

[CHAPTER 1]

INTRODUCTION TO
21ST-CENTURY AUSTRALIAN
POLITICS

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading this chapter, you should be able to:

1. Describe some of the approaches used to understand politics
2. Explain some key features of Australian federal politics
3. Understand how and why we study Australian politics
4. Identify some of the recent domestic and international challenges to Australian federal politics



INTRODUCTION

political institutions: Bodies that influence the distribution of power, and can be formal, informal, bureaucratic or cultural such as parliament, federalism, political parties, churches and the state.

political actors: Individuals who seek to influence the distribution of power either directly, for example, by standing for parliament, or indirectly, for example, by lobbying or campaigning, including politicians, bureaucrats and judges.

liberal democracy: Representative democracy, rather than direct democracy, that includes free and fair elections with individual rights enshrined in a constitution and an active civil society.

geo-political: The political environment taking into account geographic considerations; geo-politics and the regional environment are critical to foreign policy.



AUTHOR
PANEL

With the Australian Federation now well into its second century, important questions have emerged about the capacity of its **political institutions**, and the **political actors** that work within and across them, to produce meaningful political and policy outcomes for the nation's citizens. Australia's federal institutions remain largely unchanged since Federation, yet the world is unrecognisable to that which existed in 1901. **Liberal democracy** is seemingly under threat from a range of technological, **geo-political** and environmental challenges that are domestic and international in origin. It is therefore vital to understand not only the structure of Australian federal politics, but also how these significant and varied challenges are continually shaping and redefining Australian federal politics and are likely to do so for the foreseeable future.

'Politics', of course, is not simply what occurs in Canberra in funny-shaped buildings housing politicians and faceless public servants. Politics in Australia, as for other democracies, also includes voters, the media, political parties, citizens' groups and much more. While many Australians may feel that the political world is distant and has little impact on their everyday lives, the reality is quite the opposite. Politics, broadly defined, is everywhere. It is present in our conversations with friends and families; in our schools, universities and workplaces; in the supermarkets we shop at and in the products that we choose to purchase. While it may seem like hyperbole, for political scientists and students of politics, *everything* is political. This does not mean we should all agree on the public policies to implement, whether one leader is more effective than another or whatever else; the point is that politics is an inescapable battle of ideas and approaches, and it is upon this basis that the book begins.

In 'What is politics?', we explain the competing approaches to understanding the political world before turning to contemporary Australian politics. We consider Australian political history and discuss some of the prominent institutions, actors and ideas that shape Australian federal politics. Next, we outline how and why we study politics. This includes a discussion of power, as well as the institutional, behavioural and critical approaches to studying politics. 'Contemporary challenges in Australian politics' provides an overview of the turbulence created by recent key global and national challenges and dynamics for Australian politics. This includes the impacts of **globalisation**, **neo-liberalism**, declining party identification, the rise of single issue organisations, the battle for gender equality, leadership churn and the challenges for governments of managing **fiscal policy**. Ultimately, the chapter lays the foundations for pursuing the central question at the heart of this book: how does the Australian political system, many elements of which were conceived more than a century ago, accommodate the diverse and conflicting political interests arising in what is now a far more complex and diverse Australia? The chapter concludes by outlining the structure for the rest of the book.

WHAT IS POLITICS?

A good place to start is to examine what we mean when we refer to ‘politics’. Like many concepts in the social sciences, there is no universally accepted definition of politics. This is because the social world is inherently complex involving multiple interests, values, beliefs, ideas and theoretical perspectives. As such, multiple definitions exist with each author highlighting what they see as the concept’s essential features. To begin with, it is important to recognise that politics is much broader than the popular notion that restricts it to the activity in parliaments and other formal institutional settings. Further, and somewhat problematically, politics in a general sense has negative connotations for many citizens; it is instructive to examine some conventional definitions that highlight politics as a specific *arena* of social life before we tackle the more expansive *process* view of politics and extend our focus beyond a moral appraisal of its worthiness.

