



*WHTC University application subject guides*

# Politics

This guide has been written to help support you in your application to university. It contains the following information relevant to your subject to help you decide where to apply and put together the best application that you possibly can:

1. **Course links**
2. **Entrance requirements**
3. **Recommended A-levels**
4. **Admissions tests**
5. **Recommended reading**
6. **Interesting MOOCs**
7. **Useful additional resources**
8. **Related courses**
9. **Oxbridge example interview questions**

---

## 1. Course links

Below are links to the top courses for this subject in the UK (according to [The Complete University Guide](#)). Click on the links to find information about what the course is like, what you'll learn, and loads of information about things such as fees and accommodation. However, remember that there are loads of other great universities out there, so check out The Complete University Guide or just google studying your subject at university.

1. **University of Oxford:** Oxford doesn't offer Politics on its own but it does offer [History and Politics](#) and [Philosophy, Politics and Economics](#)
2. **University of Cambridge:** Cambridge doesn't offer Politics on its own but it does offer [Human, Social and Political Sciences](#) and [History and Politics](#)
4. [University of Warwick](#)

13. [King's College London](#)
  19. [University of Leeds](#)
  28. [University of Southampton](#)
- 

## 2. Entrance requirements

Here are the grades that the university suggests you need to get in to that course, and the likely offer that they will give you.

1. **Oxford:** AAA
  2. **Cambridge:** A\*AA
  3. **Warwick:** AAA
  4. **KCL:** A\*AA
  5. **Leeds:** AAB
  6. **Southampton:** ABB
- 

## 3. Recommended A-levels

Different universities may differ as to what A-levels they ask you for. Some might list one subject as 'essential', while another might list the same subject as just 'helpful', so make sure to check out the course page (under Section 1 of this document, or on the university website) to be sure what your chosen university expects!

There are no specific or essential A-levels required to study Politics at university. Although universities will need you to have **at least one essay-based subject**, most of them are looking for individuals with the ability to think critically, an awareness of the world around them, and the ability to get their ideas across clearly and concisely. Although humanities subjects are generally preferred, any subject where you can show these skills will be beneficial.

Examples of subjects that would be helpful for studying politics are:

**History:** Many universities list history as a recommended A-level, though it is not essential. Over the course of your politics degree you'll be asked to consider a variety of political schools of thought and it is useful to have an awareness of the historical context behind them. It is also important to have an awareness on how the past impacts on our political system today, particularly with regards to international relations

**Philosophy:** Most universities list philosophy as being useful to pursuing a politics degree. The ability to argue a point and flexibility of thought gained from an A-level in philosophy will be very beneficial to studying politics.

**Sociology:** Most universities list sociology as being helpful as it gives you an awareness of how society functions which is useful to a politics degree

---

## 4. Admissions tests

What admissions tests are you typically required to sit in addition to submitting your application? This also differs from uni to uni, so if your chosen university isn't on this list, make sure you check out the course page so you know exactly what you need to apply.

**Oxford:** [History Aptitude Test](#) (H&P), [Thinking Skills Assessment](#) (PPE). For History and Politics you will also be required to submit an essay on a historical topic

**Cambridge:** Although there are no entry tests for Politics courses at Cambridge, you may be required to take an at-interview assessment. You will also need to submit an example of your written work prior to interview.

---



## 5. Recommended reading

Reading some relevant books or articles is a really great way to demonstrate your passion for your chosen subject in your personal statement, and show how you've gone beyond the curriculum. Plus, if you really want to spend three years or more studying this subject at university, it should be enjoyable! Try taking notes and jotting down your thoughts as you're reading so that you can share some of this in your personal statement

### Political Theory

***Political Ideas: The Study of the Most Significant and Fundamental Ideas of Eminent European Political Thinkers of the last Hundred Years*** edited by

**David Thomson:** This book offers the reader a collection of essays by distinguished historians and politics professors. Each one focuses on a different European political thinker of the last five hundred years, and provides a lovely, concise introduction to their works and theories. Machiavelli, Locke, Rousseau, Paine, Burke, Hegel, Mill and Marx all feature within the book's pages

***Two Cheers for Anarchism* by James C. Scott:** Inspired by the core anarchist faith in the possibilities of voluntary cooperation without hierarchy, *Two Cheers for Anarchism* is an engaging, high-spirited, and often very funny defence of an anarchist way of seeing – one that provides a unique and powerful perspective on everything from everyday social and political interactions to mass protests and revolutions.

