

University of Wales Trinity Saint David

Students are required to critically evaluate the complex interplay between political influence, policing priorities, and public engagement at a national, regional and local level.

Students are required to produce a 2500 word report, a supportive paper with a 15 minute video presentation (pre-recorded) which expands on the main learning points discussed in the paper

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Introduction

This report will respond to the assignment question in three distinct parts. Firstly it explores the complex interplay between politics and policing specifically through the lens of political accountability. Whilst Chief Constables are said to have operational autonomy, they are ultimately accountable to the Home Office and the PCC who occupy highly politicised roles (Caless et al., 2016). In the second section it examines the influence of politics in shaping policing priorities and community engagement at a national, regional and local level. Although the police are expected to be operationally independent, political factors such as legislative reforms, strategic priorities and resource allocation have a significant impact on police priorities and practices (Waddington, 1999). The third section is a critical reflection of the growing political pressure on the policing response to protests, highlighting how politics assists in gaining attention and achieving legislative reform for protest movements (Peay & McNair, 2024). However, the need for impartiality, to police without “fear or favour” is crucial to avoid loss of trust and confidence from the public, particularly minority or marginalised communities (Hymas, 2021).

Section 1: Politics & Police Accountability

This section will explore how political influences on policing can be viewed from various perspectives, revealing both positive and harmful implications. Grieve (2024) argues that political involvement in policing is necessary for ensuring accountability and aligning police practices with community needs. Elected officials can represent public concerns and ensure that policing has appropriate oversight to prevent abuses of power (Caless et al., 2016). The Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 (PACE) for example, influenced common law and police practice by shaping the framework within which police accountability operates (Reiner, 1992). With a growing recognition of the need to modify police culture and practice through legal regulation, the Act aimed to address serious miscarriages of justice that had occurred (Dixon et al., 1990).

Politicisation, on the other hand, can confuse the interaction between law enforcement and the communities they serve, raising questions about accountability and the challenges for community policing (Fletcher, 2025). Fletcher examined how police forces became politicised, especially in England and Wales in the 1970s, when they were immersed in implementing government policies that resulted in violent clashes with the public and strained the relationships between the community and the police. Furthermore, Ward (1996) argues that the interplay of racial bias and political pressure in policing contexts can heighten tensions between police and communities.

The role of Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs) has arguably made policing more political (Lister, 2013). PCCs promised to “give power to the people” over police actions, management and how they are held to account (Reiner, 2016). The implementation of directly elected PCCs in England and Wales aimed to enhance police accountability by giving the people a say in policing and making sure that forces are held to account for their actions (Caless et al., 2016). In addition to having the power to hire or fire Chief Constables and hold them to account for their performance, PCCs also set the force priorities and budget (Loveday, 2018). However, the presence of multiple participants in the accountability framework can lead to confusion regarding roles and responsibilities, making it more difficult for the public to hold officials accountable for police actions (Murphy et al., 2017). There are also concerns about the possibility of political interference in police operations which could undermine the operational Independence of Chief Constables (Lister, 2013). Therefore, although political oversight can improve accountability, it also runs the danger of undermining the operational independence required for effective policing (Joyce, 2011).

However, the concept of Chief Constables ‘operational independence’ is problematic to many because it implies that police decisions regarding the use of public resources are above democratic scrutiny (Lustgarten, 1986). Indeed, the government is said to have introduced PCCs to deliberately weaken the autonomy of Chief Constables and as a way of democratising policing (Cooper, 2020). As noted most recently by Muir (2017), the tension between the competing principles of operational independence versus democratic oversight and accountability still exists. A recent significant High Court Ruling has indicated that PCCs may be held responsible for all police operations; “It is in our Judgement impossible to see operational independence as

being beyond the supervision of the PCC” (Crompton, 2017) this judgement might be considered as a significant challenge to the principle of police independence. The relationship between PCCs and Chief Constables is said to involve a delicate balance between operational independence and legitimate political oversight (Corley et al., 2025).

Since the 1980s, the Home Office has purposefully extended its control over policing (Savage, 2007). Local policing has been increasingly micromanaged from the centre during this time, with the Home Office setting the majority of targets and directives (Sullivan, 1989). Funding decisions driven by the government directly influences the scope of local policing and the police's ability to engage with communities and respond to crime. Police funding has also frequently been contingent on focusing on specific crime types, such as the Safer Streets Fund which since 2020 has provided £125 million to tackle neighbourhood crime (Home Office Policy Paper, 2024) exerting further financial pressure on forces to deliver against political agendas (Reiner, 2010). Although PCCs have the collective potential “to effect a significant shift in the power balance from the centres to locality in criminal justice.... As long as the bulk of public funding for local services continues to come from the centre, it is evident that resource dependency is likely to remain potentially problematic” (Raine, 2014, p.10).

