

What is politics?

Professor Christina Boswell, University of Edinburgh

We often refer to something as being ‘political’, or ‘all about politics’, to mean it boils down to a power struggle between people or groups. The idea is that politics is a process of manoeuvring to assert rival interests.

Of course, this notion of competition over interests or power is very relevant to politics with a capital ‘P’, or party politics. Indeed, we might start by defining politics as a process of competitive claims-making by rival parties, with the aim of mobilising support to put these programmes into action. But beyond this broad definition, it’s useful to unpack what this competition is about and the way in which it plays out. Both of these questions will help us develop a rather more nuanced (and hopefully less cynical!) view of politics.

First, what is politics about? One of the classic answers to this question is that politics is about who gets what, when and how. On this view, politics is essentially about settling contestation over the distribution of material goods. This may have been a fair characterisation of politics in the post-World War II era – an era that saw the rolling out of progressive taxation and welfare provision by a relatively centralised state and a party political system based on a traditional left-right ideological cleavage.

Yet the notion that politics is solely, or mainly, about distribution has been challenged over the past three or more decades. The increasing salience of ‘post-ideological’ contestation around values and lifestyles suggests that politics is as much, or arguably more, about identity and culture as it is about material resources. Much of our contemporary political debate revolves around issues that are not neatly categorised as left or right, such as the environment, gender and sexual rights, immigration and security.

“Political contestation is as much about cultural identity and recognition, as it is about allocating material resources”

Another challenge to this classic view comes from the ‘ideational turn’ in studies of politics.

Scholars have shown how politics is as much about contestation over ways of framing or narrating policy problems, as it is about struggles over distribution. Of course, the two may not be easily distinguishable: different ways of framing problems may have profound consequences for distribution. But the point is that politics is a battle of ideas, in which participants attempt to control the narrative through tapping deep-rooted values and beliefs, rather than invoking objective self-interest. This recognition of the importance of narratives chimes with debates on ‘fake news’ and the potential for significant divergence in the way rival political groups frame policy issues.

The second question is about the process of politics: how are these rival claims translated into policy? In multi-party democracies, the obvious answer to this is through winning elections, which allows parties to implement their programmes.

But this rather transactional account is misleading. Electoral competition tends to create a ‘bidding war’, in which rival parties promise ever more appealing programmes. Voters often assume that these programmes can be straightforwardly implemented – as if they are consumers choosing a product. But in reality, manifesto claims are often discarded or watered down in the face of limited resources, viability, or political veto. What results is disappointment and disillusionment in democratic politics.

One of the challenges for political science, then, is to chart and understand these changes in the nature of politics. We need to understand that political contestation is as much about cultural identity and recognition, as it is about allocating material resources and to make sense of the disappointment in politics generated by the gap between the transactional view and the messier reality. Only by elucidating these trends can we develop institutions that can renew democratic debate and trust in politics. No mean feat in the current political climate, but definitely worth our best effort.