***23 Things They Don't Tell You About Capitalism* by Ha-Joon Chang:** In this revelatory book, Ha-Joon Chang destroys the biggest myths of our times and shows us an alternative view of the world.

***An Introduction to Political Philosophy* by Jonathan Wolff:** An in-depth yet accessible overview of some of the key thinkers in the history of political thought and key questions such as 'What justifies the state?', 'Who should rule?', and 'How should property be distributed?'

## Contemporary politics

### ***Democracy for Realists* by Christopher H. Achen and Larry M. Bartels:**

Using a wealth of social-scientific evidence from topics ranging from abortion politics and budget deficits to the Great Depression and shark attacks, Achen and Bartels show that the familiar ideal of thoughtful citizens steering the ship of state from the voting booth is fundamentally misguided. This book offers a powerful challenge to conventional thinking, pointing the way toward a fundamentally different understanding of the realities and potential of democratic government.

***How Democracy Ends* by David Runciman:** Runciman, one of the UK's leading professors of politics, surveys the political landscape of the West, helping us to spot the new signs of a collapsing democracy and advising us on what could come next.

### ***Ruling the Void: The Hollowing of Western Democracy* by Peter Mair:**

Offers an authoritative and chilling assessment of the prospects for popular political representation today, not only in the varied democracies of Europe but throughout the developed world

***Stand out of our Light: Freedom and Resistance in the Attention Economy* by James Williams:** As information becomes ever more plentiful, the resource that is becoming more scarce is our attention. In this 'attention economy', we need to recognise the fundamental impacts of our new information environment on our lives in order to take back control.

You might also find it interesting to read the biographies of key political figures that you admire or leaders from our recent past, such as Tony Blair, Barack Obama, or Margaret Thatcher, even – or especially! – if you don't always agree with them!

## Political Economy

***Austerity: The History of a Dangerous Idea* by Mark Blyth:** Offers a damning indictment of austerity politics using countless historical examples from the last 100 years. This book places the blame for these policies on the bailing out of the broken banking system, which was allowed to walk away scot free, while placing the burden of government debt on the taxpayer.

***Expulsions: Brutality and Complexity in the Global Economy* by Saskia Sassen:** This hard-headed critique updates our understanding of economics for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, exposing a system with devastating consequences even for those who think they are not vulnerable. *Expulsions* lays bare the extent to which the sheer complexity of the global economy makes it hard to trace lines of responsibility for the displacements, evictions, and eradications it produces – and equally hard for those who benefit from the system to feel responsible.

## **Protest Politics**

***The Making of Black Lives Matter* by Christopher J. Lebron:** Lebron lays out the genesis of the ideas that have built the movement, presenting a foundational blueprint of sorts that can help us make sense of the emotions, demands, and arguments of present-day activists and public thinkers as well as recast the role of historical black thinkers in American life.

***Age of Anger* by Pankaj Mishra:** By tracing the origins of phenomenon's such as mass shooters and ISIS militants back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Mishra is able to show that these aren't symptomatic of the 21<sup>st</sup> century world. Today, just as then, the wider embrace of mass politics, technology, and the pursuit of wealth and individualism has cast millions adrift in a literally demoralised world, uprooted from traditional but still far from modernity – with the same terrible results.

It might also be useful to read articles from [History Today](#), [Politics Review](#) and [British Politics: A Very Short Introduction](#)

There are a whole range of different topics within politics and we can't possibly cover everything here. If there's a particular area of politics that you're especially interested in then ask your teacher or the Sixth Form team for recommendations!

An additional reading list can also be found [here](#)

---

## 6. Interesting MOOCs

Another great way of learning more about your chosen subject and demonstrating your interest is to take a MOOC, or Massive Open Online Course. These are free courses delivered by universities that you can take online. If the ones below don't take your fancy, try looking at [Class Central](#) - they have a huge list of different courses for every subject imaginable, and they're all free!

[Moral Foundations of Politics](#) (Yale University) – Do governments automatically deserve our allegiance? Is there a situation when we should deny this allegiance? How can applying political thought and ethics to modern society solve the biggest issues facing it? A top professor talks through key issues in political philosophy and discusses figures such as Marx and J.S. Mill.

[US Public Policy: Social, Economic and Foreign Policies](#) (Harvard University) –

This course will take a broad view of public policy in America but will use specific examples, such as the 2008 economic downturn and climate change, to illustrate the wide-ranging effects of those policies. This course will also serve as an overview of American government, concentrating on overarching tendencies such as its fragmented power structure.