Section 2: Politics, Policing priorities & public engagement

Policing does not exist in a social, political or economic vacuum (Loader & Mulchay, 2003). “Government ministers exert considerable influence over policing priorities through policy directives, funding mechanisms, and public statements, ensuring that policing reflects contemporary political concerns” (Waddington, 1999, p.78). The involvement of party politics in policing reform has brought about a fundamental change that has an impact on how policing is performed and executed within communities (Grieve, 2024). Such changes have provided those who wish to alter the governance and accountability processes greater momentum, broad support and a more robust licence to carry out reforms (Coliandris et al., 2011).

Accountability and legislative reform have an impact on how police organisations function, which in turn affects the delicate balance between the police, the community and partnerships requiring careful attention and effort to maintain (Murray, 2017). Political changes can also significantly affect police culture by prompting reforms that necessitate shifts in organisational values, practices and identities (Loftus, 2009). The lack of a uniform standard for community intervention in police reform litigation highlights the need for a more inclusive approach that recognises the voice of those affected by police practices (O’Brien, 2020). This gap in engagement and representation can further complicate the relationship between policing and the communities they serve (Hardaway, 2021).

Government policy can directly impact upon national policing priorities, including funding, legislative reform and strategic priorities as it puts pressure on police to follow political agendas (Reiner, 2010). “The priorities of the police are not autonomously generated but are shaped through a complex interplay of political expectations, media agendas, and government strategies” (Loader & Mulchay, 2003, p. 12). Examples of the Home Office implementing a hands-on approach to policing have persisted since 2012 (Lister & Rowe, 2015). In 2015, Theresa May, the then Home Secretary, addressed concerns on the use of stop search powers by the police by saying: “Let me be absolutely clear; if ‘stops and searches’ do not continue to fall, if the use of these powers does not become more targeted, and stop-to-arrest ratios do not improve, then a Conservative Government will not hesitate to bring in primary legislation to make it happen” (May, 2015). During the two years that followed, the use of the power dramatically decreased (Home Office, 2018) marking one of the most significant examples of political pressure on operational policing in modern times (Bradford & Tiratelli, 2019).

In Scotland and Wales, devolved governments can facilitate more responsive localised policing policies, but it can also lead to a more complicated and fragmented approach, with police forces attempting to balance meeting national objectives with regional priorities (Wales Governance Centre, 2019). “Devolution has contributed to the emergence of a more plural and potentially fragmented criminal justice landscape, where local political and administrative culture mediate the implementation of central policy agendas” (Jones & Newburn, 2006, p 290). At a regional level, PCCs are essential to connect communities with policing however, there is a danger that their local policing plans have the potential to skew priorities to suit specific political

agendas (Lister, 2013). At a more localised level, councils, community leaders and MPs can also exert pressure on the police via community safety partnerships, scrutiny panels and financing for neighbourhood projects (Crawford, 1998). Crawford goes on to say that trust, legitimacy and accountability are arguably most evident at this local public participation level. Evidence has shown declining trust levels in public institutions in the UK and around the world, between 2014 and 2024, the British Election Study showed that the proportion of people with low to no trust in MPs rose from 54% to 76% (Gibbs & Mutebi, 2025). Diminished political trust can adversely affect the concept of policing by consent and necessitates a renewed focus on neighbourhood policing and addressing disproportionality in policing practices (Torrible, 2022).

Therefore, although Chief Constables are said to have operational autonomy they are accountable to elected politicians at National, Regional and Local levels and can be heavily influenced by legislative reform, strategic priorities and funding allocation (Lister, 2013). Recent years have seen a marked increase in laws that expand police powers in a way that is aligned with political agendas (Fenwick, 2022), e.g., the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act (2022). Politicians can set legislation and strategy, but they should be extremely careful not to publicly criticise, interfere with or otherwise try to influence any decisions in advance of the police implementing them (Reiner, 2010). “When ministers publicly criticise police tactics, particularly in response to high-profile incidents or protests, it blurs the line between political accountability and operational independence, raising the spectre of political interference” (Lister, 2013, p 244).

