

Civics and Community Engagement - Lecture# 20

Understanding the Connection of Civics, Community and Political Science

Civics

Civics focuses on the role of citizens in governance. It includes the study of rights and responsibilities, voting, laws, and participation in public life. The primary aim of civics is to encourage active citizenship and engagement in community affairs so that individuals understand how they can contribute to society.

Community

A community refers to a group of people who share common values, geography, or interests. It emphasizes cooperation, social support, and collective goals. Community life involves local initiatives, volunteerism, and collaborative problem-solving, helping individuals work together for shared progress.

Political Science

Political science is the academic study of governments, power structures, public policies, and international relations. It includes the analysis of political behavior, elections, lawmaking, diplomacy, and various governing systems. It is broader in scope than civics and helps explain both national and global political processes.

Their key similarity is that all three areas explore human interaction within governance and society. Civics and community emphasize participation at the local level, whereas political science offers a wider understanding of how governments and policies operate on national and international scales.

Political Theory

Political theory is the study of the ideas, philosophies, and values that shape how societies are governed. It explores the foundational principles behind political systems and helps us understand the abstract concepts that guide political life. Central concerns in political theory include justice, which examines what is fair or equitable within a society; liberty, which questions the extent of individual freedom; and power, which considers who holds authority and how it is exercised. It also investigates rights, identifying what individuals should be entitled to, and democracy, analyzing how people should participate in governing themselves. Through these concepts, political theory provides a framework for evaluating and improving political structures and civic practices.

Types of Political Theory

Political theory can be studied through different approaches, each offering a unique way to understand how political systems function and how societies should be organized. These approaches help us examine political ideas from multiple angles which are idealistic, practical, and critical; so we can gain a complete picture of how power and governance operate. The main types of political theory include normative, empirical, and critical political theory.

1. Normative Political Theory

Normative political theory explains how government and society should function. It focuses on ideals such as fairness, justice, and moral principles, helping us imagine improved systems where people are treated equally. This type of theory asks questions like, “What is the best form of government?”

2. Empirical Political Theory

Empirical political theory examines what happens in reality. It studies voter behavior, government operations, and leadership actions using facts, data, and observation rather than personal opinions. An example of an empirical question is, “How many people voted in the last election?”

3. Critical Political Theory

Critical political theory challenges existing systems and highlights issues such as injustice, inequality, and exclusion. Its goal is to expose unfair structures and encourage reforms that create a more just society. It raises questions like, “Why are some groups always left out of power?”

Major Thinkers in Political Theory

Political theory has been shaped by the ideas of many great thinkers who attempted to explain how societies should be governed, why governments exist, and what rights individuals possess. These philosophers offered different perspectives based on the historical contexts in which they lived, and their ideas continue to guide modern political systems today. Among the most influential contributors to political thought are Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) developed his ideas during the turmoil of the English Civil War, which convinced him that humans are naturally selfish, aggressive, and driven by fear and survival. He believed that without a strong government, society would collapse into violence, a condition he called the “state of nature.” In *Leviathan* (1651), Hobbes argued for an absolute sovereign who could maintain order and prevent conflict. He supported the idea of a social contract in which people surrender certain freedoms in exchange for protection, and he opposed democracy, favoring absolute monarchy as the best safeguard against anarchy.

John Locke (1632–1704), influenced by the Glorious Revolution, offered a more optimistic view of human nature, believing people to be rational and capable of self-governance. He introduced the idea of natural rights—life, liberty, and property—that individuals possess inherently. For

Locke, the purpose of government is to protect these rights, and if it fails, citizens have the right to revolt. His advocacy for the separation of powers, limited government, and rule by consent deeply shaped modern democratic systems, particularly the U.S. Declaration of Independence and Constitution.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778), a central figure of the Enlightenment, argued that humans are naturally good but become corrupted by society. He famously stated that “man is born free, but everywhere he is in chains,” highlighting the restrictive nature of social institutions. Rousseau introduced the idea of the “general will,” representing the collective good of the community, and insisted that government must follow this general will rather than merely majority opinion. He supported direct democracy, where citizens participate actively in lawmaking. For Rousseau, political authority is only legitimate when it arises from and serves the people, making any government that violates the general will unjust.

Distinction Between State and Nation

The terms state and nation are often used interchangeably, but they refer to two distinct concepts. A state is a political and legal organization that operates within a clearly defined territory, possesses an established government, and holds full sovereignty. It has the authority to make, implement, and enforce laws over its population. Examples of states include Pakistan, France, and Brazil. In contrast, a nation is a group of people united by shared elements such as culture, language, history, ethnicity, or a sense of common identity. A nation does not necessarily require a defined territory. For instance, the Kurds constitute a nation without having their own state, while the Japanese represent both a nation and a state. When a nation and a state overlap geographically and politically, they form what is known as a nation-state, with Japan being a prime example.

Conclusion

This lecture introduced key foundations of political understanding. By distinguishing between concepts like civics, community, and political theory—and by exploring the ideas of Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau—students gain a clearer view of how societies are organized and governed. Recognizing the difference between a state and a nation further sharpens our understanding of the modern political world.