POLITICS AS AN ARENA

Conventional definitions of politics tend to revolve around the location or *arena* within which political activity occurs (Hay 2002). For example, the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines politics as ‘[t]he science and art of government, the science dealing with the form, organisation and administration of a state, or part of one, and with the regulation of its relations with other States’ (cited in Ball 1988, 3). It thereby renders politics as the domain of government, its formal institutional structures, and the constitution of rules and practices to govern a **nation-state** extending into the international realm. In other words, politics is fundamentally understood as the study of **the state** and its institutions. During the 19th and 20th century, as the discipline of political science began to solidify as a field of study in its own right, various scholars developed understandings of politics that broadly aligned with the arena view: ‘The meaning of the term “politics” is confined to that of the business and activity which has to do with the actual conduct of affairs of the State’ (Garner 1952, 4–5). Also, political science ‘is the science which is concerned with the State, which endeavours to understand and comprehend the State in its conditions’ (Bluntschli 2000, 12). This view of politics as an arena therefore emphasises the institutions of the state, the world of government and those who seek to influence it. From this perspective, the scope of political activity is primarily limited to decision-making in the public sphere. This view privileges formal political activity that occurs in public arenas and institutions, which is often far removed from the day-to-day lives of ordinary citizens. The ‘politics as an arena’ view therefore offers rather circumscribed parameters of what counts as political practice.

POLITICS AS A SOCIAL PROCESS

In contrast to the ‘politics as an arena’ approach, which presents a restricted understanding of politics, we aim to demonstrate in this book that politics is in fact an omnipresent social process. Politics extends well beyond formal institutions and exists in all of our

globalisation: A process of growing inter-connectedness across the globe; in particular, the ease of movement of people, ideas and capital are cited as examples.

neo-liberalism: A set of policies that emerged in the aftermath of the oil shocks and stagflation in the mid-1970s, which aimed to reduce the role the state played in the economy. The policies focused on privatisation, deregulation and free-trade.

fiscal policy: The policies that governments can employ to alter spending and taxation. This contrasts with monetary policy that is administered by a central bank, the Reserve Bank in Australia’s case, which can alter the supply of money as well as interest rates.

nation-state: A geographically defined area in which sovereignty is claimed over the area and its citizens.

the state: A political entity that exercises sovereign jurisdiction over a defined geographical area and the population residing within it via institutions that structure and organise public life.

4 AUSTRALIAN POLITICS IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

daily interactions whether we contribute as citizens, consumers, employers, employees, family members or participants within the vast array of citizens' groups, from local neighbourhood associations to environmental, human rights or industry groups. Thus, the view of politics as a *social process* is a broader, more expansive understanding of political activity (see Hay 2002). In particular, it emphasises politics as a process through which we address societal conflict, where there are no boundaries between the public and private spheres of social life and no distinctions between formal or informal arenas.

Harold Lasswell's (1958, 96) most well-known definition of political science fits into the politics as a process view: 'Politics determines who gets what, when and how'. In other words, Lasswell contends that politics is the process of sorting out who gets access to society's scarce resources. Stoker and Marsh (2002) also define politics as a process, suggesting politics is 'a social process that can be observed in a variety of settings. It is more than what governments choose to do or not do. It is about the unseen distribution of power in society, how the struggle over power is conducted and its impact in creating and distributing resources, life chances and wellbeing' (Stoker and Marsh 2002, 9). This explanation accords with more critical analyses of politics, such as those who view social life as an inevitable power struggle between social groups (see, for example, Gramsci et al. 1971; Lukes 1974).