Section 3: Politics, Policing & Protests

In 2020, police brutality resulted in the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, America and was the catalyst for a global wave of Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests including widespread demonstrations in the UK (Hodkinson & Essen, 2021). The BLM movement raised global awareness of systemic racism and exerted pressure on lawmakers leading to structural reform and cultural change (Olusoga, 2021). The BLM movement illustrates that political responsiveness to protests can directly influence legislative reform and lead to substantial policy changes (Peay & McNair, 2024). The presence of general protests negatively impacts people's perception of safety, police trustworthiness and police performance, but more so for the Black American participants (Wright et al., 2021).

Although the public generally supports peaceful policing tactics, new research indicates that public opinions of protest policing depends on the circumstances and goals of the protest (Metcalf & Pickett, 2021). Police attendance at protests is often determined by the perceived threat level of the event, with larger and more confrontational protests attracting more police presence (Earl, 2003). The way that police behave and treat protesters also affects how the public views protest policing (Curtice, 2021). These values are broken when protesters are subject to excessive force or repressive measures, which can harm police legitimacy (Nagel & Lutter, 2021). Perceptions of the police are linked to public cooperation, therefore it is vital to understand, when, how much, and in what circumstances high profile police conduct cases have on public trust and legitimacy (Tyler & Huo, 2002).

Understanding public attitudes towards protest policing is of fundamental importance for police legitimacy and policy (Metcalf and Pickett, 2021). Attitudes towards the police are influenced by how people are treated during interactions, whereby unfair, disrespectful and unequal treatment can lead to more negative perceptions of police legitimacy (Walters and Bolger, 2019). The ability of the police to balance the rights of protesters and the rights of members of the public whose lives are disrupted is what determines public support for protest policing (Loader & Mulchay, 2003). Although police officers are expected to use their powers without “fear or favour” and “faithfully according to the law”, the public believe that forces do not police all demonstrations neutrally (Jackson and Bell, 2022). There have been notable differences in how police have responded to protests, including those by Extinction Rebellion and the vigil for Sarah Everard (Hymas, 2021). The British public also believes that “political interference” stops police from doing their jobs at protests” (Baldock and Loder, 2022).

As HM Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) have previously noted, “the police must not take ‘sides’ for or against protesters, nor must they be seen to make judgements regarding the value of particular protester activity” (HMIC, 2009). Where they exist, perceptions of police not acting impartially have the potential to threaten our democracy (Shiner, et al., 2018). Politicians have also been criticised for repeatedly publicly pressuring police forces to adopt different approaches to different forms of protest (Fenwick, 2022). “The politicization of protest policing places legitimacy at risk by compromising the police’s appearance of impartiality, particularly when protest responses align with government agendas to suppress dissent” (Jackson & Bell, 2022, p. 866).

Recent laws, particularly concerning protests, reflect a government increasingly willing to restrict public dissent in the name of order and national interest (Fenwick, 2022). The controversial Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act (2022) gave additional powers to the police, this expansion raises concerns about the erosion of protest rights under the guise of public order (Lennon & Walker, 2022). Protesters challenge power, police enforce political will and politicians legislate to limit unrest (Jackson & Bell, 2022). The Home Office has taken a markedly activist stance in legislating for increased control over protest policing, raising concerns over the political use of police powers (Fenwick, 2022). At stake in the “tightening nexus between protest policing and political agendas is not merely law and order, but the legitimacy of democratic governance and the protection of dissenting voices” (Jackson & Bell, 2022, p 866). They go on to argue the role of the police has come under intense scrutiny, particularly as they become more entangled in political issues and public demonstration.

Conclusion:

UK Governments have increasingly shaped policing through legislative reform, strategic priorities and budget allocation which heavily influence local police forces (Newburn, 2017). Politics has a profound effect on policing priorities and community engagement (Lister & Rowe, 2015). While National strategy provide consistency and resources, they can stifle local responsiveness and risk alienating local communities (Reiner, 2010). Overt political pressure risks undermining police legitimacy, neutrality and effectiveness particularly in communities who feel over-policed and under-consulted (Lister, 2013).

Politics, policing, and protests in the UK are in a dynamic and evolving relationship (Loader & Mulchay, 2003). The politicisation of protests can be positive in advancing causes, gaining attention and achieving legislative change (Jackson & Bell, 2022). While political influence must be balanced to avoid undermining operational independence, it plays a vital role in aligning policing with democratic values and public needs, driving accountability and reform (Jones & Newburn, 2006). However, when political influence becomes more overt, trust in policing can be eroded, particularly in minority or marginalised communities (Shiner et al., 2018). The future of British policing will depend on maintaining operational independence, rebuilding community relationships and becoming resistant to political pressure (Lister, 2013). The accompanying presentation will now expand on some of these key points.

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