

## 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.