

● CLUES to Critical Thinking ●

Thinking Like a Political Scientist

This book is an introduction to American politics, and in a way it is also an introduction to political science. Political science is not exactly the same kind of science as biology or geology. Not only is it difficult to put our subjects (people and political systems) under a microscope to observe their behavior, but we are somewhat limited in our ability to test our theories. We cannot replay World War II to test our ideas about what caused it, for example. A further problem is our subjectivity; we are the phenomena under investigation, and so we may have stronger feelings about our research and our findings than we would, say, about cells and rocks.

These difficulties do not make a science of politics impossible, but they do mean we must proceed with caution. Even among political scientists, disagreement exists about whether a rigorous science of the political world is a reasonable goal. We can agree, however, that it is possible to advance our understanding of politics beyond mere guessing or debates about political preferences. Although we use many methods in our work (statistical analysis, mathematical modeling, case studies, and philosophical reasoning, to name only a few), what political scientists have in common is an emphasis on critical thinking about politics.

Critical thinking means challenging the conclusions of others, asking why or why not, turning the accepted wisdom upside down, and exploring alternative interpretations. It means considering the sources of information—not accepting an explanation just because someone in authority offers it, or because you have always been told that it is the

true explanation, but because you have discovered independently that there are good reasons for accepting it. You may emerge from reading this textbook with the same ideas about politics that you have always had; it is not our goal to change your mind. But as a critical thinker, you will be able to back up your old ideas with new and persuasive arguments of your own, or to move beyond your current ideas to see politics in a new light.

Becoming adept at critical thinking has a number of benefits:

- We learn to be good democratic citizens. Critical thinking helps us sort through the barrage of information that regularly assails us, and it teaches us to process this information thoughtfully. Critical awareness of what our leaders are doing and the ability to understand and evaluate what they tell us is the lifeblood of democratic government.
- We are better able to hold our own in political (or other) arguments: we think more logically and clearly, we are more persuasive, and we impress people with our grasp of reason and fact. There is not a career in the world that is not enhanced by critical thinking skills.
- We become much better students. The skills of the critical thinker are not just the skills of the good citizen; they are the skills of the scholar. When we read critically we figure out what is important quickly and easily, we know what questions to ask to tease out more meaning, we can decide whether what we are reading is worth our time, and we know what to take with us and what to discard.

Although it may sound a little dull and dusty, critical thinking can be a vital and enjoyable activity. When we are good at it, it empowers and liberates us. We are not at the mercy of others' conclusions and decisions. We can evaluate facts and arguments for ourselves, turning conventional wisdom upside down and exploring the world of ideas with confidence.

How does one learn to think critically?

The trick to learning how to think critically is to do it. It helps to have a model to follow, however, and we provide one below. The focus of critical thinking here is on understanding political argument. Argument in this case refers not to a confrontation or a fight, but rather to a political contention, based on a set of assumptions, supported by evidence, leading to a clear, well-developed conclusion with consequences for how we understand the world.

Critical thinking involves constantly asking questions about the arguments we read: Who has created it, what is the basic case and what values underlie it, what evidence is used to back it up, what conclusions are drawn, and what difference does the whole thing make? To help you remember the questions to ask, we have used a mnemonic device that creates an acronym from the five major steps of critical thinking. Until asking these questions becomes second nature, thinking of them as CLUES to critical thinking about American politics will help you keep them in mind. To help you develop the critical thinking habit,

readings featured in each chapter of this book will provide a CLUES model for you to follow.

This is what CLUES stands for:

- Consider the source and the audience
- Lay out the argument and the underlying values and assumptions
- Uncover the evidence
- Evaluate the conclusion
- Sort out the political implications

We'll investigate each of these steps in a little more depth.

Consider the source and the audience

Who wrote the argument in question? Where did the item appear? What audience is it directed toward? What does the author or publisher need to do to attract and keep the audience? How might that affect content?

If the person is a mainstream journalist, he or she probably has a reputation as an objective reporter to preserve, and will at least make an honest attempt to provide unbiased information. Even so, knowing the actual news source will help you nail that down. Even in a reputable national newspaper like the *New York Times* or the *Wall Street Journal*, if the item comes from the editorial pages, you can count on its having an ideological point of view—usually (but not exclusively) liberal in the case of the *Times*, conservative in the case of the *Wall Street Journal*. Opinion magazines will have even more blatant points of view. Readers go to those sources looking for a particular perspective, and that may affect the reliability of the information you find.

Lay out the argument, the values, and the assumptions

What basic argument does the author want to make? What assumptions about the world does he or she make? What values does he or she hold about what is important and what government should do? Are all the important terms clearly defined?

If these things aren't clear to you, the author may be unclear about them, too. There is a lot of sloppy thinking out there, and being able to identify it and discard it is valuable. You may be intimidated by a smart-sounding argument, only to discover on closer examination that it just doesn't hold up. A more insidious situation occurs when the author is trying to obscure the point to get you to sign on to something that you might not otherwise accept. If the argument, values, and assumptions are not perfectly clear and up front, there may be a hidden agenda you should know about. You don't want to be persuaded by someone who claims to be an advocate for democracy, only to find out that democracy means something completely different to him or her than it does to you.

Uncover the evidence

Has the author done basic research to back up his or her argument with facts and evidence?

Good arguments cannot be based on gut feelings, rumor, or wishful thinking. They should be based on hard evidence, either empirical, verifiable observations about the world or solid, logical reasoning. If the argument is worth being held, it should stand up to rigorous examination, and the author should be able to defend it on these grounds. If the evidence or logic

is missing, the argument can usually be dismissed.

Evaluate the conclusion

Is the argument successful? Does it convince you? Why or why not? Does it change your mind about any beliefs you held previously? Does accepting this argument require you to rethink any of your other beliefs?

Conclusions should follow logically from the assumptions and values of an argument, if solid evidence and reasoning support it. What is the conclusion here? What is the author asking you to accept as the product of his or her argument? Does it make sense to you? Do you "buy it"? If you do, does it fit with your other ideas, or do you need to refine what you previously thought? Have you learned from this argument, or have you merely had your own beliefs reinforced?

Sort out the political implications

What is the political significance of this argument? What difference does it make to your understanding of the way the political world works? How does it affect who gets what scarce resources and how they get them? How does it affect who wins in the political process and who loses?

Political news is valuable if it means something. If it doesn't, it may entertain you, but essentially it wastes your time if it claims to be something more than entertainment. Make the information you get prove its importance, and if it doesn't, find a different news source to rely on.

Source: Adapted from the authors' "Preface to the Student," in Christine Barbour and Matthew J. Streb, eds., *Clued in to Politics: A Critical Thinking Reader in American Government*, 3rd ed. (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2010). ■