While the above 'politics as a social process' definitions certainly go further than the conventional 'politics as an arena' view, they only hint at the notion that politics is also fundamentally about ideas as well as interests and resources. Specifically, politics concerns the development, dissemination and contest of ideas, values, beliefs and identities. For example, the notion that citizens should be free to practise religion, endeavour to own their own homes, enjoy penalty rate wages for weekend work, marry a same-sex partner, or that the Constitution be adapted to recognise Indigenous Australians in its preamble, are all underscored by political ideas. Accordingly, the process view of politics offers an expansive understanding of political activity. Not only does it have the state and the division of society's resources as a central concern, it also encompasses contests over ideas, values, beliefs and identities that inform decision-making at all levels. As such, there are few aspects of social life that cannot be analysed using a political lens.



SHORT-ANSWER
QUESTIONS
REFLECTION
QUESTIONS

TABLE 1.1 THE 'ARENA' AND 'SOCIAL PROCESS' VIEWS OF POLITICS COMPARED

	POLITICS AS AN ARENA	POLITICS AS A SOCIAL PROCESS
Scope	Public sphere	Public and private spheres
Context	Government	Government plus decision-making in any setting
Sector	State	State and society

THE INEVITABILITY OF POLITICS

Another aspect of politics concerns the popular conception that it is an undignified, morally ambiguous, even 'grubby' business, and thus something to be avoided. One element of this is the inherent potential for conflict that politics entails. Sometimes, this conflict is indeed highly visible in the form of politicians brawling on the floor of various parliaments through to armed conflict between nation-states, or other forms of violence such as terrorist acts. More often, however, politics is less physically confrontational

and involves deliberate bargaining, compromise and negotiation between groups of people in order to develop rules to govern social conduct, control access to resources, and determine the rights and responsibilities of citizens. For example, trade agreements between nation-states usually involve tortuously long talks to negotiate new rules to govern cross-border trade across a number of goods and services sectors. Further examples include routine state and Commonwealth bargaining over funding for hospitals in Australia; discussions among governments, industry and environmental groups over water resources such as the Murray–Darling Basin; or the procedures developed to govern people seeking refugee status in Australia. Second, politics incorporates hidden or latent conflict and extends well beyond public life into citizens' private spheres. To illustrate, the division of chores within a household, the varying workforce participation of mothers and fathers, the selection of public or private education, the purchase of fair-trade coffee and the decision to join or abstain from trade union membership in the workplace, should all be considered worthy subjects of study for political scientists. Consequently, it is simply impossible to avoid politics or isolate politics from everyday life; politics inevitably permeates most interactions between people, whether or not those interactions appear cooperative or hostile (or somewhere along this spectrum). Politics is thus fundamental to decision-making concerning the allocation of rights, responsibilities, benefits and burdens across groups of people, regardless of a group's size or the location of the decision-making arena.

RESEARCH
QUESTION

Describing politics

SPOTLIGHT

While this book explains that there are two broad approaches to the 'what is politics' question, a number of interesting, thought-provoking, and even humorous, definitions and descriptions have been developed by a wide range of political scientists, philosophers and public figures, some of which defy simple categorisation. A selection of these include:

'Politics is the constrained use of social power' (Goodin and Klingemann 1996, 7).

Politics is [t]he activity by which differing interests within a unit of rule are conciliated' (Bernard Crick, British political theorist 1929–2008, quoted Crick 1964).

'Power relations between men and women and whenever and wherever they occur, as much, if not more, in the bed or the kitchen, for example, as in Westminster or Whitehall' (Randall 2002, 119).

Politics is 'nothing more than a means of rising in the world. With this sole view do men engage in politicks [sic] and their whole conduct proceeds upon it' (Samuel Johnson, English writer 1709–1784, cited in Boswell 1798).

'Politics, as a practise, whatever its profession, has always been the systematic organization of hatreds' (Henry Adams, American public intellectual 1838–1918, quoted Adams and Nadel 1999).

'The personal is the political' (1960s feminist movement slogan).

Politics is the 'authoritative allocation of value' (Easton 1953).