[Global Diplomacy: The United Nations in the World](#) (SOAS) – The course offers a well-researched and broad-ranging primer to the United Nations system. It consists of an introduction to the complex UN family and its history, and a series of ‘snapshots of key UN functions, which are used to explore important UN themes

[The Politics of Economics and the Economics of Politicians](#) (University of Nottingham) – How has the economy impacted on political thought? And how have politicians shaped the economy to fit their goals? From Alexander Hamilton to Deng Xiaoping via Franklin D. Roosevelt and Margaret Thatcher, this course will examine the link between economics and politics

---

## 7. Useful additional resources

There are loads of other great things out there that you might want to look at to develop your interest and strengthen your application, from videos to podcasts, to websites. Here are a few suggestions:

[Talking Politics Podcast](#): A podcast that tries to make sense of the modern political landscape addressing everything from the politics of lockdown to the post office

[Radio 4: In Our Time](#): Although mainly historical in focus, there are a variety of useful talks that will be useful for providing context to political debates.

[Chatham House](#): A world-leading policy institute, they have a variety of resources covering every area of political thought, historical events and current affairs



**The Economist**: A leading news magazine covering politics, economics and much more. Useful for following the latest economic developments globally and in different regions. You can read a few articles for free each month

**British Journal Of Sociology**: Published for LSE, the British Journal of Sociology provides an in-depth look at the issues facing society today, their causes and possible solutions

**Gresham College**: A collection of interesting lectures on a whole range of different topics

**Political Theory YouTube Series**: A series of short and easy to watch videos introducing key political thinkers and their theories

**R.A Butler Essay Competition**: Essay competition from the University of Cambridge. Essay of between 2,000 and 4,00 words. Deadline 3<sup>rd</sup> August

**Immerse Education Essay Competition**: Chance to win a scholarship to attend a summer school at the University of Cambridge. 2020 deadline: 31<sup>st</sup> August.

**John Locke Institute Essay Competition**: Essay competition from an educational institution. Essay of up to 2000 words on a choice of questions. Deadline 15<sup>th</sup> July.

---

## 8. Related courses

At university, there are loads of different combinations of subjects that you can do. Maybe you might find one of these alternatives more interesting? A few ideas are listed below with a sample link, but in most cases there are lots of universities that offer these different combinations so make sure to have a good look around!

You can combine Politics with almost any other subject. [Warwick](#) in particular offers a range of politics-related courses.

**History and Politics** and **Politics and International Relations** are common alternatives to a straightforward Politics degree. These options will be offered at most universities.

Other courses linked to politics include:

[War Studies](#) e.g. King's College London

[International History and Politics](#) e.g. University of Leeds

[Politics and Social Policy](#) e.g. University of Leeds

[Politics and Philosophy](#) e.g. University of Sheffield

[Philosophy, Politics and Economics](#) e.g. LSE, Nottingham, Exeter, Manchester etc.

[Policy, Politics and Economics](#) e.g. University of Birmingham

[Development Studies](#) e.g. SOAS

[International Social and Public Policy](#) e.g. LSE

Please note that many of these courses are offered at a variety of universities so make sure to do your research!

---

## 9. Oxbridge example interview questions

As you will know, applicants to Oxford and Cambridge have to take an interview in order to get a place. It is normal to get open-ended questions, as well as being given charts or pieces of writing to analyse. Here is a sample of the kind of questions you might get asked. Remember, you're supposed to not know the answer! They often deliberately choose topics that they think no one will have studied in order to make the questions fair. What they're looking for is to see how you think under pressure, and how you can present your ideas and your logic.

## Longer questions with explanations

*Interviewer: Cecile Fabre, Lincoln College (now of All Souls)*

**'I agree that air transport contributes to harmful climate change. But whether or not I make a given plane journey, the plane will fly anyway. So there is no moral reason for me not to travel by plane.' Is this a convincing argument?**

The interview is not meant to test candidates' knowledge, since more often than not, they have not studied this subject before. Moreover, we are not trying to get them to guess or arrive at 'the right answer'. Rather, the interview is about candidates' ability to think critically, to deal with counter-examples to the views they put forward, and to draw distinctions between important concepts.

This answer raises the difficult question of individuals' responsibility, as individuals, for harmful collective actions. Some candidates might be inclined to dispute the premise that air transport contributes to climate change: that's fine, but we would then ask them to accept that premise for the sake of argument. Whether they are able to do that is in itself an important test, since much of philosophical thinking proceeds in this way.

