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Logics of politics



1. Introduction

Political parties and politicians use various tools to inform, mobilise and persuade voters. They take positions,¹ stress some topics while ignoring others,² try to exude competence,³ explain their political views and choices,⁴ and cultivate a public persona with certain recognisable and desirable features.⁵ These mechanisms and their direct effects on political behaviour and public opinion are extensively studied in political science. I build on this work by arguing that the effects are conditioned by different *logics of politics*. In this chapter, I begin by explaining how I conceive of logics of politics and their consequences. After that, I illustrate my argument with brief case studies of change from one logic to another. I conclude with a discussion of the practical significance of logics of politics for social democracy.

Logics of politics can be identified as individual attributes of citizens and political elites. They describe the motives people have for engaging with politics. Some people engage with politics to achieve a beneficial policy outcome (resources), some seek greater respect for an allegedly underappreciated group (recognition), and some are in it simply to win (power). Citizens engage with politics in different ways than politicians do. Citizens learn, vote and demonstrate, while politicians campaign, negotiate and decide. But citizens and politicians have the same range of motives for engaging with politics, and both groups have expectations about the prevalent and the desirable motives of their counterparts.

The logic of politics at the level of the political system emerges from the interplay of citizens and politicians. We can use knowledge about citizens' and politicians' logics of politics to determine a logic of politics as an attribute of a given polity and time. Logics of politics change over time, but not in a linear manner. They are not consecutive stages of political development. They are a constant background

condition of politics that sometimes exists in a state of stability and equilibrium. On other occasions, logics of politics change and, as a result, the nature of political competition and the outcomes of public policy change.

2. Resources, recognition and power

Different logics of politics are a feature of the political system that emerges from the interaction of elites' and citizens' logics of politics. This means that an assessment of the logic of politics at the system level, as well as specific analyses of the conditioning effects of individual-level logics of politics, need to be based on a useful concept of individual logics of politics. The identification of resources, recognition and power as the foundational logics of politics is an initial effort to link systemic theories of politics to individual motives. One important task of research will be to verify, expand and categorise lists of motives through theoretical, conceptual and empirical analysis.

I understand individual logics of politics as a personal disposition. This status is independent of any specific list of relevant motives that empirical analysis and theoretical arguments might produce. Among different types of dispositions, individual logics of politics are more stable than a mere attitude,⁶ but less stable perhaps than basic values,⁷ moral intuitions⁸ and personality.⁹ It is possible that even the stability of individual logics of politics is subject to systematic and consequential variation.

In psychology, motivation is an established factor. It identifies the intensity of a person's desire to do something.¹⁰ For instance, cognitive psychologists studying biases in decision-making distinguish the ability of individuals to perform a certain task from their motivation, that is, their inclination to do it.¹¹ Dual-process thinking in political psychology¹² fa-

cilitates a similar distinction between political sophistication – the ability to engage political information – and the motivation to engage. By contrast, motives are the reasons for why someone does something. For instance, one well-known dual-process model of motivated reasoning suggests that people engage with political information either to learn the truth or to confirm their preconceptions.¹³

Motivation and motives cannot always be neatly distinguished, and some theories of motivation consider specific motives.¹⁴ However, motives (and particularly motives for engaging politics) are not studied as often and as systematically as motivation. When motives are studied comprehensively, it is usually in the form of communicated motive. For instance, studies of accounts in interpersonal relations,¹⁵ strategic communication,¹⁶ and politics¹⁷ analyse the reasons people invoke to explain their behaviour. However, what people say about why they do the things they do might or might not be an accurate representation of their true motives.

Theories of politics address the question of motive by establishing concepts of politics derived from one particular motive (sometimes a general condition, and sometimes closer to an individual-level need), rather than describing logics of politics as a scope condition and a variable factor. For instance, Laswell conceives of politics as the struggle for resources (“who gets what, when, how”),¹⁸ while Luhmann describes it as a social system defined by varying relations to power (government versus opposition).¹⁹ Wendt outlines a comprehensive model of international politics based on the desire of states to be recognised,²⁰ and Honneth establishes the quest for recognition as people’s fundamental political motive.²¹ He argues that even conflicts over redistribution have their roots in individuals’ need for recognition.

I distinguish these three fundamental political motives – seeking power, seeking resources and seeking recognition – which are prominently discussed in theories of politics. Other than prior work, I treat

them as variable scope conditions rather than stable foundations of politics, and I investigate them as both individual-level attributes and (subsequently) foundations of system-level variation.