6 AUSTRALIAN POLITICS IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

'Political history is largely an account of mass violence and of the expenditure of vast resources to cope with mythical fears and hopes' (Edelman 1971).

'Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men' (Lord Acton, English Catholic historian, politician and writer 1837–1869, quoted Acton et al. 1907).

'Politics is the art of looking for trouble, finding it, misdiagnosing it and then misapplying the wrong remedies' (Groucho Marx, American comedian, stage, film and television star 1890–1977, quoted Kannan 2013, 36).

'Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains. One man thinks himself the master of others, but remains more of a slave than they are' (Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Francophone Genevan philosopher 1712–1778, quoted Rousseau and Cranston 1968).

QUESTION

Critically analyse the definitions and descriptions of politics presented above. Can you identify any that fit within the 'arena' or 'social process' views of politics?

KEY FEATURES OF AUSTRALIAN POLITICS**federation:**

One of three common systems of government used in organising modern nation-states (unitary and confederal being the others). It involves a division of power between a central government and subnational governments. There are generally three layers of government: federal, state/provincial and local. Unitary systems, in contrast, have no division between central and subnational units, while confederal systems imply states that have come together under an overarching body, which has limited power.

It is often argued that the Australian political system contains a unique institutional architecture. While the level of exceptionalism is debatable (Dowding 2016), the Australian nation-state combines features inherited from the United Kingdom (UK) and borrowed from the United States (US) to produce one of the most stable liberal democracies in the world. These features are a product of Australia's colonial origins and the decisions taken by the men and women who were central to the **federation** of the Australian colonies into a nation-state. Understanding the way these features have been combined and the impact they have on shaping Australian politics is key in deciphering how the Australian political system functions. As Table 1.2 shows, Australia shares a number of similar features with both the UK and the US.

THE ORIGINS OF THE AUSTRALIAN POLITICAL SYSTEM

More than 115 years on from Federation, it is often easy to forget that prior to 1 January 1901, the six Australian colonies had closer relationships with the UK than they did with each other. While they were bound together by geography, inter-colonial negotiations required regular conferences to be held and even then seemingly simple negotiations, like that over the standard gauge of railway tracks, were unsuccessful (De Garis 1999). Each colony also had its own complex set of tariffs on trade from other countries, including from its sibling colonies. According to De Garis (1999, 13), 'the need to do away with barriers to trade between the colonies and to establish a common tariff policy with the rest of the world was, in the end, to prove a major force for federation'.

TABLE 1.2 KEY FEATURES OF THE AUSTRALIAN POLITICAL SYSTEM COMPARED

	SYSTEM OF GOVERNMENT	PARLIAMENTARY V PRESIDENTIAL	CONSTITUTIONAL ARRANGEMENTS	SEPARATION OF POWERS	HEAD OF GOVERNMENT	HEAD OF STATE
Australia	Federal	Parliamentary	Mixture	Partial separation (fused)	Prime Minister	Governor-General (Monarch)
United Kingdom	Unitary	Parliamentary	Uncodified	Partial separation (fused)	Prime Minister	Monarch
United States	Federal	Presidential	Codified	Full separation	President	President



Figure 1.1 The opening of Federal Parliament in Melbourne, 1901

The path to federation was long and winding. Indeed, Macintyre (1999, 140) has said that ‘Australians can hardly be accused of rushing into federation’. Serious discussions about federation began in the 1870s at the same time that the British were starting to reduce their military presence in the colonies and amid increasing concern about regional security (De Garis 1999; Macintyre 1999). By the 1880s, debate within the colonies was increasing, and at conferences through the 1880s and early 1890s, each of the colonies was represented in discussions about federation. New Zealand and Fiji were frequently involved too as they considered joining any new federated entity. Eventually, after much cajoling, New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia, Victoria and Tasmania all achieved majorities in their referenda to federate. A year later, in 1900, Western Australia held their referendum, which was also successful (AEC 2011). Then, in July 1900, Australian delegates went to London with a draft of a constitution for the new federation and the British parliament passed the *Commonwealth of Australia Constitution Act 1900* (Parliamentary Education Office: The colonial parliaments of Australia.).



