Human Rights (1950) Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989)		
What political institutions are involved, and what are their powers of decision?	Municipal parliament as legislator		
What laws and legal principles are to be applied?	The case story delivers no information; this is, however, a standard question that should always be included		

### **How does this analysis support EDC/HRE?**

A structured and systematic analysis of a political topic helps the teacher in preparing EDC/HRE lessons, and the students in understanding politics.

The teacher:

- can decide whether to focus on one dimension only, using a case story such as this to demonstrate how the system of political institutions works, how a political decision is made, or what a political issue is and how it may be resolved;
- can turn this case story into a decision-making game; the students act in different roles, and they negotiate a solution;
- develops a keener eye to identify suitable materials on current issues in the media.

The students:

- train their competences to understand and select information on political issues, decision-making processes and political institutions;
- learn to ask questions that guide their analysis;
- learn how to deal with complex subject matter by focusing on parts of it at a time and analysing it from different perspectives.

## Understanding politics

### Work file 2: How can I support my students in judging political issues?

The core objective of EDC/HRE is to enable students to take part in their community and in politics. To take action in this way, the students must know what they want to achieve; objectives and strategies of political participation rest on analysis and judgment.

How can EDC/HRE teachers therefore support their students in judging political issues? Students permanently judge issues and decisions, perhaps emotionally, perhaps intuitively. How can the students develop a more reflected approach to political judgment?

#### What criteria are appropriate for political judgment?

The same case story that has already been used in the preceding work file is used as an example to demonstrate how criteria in political judgment may be set in contrast and balanced. By using the same case story, the two work files show how a political topic may be analysed from different perspectives. Political judgment focuses on the dimension of political issues (see the preceding work file), probing it in more depth.

#### A case story

A small town in a rural area has one school that serves not only students who live in the town, but also up to 20 km away. They use a bus service to shuttle between their homes and school. The municipal government supports families with a low income, particularly if they have two or more children at school. The families receive a relief on the bus fare, ranging from 25% to 75%.

The economic crisis has now led to a sharp drop in tax revenues. The representatives in the municipal parliament are now discussing how spending can be cut to avoid financing by credits as far as possible. Some influential politicians and commentators have suggested reducing the bus fare allowance, or even cutting it completely. They argue that the total spending cuts are considerable, but it is spread among many families who would hardly “feel the pinch”. But many parents disagree with this view and want the system of family allowances to stay as it is.

This case story is fictitious, but probably quite typical for the discussions on reducing public spending in times of economic recession. How is the issue to be judged?

The local government must attempt to achieve two objectives that are difficult to achieve at the same time.

1. Families with low income need support; this implies that a certain amount of the budget is reserved for family benefits.
2. The government must address the problem of falling tax revenues in a period of economic recession; this raises the question to what extent spending, including family benefits, should be reduced.

The objectives are in conflict with each other because their ways of achievement mutually exclude each other. While the first requires spending, the second requires saving. The way out – financing by debt – has serious undesired consequences. It provides short-term relief, but the interest payments, plus paying back the credit loan, tends to strangle public finances. Moreover, credit financing may add to inflation.

#### Two basic criteria for judging political decisions

In a democratic state, not only political leaders, but also citizens should judge the options in decision making. Only then will citizens be able to support or to oppose the decisions made by the government.

We may conceive political judgment as a process of constructivist thinking that resembles an inner debate. Different inner speakers propose different values or principles that lead to different decisions. The individual is like a judge who listens to all the speakers, balances or prioritises their arguments and then passes a verdict that opens up a path of action. We may imagine an ideal-type inner debate on the political issue about family allowances like this.

### **First speaker**

Our community is devoted to human rights and has integrated many of them in our constitution. They include the right to education<sup>30</sup> and to an adequate standard of living.<sup>31</sup> Families in particular enjoy the protection of the state. Families serve society as a whole by taking responsibility for the upbringing of the young generation. Therefore we are bound by obligation to care particularly for families living on low incomes. I therefore demand that the allowances for school bus fares remain untouched, particularly in these difficult times.

### **Second speaker**

Taking responsibility for the community means that we must identify the problems and dangers that threaten us and make sure that we solve them. In the medium run, we cannot spend more than we earn. If our tax revenue goes down, so must our spending. We are doing the families a favour if we finance their allowances through credits. All of them, and particularly their children, will have to repay their part, plus the interest. An efficient solution of our finance problem will serve everyone. I therefore request that spending be reduced to the extent that credit spending can be avoided, and ask the families to contribute their part.

More speakers can take the “inner floor”, expressing further basic points of view. A third speaker, for example, considers the desired and undesired long-term impact of a decision, for example, in terms of sustainability. What is the impact on the planet, the interests and living conditions of the next generation, on economic growth, or on social groups at the bottom of the social ladder?

### **Two basic perspectives of political judgment**

The first two speakers argued for different understandings of responsibility. The first speaker’s definition of responsibility was normative, based on the value system of human rights. Poverty is a serious violation of human dignity, and therefore the state must not reduce support for low-income families. The second speaker’s definition of responsibility was not values based, but purpose based. The efficient solution of an urgent problem is important, and no taboos are acceptable to distract from this priority.

The third addresses aspects of both in considering the long-term consequences of a decision.

Put in simple words, people want to be treated as humans by authority and have a say in how the country is run (first speaker), and they want to be governed well and efficiently (second speaker).

Discussions may lead to a dead end if speakers resort to different points of reference, such as values and purpose. Both points are justified in their way, but they do not meet unless linked by judgment.

### **Political judgment in EDC/HRE classes**

In school, students exercise their freedom of thought and opinion.<sup>32</sup> Students who have listened to their inner debate are therefore free in their decision. The teacher should not intervene as a further speaker in this process of judgment and give his or her view on the “right” decision;<sup>33</sup> in democratic

30. Protocol to the European Convention on Human Rights (20 March 1952), Article 2.

31. Universal Declaration of Human Rights (10 December 1948), Article 25.

32. Convention on the Rights of the Child (20 November 1989), Articles 13, 14; European Convention on Human Rights (4 November 1950), Articles 9, 10.

33. See the work file on the EDC/HRE teacher’s professional ethics in this volume.

politics, no-one possesses absolute standards of judgment to define the right decision. In particular, the teacher should not moralise or urge the students to take action in a certain way, or even to take action at all. This remains for the students to decide, not the teacher.

The students are therefore free in their choice of criteria. In reflecting their political judgment, they should become aware of them. This is a big step forward, compared with judgments based on emotions or intuition (“good” and “bad”). At an even more advanced level, they can give reasons for their choice of criteria.

However, the students should realise that in politics decisions must be made, and in effect, not judging amounts to a decision as well. Therefore, it is not enough for them to listen to their inner debate and dismiss their speakers without deciding which decision to make. Basically, when considering conflicting objectives as in the case here, the students may:

- prioritise, that is, decide to keep up family allowances or adopt a policy of tight spending cuts;
- find a compromise: in this case, this would amount to mild cuts in family allowances and moderate credit spending; by thinking more carefully how to spend a smaller budget in a way that those who help most still receive it gives technical details a new significance in the light of human rights.

Different methods, but not all, support the students in carefully thinking about questions of political judgment. They include:

- plenary sessions – critical thinking, debates and discussions;
- written work with feedback by the teacher;
- task-based learning followed up by a phase of debriefing and discussion.

The topics that the teacher chooses should allow convincing choices of controversial views and be within the students’ reach, that is, not too complicated. Current issues arouse the students’ interests, but are more difficult as both teachers and students act as pioneers.