Power is a means to an end for seeking resources and recognition, and an end in itself. In that scenario, where power is an end rather than a means to an end, it is what is sometimes called “naked power”. Seeking resources means to engage with politics for the satisfaction of specific, achievable and measurable needs, while seeking recognition means to do it for the non-material and less clearly identifiable need of being recognised, accepted and respected. The distinction is related but not identical to the well-known distinction between the “struggle for recognition” and the “struggle for redistribution”.²²

Each of the three individual-level motives (why someone engages with politics) can be distinguished from normative logics of politics (what someone thinks about why people ought to engage with politics) and the performance of a logic of politics (what someone wants people to believe about why he or she engages with politics). Both theorising about logics of politics and empirical analysis should watch this distinction.

The same is true for other ways in which logics of politics can be further classified. One possible classification is based on the observation that different motives, as well as their performance, can occur in more moderate and more amplified versions. For instance, when two political actors adhere to seeking resources as their logic of politics, and one of them has the upper hand in a distributional conflict, the nature of conflict and its material outcomes vary between a moderate and an amplified version of the given logic of politics. In a moderate scenario, conflict is curtailed and policy outcome would entail at most mild wins for one group and mild losses for the other. By contrast, an amplified version (of the same logic of politics with the same dominant motive) would produce economic exploitation.

As another important distinction, logics of politics might vary based on whether their foundational motives target personal interests or “the interests of others”.²³ For instance, a politician might be motivated by an individual need for recognition that is concentrated on himself, the group to which he belongs, or a larger ensemble of social actors. It is easy to imagine how this variation in a motive’s target can alter politicians’ electoral appeals and their policy choices.

3. Logics of politics as a condition of political competition

The interplay between logics of politics at elite and mass levels has two important functions: it determines the logic of politics as a feature of the political system (descriptively), and it conditions the effects of various actions of political elites to mobilise, inform and persuade citizens (moderating causal effect).

As a descriptor of the political system, the varying logics of politics are ideal types: three distant corners in a Cartesian coordinate system with values ranging from zero to one identifying their relative presence. A system-level description of the logic of politics *at large* emerges from the variation captured by the strengths of the three possible logics of politics. It is conceivable that one logic of politics clearly dominates a political system, but also that the political system is fragmented into separate corners of more than trivial size, each clinging to a different logic.

As a moderating factor, different individual-level logics of politics at elite and mass levels condition elite influence on political behaviour, public opinion, and as a result the structure of political competition and the content of public policy. They can be conceived of as an interacting variable to be inserted into existing hypotheses and analyses of the direct effects of different tools of elite influence, including party

positions,²⁴ issue emphasis,²⁵ positional clarity,²⁶ competence,²⁷ political accounts,²⁸ policy information²⁹ and personality.³⁰

For instance, party positions in favour of economic redistribution are typically associated with social democratic politics, but this association depends on a logic of politics during the postwar period in which different actors universally emphasised seeking resources and engaged in conflict with moderate intensity. Once that logic changes to one centred on recognition, demands for economic redistribution become part of a bundle of measures, to achieve recognition in a moderate scenario and ideational domination in the amplified version. When the logic of politics changes from *resources* to *recognition*, the nature of political competition changes as a result. The same demands for redistribution will have a different audience and support coalition. They might also be harder to implement, and in the amplified version, they might become “sacred”,³¹ that is, less negotiable and less amenable to compromises than demands for redistribution that are driven by the need for resources.

4. Changing logics of politics

Logics of politics at the system level experience periods of equilibrium and periods of change before they settle on a new and possibly different equilibrium. One important question is why change occurs and how it is related to specific manifestations of political competition, such as positions, competence and issue emphasis. For one, once a new logic settles, it conditions specific actions of political parties; in other words, it gives them a meaning that might be different from what it was before. From this point of view, the effects of elite action change depending on a given logic of politics. In addition, elite action also causes change from one logic of politics to another. Transformative political action is the key driver of change in logics of politics, and

it can be studied by analysing the way in which transformative leaders innovate elements of the political toolbox, the composition of tools, or their implementation.

A change in logics of politics is an important occasion to explain the causes and consequences of varying logics of politics. It is also a useful moment for illustrating different logics of politics, which I will do now using four brief empirical examples of change resulting from transformative leadership.

To begin with, during the last decade, populist leaders managed to transform the logic of politics, typically from a logic of resources with moderate levels of conflict to a logic of recognition (with sometimes higher levels of conflict intensity). For instance, in the United States, the reformed Republican Party now appeals to alienated rural, male and authoritarian-minded voters. Policy offerings conditioned by this logic of politics serve the purpose of recognising and affirming group identity more than the purpose of achieving specific improvements. Voters do not judge the new Republicans based on the implementation of a policy agenda but rather the continued recognition of identity and grievance.