VIDEO

8 AUSTRALIAN POLITICS IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

The new federated nation

VIDEO

With the birth of Australia as a nation-state, on 1 January 1901, a new set of institutions was required to complement the institutions that were present in the colonies (which would go on to become the states). But what did this actually mean in terms of the institutional structure?

SIX KEY FEATURES OF THE AUSTRALIAN POLITICAL SYSTEM

The contemporary Australian political system remains basically the same as that devised at Federation and the following six features can be seen as key to the functioning of the system. Each of these will be discussed in more detail through the rest of this book.

1. Parliamentary system of government – This means that voters elect a local representative and then the party or group of parties who form a majority in the lower house decide who will be part of the executive, including who will become the leader of the government, the prime minister.
2. Federalism – In the Australian context, federalism means a division of powers between, on the one hand, the federal government and, on the other, the states. In practice, this creates three layers of government: federal, state and territorial, and local. Figure 1.2 shows these three levels of law-making.
3. Constitutional government – Australia's system of constitutional government is unlike both the UK and the US. The reason for this is that it utilises both a codified constitution, like the US, and conventions, like the UK. As a result, Australia is often noted as having a 'mixed' constitutional arrangement.
4. Constitutional monarchy – While a representative democracy, Australia also remains a constitutional monarchy with the British crown as the Head of State who is represented by the Governor-General at the federal level and the Governors at the subnational level.

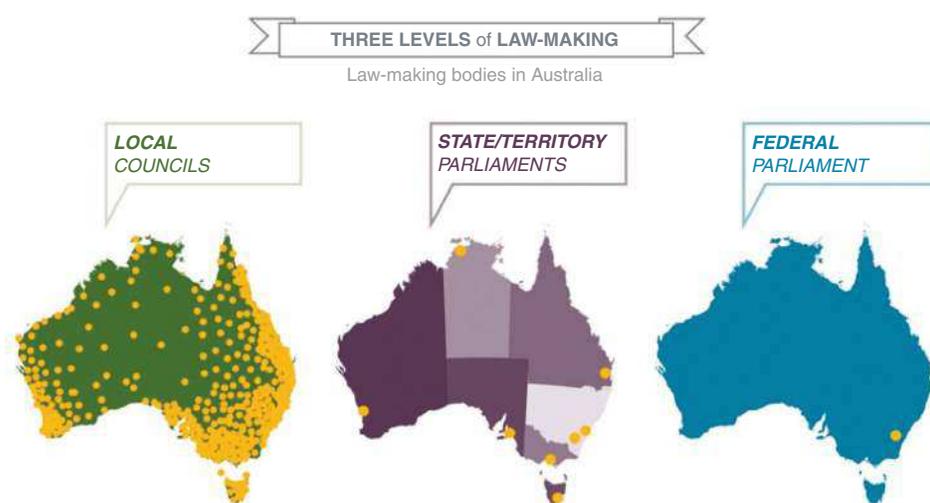


Figure 1.2 Australia's three layers of government
Source: Parliamentary Education Office

5. Strong bicameralism – Australia has a tradition at the federal and subnational levels of strong bicameralism. This means that the legislature consists of two chambers – lower and upper houses – with relatively equal powers. At the federal level, this means the Senate has significant powers to block the passage of legislation.
6. Majoritarianism – As a result of the electoral system used in lower houses and strong party discipline, Australia historically has exhibited the features of party majoritarianism, which is consistent with that of the Westminster system. Changing voting behaviour, however, suggests that Australia’s adherence to the major political parties is beginning to change.