Some candidates might say that the argument is a good one: given that what I do makes no difference, I have no moral reason not to do it. At this point, I would want to know what they consider a moral reason to be (as distinct from or similar to, for example, a practical or prudential reason).

I would also push them to think about other cases: for example, the bombing of Dresden (one jet fighter less makes no difference to the collective outcome – so why not go and fight); or voting (why should I vote in a general election, given that my vote makes no difference)? Are the cases the same? Are they different? If so, are the differences or similarities relevant? That is to say, do those differences and similarities help us think about the original case? Do they help us to work out a view about individual responsibility in those cases? For example, in the Dresden case, the individual jet fighters act together as part of an organisation – the air force – whose aim is to bomb Dresden. But we cannot say of companies such as British Airways that they aim to cause climate change. And the air passengers cannot really be described as acting together. Does this make a difference?

**Suppose that you could plug yourself into a machine for the rest of your life, which would give you all the experiences you find enjoyable and valuable. Once in the machine, you would not know that you are plugged**

**in, and that these experiences are not real. Would you go into the machine? If so, why? If not, why not?**

The interview is not meant to test candidates' knowledge, since more often than not, they have not studied this subject before. Moreover, we are not trying to get them to guess or arrive at 'the right answer'. Rather, the interview is about candidates' ability to think critically, to deal with counter-examples to the views they put forward, and to draw distinctions between important concepts.

Thought-experiments are an important part of doing Philosophy. The experience machine is a thought experiment (it's also at the heart of the movie *The Matrix*, of course.) It invites candidates to think about what makes a life worth living. Some candidates might be tempted to go into the machine, on the grounds that a good life is a pleasurable life. If so, we would invite them to consider the case of the addict with unlimited supplies of pleasures-inducing drugs. We would also invite them to consider the distinction between 'experiencing' and 'doing/acting': could actually carrying out those pleasurable activities be a better measure of a good life than merely experiencing those pleasures? Other candidates might say, on the contrary, that they would not go into the machine, precisely on the grounds that a good life is not merely one in which we experience pleasure. Depending on how they construct their argument, we would try and see what they make of the distinction between what is pleasurable and what is valuable (some experiences might be valuable precisely in so far as they are not enjoyable.) In all cases we want them to reflect on whether a good life, for me, is simply what I say it is, or whether a good life must be objectively good.

*Interviewer: Dave Leal, Brasenose College*

**When I was at school in the 1970s, there was talk of a pensions crisis that would one day hit. The talk persisted in the 1980s, and the 1990s – and then there was a pensions crisis, and little had been done politically to prepare us for it. Is there a fault with the British political system that means we can't sensibly address serious medium and long-term problems when they are identified?**

This question was an invitation to think about democracy and its limitations – it's a big question, but an important one. I have had candidates come up with good discussions about voting methods – for example, how having proportions of parliament voted in for much longer terms might promote more long-term policy thinking. Another approach might be to reflect on the responsibility of the electorate; if they do not think in long-term ways, it may not be politicians who are to blame, and the problem may be down to education. One might reflect upon the importance of having an unelected second chamber to which all really important business could be delegated. One candidate suggested that no one should be allowed to stand for parliament unless they have dependent children,

with the thought that this would ensure a personal motivation towards longer term thinking on a variety of matters.

There is no single 'right answer' to the question; most answers given serve as the basis for further elaboration. For example, in the case of longer parliamentary terms: What would be the wider consequences of that change? Would they be desirable? We are testing the capacity to begin to locate the source of a problem, and try out solutions through discussion. The precise solution students suggest matters much less than evidence of the refining of ideas and of self-correction where necessary.

### **Short Questions**

Does your vote count?

Is Britain a democracy? How could it be made more democratic?

What are your views on electoral reform?

How do you think that the media affects politics?

Is there, or should there be, censorship of the media?

Is democracy the best system of government?

Is it ever justified for a country to intervene in the affairs of another country?

Define ideology

Is environmentalism an ideology?

What is the difference between power and authority?

If an alien came down to Earth and was confused about how we governed ourselves, how would you explain and/or justify our system of nation states to him?

What role does economics play in politics?

Do you think laws can make us freer?

What is meant by equality of opportunity?

What does the state owe to the lazy?



WEMBLEY HIGH  
TECHNOLOGY COLLEGE



Wembley  
Multi-Academy  
Trust  
ACHIEVEMENT FOR ALL