The logic of recognition that now arguably dominates American politics co-occurred not only with the reshuffling of partisan affiliations, but also with a growing emphasis on non-economic issues, such as abortion, the division of state and religion, nationalism, gender identity, and sexual orientation. Maybe non-economic issues are more amenable to facilitate a logic of recognition than economic issues, but I would argue that there is no necessary connection between the two. Both economic and non-economic policies can serve the purpose of *recognition* and the purpose of *resources*.

A comparison of contemporary American populism with language politics in Québec can illustrate this point. In the United States, the growing emphasis on non-economic policies during the past decade

prompted and sustained a transformation of the logic of politics toward recognition. By contrast, the pursuit of regionalism and protection of the French language by the *Parti Québécois* during the 1970s occurred within a stable logic of (resource) politics that focused on specific policy goals.

The passing of the Charter of the French Language (in the province of Québec) in 1977 is a key policy achievement of Québécois regionalism. It is the result of a mobilisation of regional and linguistic grievances against the status quo in both Québec and Canada between 1960 and 1976. During this period, politics moved gradually away from regulating distributional conflicts (which led to the expansion of the Québécois welfare state during the 1960s) and became a vehicle for achieving linguistic gains (such as the protection of the French language in the 1977 charter). However, while the contested resource changed, the logic of politics stayed the same. It remained centred on seeking resources. In this logic of politics, people want specific measurable solutions for perceived deficits through politics. By contrast, in a logic of recognition, what voters want from politics are not policies and improvements but the recognition and affirmation of their group identity.

British politics was transformed from a resource-based to a recognition-based logic of politics through the ascendance of populism in the Conservative Party. The British Labour Party could have embraced the recognition-based logic of politics to contest the parliamentary elections of 2024, but it did not and opted for a resource-based logic instead. The key tool the party and its candidate for prime minister, Keir Starmer, picked from the toolbox of political competition was an emphasis on competence and proficient management to increase the pool of resources (economic growth) and their more efficient dissemination (administrative reform). Starmer's Labour Party was criticised for lacking a long-term policy vision, and while this is true, the extent to which

Starmer managed to transform the logic of politics from the previous recognition-based approach to his new managerial approach could not be more radical. Keir Starmer is a prime example of transformative leadership changing the logic of politics from one to another.

With its majoritarian political system³² and high frequency of radical policy changes,³³ the United Kingdom might be more susceptible to experiencing transformations of the logic of politics. Another critical example of such a transformation is the leadership of Clement Attlee, who managed to win the parliamentary elections in July 1945 against Winston Churchill, credited by voters for being a legend and hero, who played a major part in the very survival of the country. The logic of politics during his time in office was quite close to the principle of “naked” power, but Attlee managed to get himself elected by emphasising resource-based politics in a program of economic reconstruction, state planning and social provision. He transformed the logic of politics from one centred on “power” to one centred on “resources”.

5. Lessons for (social democratic) politicians and parties

Why should politicians and political parties – social democrats in particular – care about logics of politics? First, the possibility of fundamental change in logics of politics caused by the actions of political elites should remind social democratic politicians to be open to new ideas. It is a cautionary tale that the nature of political conflict can fundamentally change, and that it is better to be the change than to be swept away by it. Second, using social science tools as well as conversation³⁴ to detect existing and changing logics of politics can offer valuable insights. Understanding deeply a given logic of politics and its transformation makes it easier not just to act, but also to react when necessary.

Third, the emphasis of my argument on fundamental motives should remind social democrats to listen (deeply) to their voters. Politicians should try to understand not only voters' complaints and demands, but also their underlying motives, that is, why they express these complaints and demands.

Fourth, understanding one's own motive for engaging with politics can help politicians gain authenticity. Politicians surprised by the rise of a new logic of politics might lag behind what they perceive as a trend. However, as Keir Starmer demonstrated, not following a trend (in his case, the politics of recognition) can lead to positive outcomes, especially if the alternative would be to embrace a logic of politics that does not suit the politician's own persona. Politicians and political parties have tough decisions to make when the demand for a certain logic of politics leads in a direction that is not consistent with what they are able to offer.

Fifth, politicians can find creative ways to negotiate and integrate different logics of politics across various areas of political practice. For instance, communicating "respect" as the cornerstone of their political approach helped German social democrats win the federal parliamentary elections in 2021. The expression of respect in political communication clearly satisfied voters' need for recognition (one logic of politics). Once in government, the party implemented policies, such as raising the minimum wage and keeping pensions stable, that were designed to translate the principle of respect into measurable material improvements (satisfying voters' need for resources, another logic of politics).

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