Local government within Australia’s federal system

SPOTLIGHT

While the attention of many Australians is focused on the federal, state and territory governments, local government also plays a vital role within the federal system. According to the Parliamentary Education Office, Australia has around 560 local councils that collect their own set of taxes and provide basic services such as rubbish collection, water and sewerage, as well as issuing licenses for pets and permits for building. The roles that local governments play in each state are determined by legislation passed by their state parliaments. In contrast to this, Section 51 of the Australian Constitution sets out the powers of the federal parliament to make laws in relation to national matters but the role of the states was never codified. The reason for this is that, similar to what has happened in the United States, the federal government was never expected to become the dominant level of government. Indeed, if many of those who supported federation knew this was likely to occur, unquestionably they would have opposed unification.

QUESTION

When would a unitary structure, like that in the UK, be an advantage over the federal model in Australia? When would it be a disadvantage?

Federal or unitary: A comparison with the unitary UK system which is in transition

SPOTLIGHT

The United Kingdom (UK) is frequently cited as an example of a unitary state (sometimes referred to as a unitary system of government). This is particularly relevant for students of Australian politics as the UK is often used as a comparison with our federal system, which involves an additional layer of government at the subnational level (states and territories). However, the UK is in a period of transition and change. Over the last two decades, a process of devolution has occurred within the UK. This process began in 1997 when referenda were held to establish a Scottish parliament and a National Assembly in Wales. Then, in 1998, as part of the peace agreement commonly known as the Good Friday Agreement, Northern Ireland held a similar referendum. Following these referenda,

the UK parliament in Westminster passed legislation to devolve some powers to these regional legislatures. *Considering this period of devolution, then, does the UK remain a unitary state?* Yes, it does. There are a few reasons for this. First, Westminster remains sovereign. It has the capacity to overturn legislation enacted at the regional level, though this would be rare. Second, federal systems require some explanation of how powers are divided between central and subnational governments. This is usually done, like in Australia, in the constitution. However, the UK does not have a written constitution. While there are agreements between Westminster and the parliaments of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, these are only Memoranda of Understanding. Third, while some powers have been devolved, they could be returned to Westminster with a vote in parliament. In a federal system, this would be far more complex and generally would require changing the constitution. While the UK remains a unitary state for now, it is clear that the amount of power that the central government in Westminster has is certainly less than it was prior to this period of devolution (UK Parliament n.d.; Gov. UK 2013).

QUESTION

Are there any regions or states in Australia that you think would prefer to manage their affairs independently of the federal government?

WHY AND HOW DO WE STUDY AUSTRALIAN POLITICS?

The Australian political system, as demonstrated above, is complex. Bringing together ideas, traditions and institutional structures from across the liberal democratic world, Australia has been, from Federation to the present day, one of the world's safest and most prosperous places to live. In recent years, Australia, like very few other countries, has successfully been able to avoid the fates of many of our allies, trading partners and regional neighbours in the Asia-Pacific. A prescient example of this is Australia's good fortune in avoiding the most damaging effects of the 2008 **Global Financial Crisis (GFC)**. The GFC was the worst global economic downturn since the Great Depression yet Australia stood almost alone in avoiding recession. Across North America and Western Europe, unemployment rose considerably, and economic growth slowed dramatically. While the inter-connectedness of the global economy meant that Australia did indeed experience the effects of this global event, our economy slowed far less and recovered much more quickly than that of almost any other country (McDonald and Morling 2011). How do we explain this miraculous recovery and incredible durability? Without understanding the Australian political system – including its history, actors and institutions – it is impossible to answer this question.

Global Financial Crisis (GFC): Also known as 'the great recession' emerging in 2008–2009 to refer to the global downturn in economic growth resulting from the collapse of several US and European financial institutions.

THE 'LUCKY COUNTRY' OR THE LUCKY FEW?

Australia is often referred to as the 'lucky country'. But what is it that makes us lucky? And just how widely dispersed is this supposed luck? While referring to Australia as the lucky country has been a national pastime for decades, it is often overlooked that according to the person widely credited with bringing this turn of phrase to popular attention,