

How Should You Vote?

A Brief Guide to Politics



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I

Why Should
You Vote?

Why bother? It's a good question, and the answer shouldn't be a guilt trip over why we have a right to vote. That might make some people vote, but not with any enthusiasm. And you should only vote because you want to, or because you see good reason to. This book aims to address that and show you how politics is relevant, and to help every reader understand what they believe in and so who they should vote for.

The first step is to forget politicians – put them out of your mind. They're not an attractive sight, after all. We'll come back to them but, for the moment, they are a distraction. And frankly, they put a lot of us off politics. They appear to squabble over minor issues, calling each other names in a way that smacks more of the playground than a parliament. That might be unfair, but it's often the impression they can give. So, for now, put any idea of politicians from your mind.

So what is politics, and why should anyone be interested in it? At its simplest, it's just how things are organised. Move into a house with others, and you have to agree on cleaning, bathroom-sharing and who gets what cupboard: that's politics. If you want to restore the local football pitch and make sure everyone can have a fair go on it, that's politics. If you think it's unfair that your neighbours play their music loud into the evening, keeping you up, and that something should be done about it, that's politics. Politics is basically about how we live our lives.

The Oxford English Dictionary definition is given as:

'The activities associated with the government of a country or area...'

But that's quite a formal, distant definition. It probably doesn't feel that relevant. So what is politics to us? The following exercise can help:

Think of what's important in your life

This is the starting-point of everything – what's important to you. It could be university funding, NHS care, damage to the environment or even getting enough money to buy that new car you want. It all depends on what is happening to you, and what you rate as important. But the key thing is that none of these options is wrong, because we are all different. This is really a question of what makes you passionate – what do you really care about?

What are the threats to that?

This all depends on what matters to you. If it's the environment, then pollution is an obvious example. If it's the NHS, it could be management or funding. If it's a new car, it could be the threat of a recession, or even the boss' ability to fire you. But whatever it is, there is always something that could take it away.

How could it be improved?

Again, that depends on what it is. The first improvement would be the removal of threats (restriction on pollution, guaranteed funding for the NHS, limits on what you can be fired for). Beyond that, we can think of things that make what we care about better. For the environment, that could go beyond pollution and into areas such as replanting certain ecosystems. For the NHS, that might be more efficient management to do more with the same money. For the economy, that could be more growth that sees everyone have a bit more money.

The above provides some examples, but each of us is different and so you may well have been thinking about other ideas. Before we move on, take a moment to establish two or three things in

your head which are important to you and consider how these could be threatened or improved.

OK. Now you have those things that matter in your mind, and you've thought about how they could be changed for the better or for the worse, you need to ask one key question:

Do any of those changes involve other people?

If they do, that's politics. It's how we get along with each other. We can't do everything ourselves. We need to team up with other people, and as soon as we do that, we need to agree how we work together.

OK. Now you have those things that matter in your mind, and you've thought about how they could be changed for the better or for the worse, you need to ask one key question:

Concerns like these are the foundations of politics. There is always something that each of us cares about, so we are all interested in politics in one way or another. The 2015 ComRes survey of 18–24 year olds – a group often labelled as being 'apathetic' about politics – showed this clearly, with huge concern over the future of the NHS and the prospect of affordable housing. Virtually all similar surveys come to a similar conclusion: people care about many things, but that doesn't always convert to voting. Why?

I don't like politicians

I don't think any of us do. But we don't have to. Who you would choose to go to the pub with is a totally different question from who you would vote for. There are lots of people we all know personally who might be great company for a night out, but you would think twice before putting them in charge of a fridge, let alone a country. And I think it's important to remember that

none of us are actually going to be going out with them. We're asking them to do a job, and that's what we've got to judge them on – the job. And the best person – or group of people – might be those we would never want to be in a room with. We need to judge our vote on ideas that affect us, not the mouthpiece that expresses them.

Voting doesn't make a difference

It does – so long as you do vote. If you and all your friends don't bother to vote – and all the politicians know that you don't and won't – why should they bother trying to appeal to you? If they have a choice between two options, and one hurts those who vote and the other only hurts those who don't vote, it doesn't take a political genius to decide to please those who vote, and disregard those who don't!

Not voting is everyone's choice, but you can clearly see how there are more national policies that appeal to the older generation rather than the younger. Why? Because the older generation votes. But when there is a constituency that is dominated by students, the parties talk up the issues that affect the young. This is not a coincidence.

Some have said that just one vote won't make a difference. That's true. But there are millions of us. One vote on its own won't make an impact, just like a single drop of water splashing on our face won't move us. Millions of votes, though, all cast the same way, can have the same force as a tidal wave, and will sweep things away. It's possible. On your own, it isn't, but that's why politics is about getting out there and persuading others. Then you can have an impact.

Lastly, some people point out that voting against a party in a safe seat is a wasted vote, and really won't make a difference. It is true that it's much harder in our system to make an impact there, though it's not impossible. But having a vote count for

more in one place than another does seem a little unfair if you think we should all have an equal say. We'll come back to that later. That's not a reason not to vote or engage in politics, though. That's identifying something you care about and that you want to change – the very essence of politics.

I don't know what they stand for

This is a problem. If we don't know what politicians and parties stand for, how can we support any of them? And if we don't know what we ourselves stand for in the first place, we can't even begin to ask the politicians.

Final Thoughts

So this is what this short book is about. Its goal is to take you through what you believe, so that you can then compare it to what they say. It might reveal some interesting things about yourself. It will certainly arm you with a list of questions for politicians. And I hope it will give people the confidence to ask and challenge those who want to rule us.

Points to consider

- ▶ Politics is about how we organise ourselves and others
- ▶ It's driven by what we care about
- ▶ Voting does make a difference