

## Make Politics Interesting in Your Fictional World

"Politics." Say the word and you'll get an instant reaction from people. If you're throwing that word or concept around in your book, a lot of people instantly go "Boring!" and tune it out. If you're setting up politics in a role-playing game, the reaction is often the same. Your minority of bright-eyed intriguers might say, "Ooo, tell me more," while your majority of sword-slingers are edging for the door.

Why the "run away!" reaction to politics in a fictional setting? I think there are a few reasons for this. One is the state of politics in our real-life contemporary times. Partisanship and power manipulations leave a bad taste in a lot of people's mouths, and they carry this distaste over to the general concept of "politics" wherever they encounter it.

There is also the perception--sometimes well-founded--that politics bog a story or game down to no good purpose. In fiction, politics (or politically related events) often **do** bog things down. They are presented in a boring manner, or as an info dump, slowing and sometimes complicating the story unnecessarily. In games, too much info about politics can likewise slow the game or divert energy and attention from more "entertaining" activities.

But I put it to you that these issues arise because of the manner in which politics is being used in the fictional setting. That is to say, it is the manner of execution, not the existence of politics in and of itself, that is the problem. Use politics more deftly, integrate it more completely into the plot or theme or daily encounters, and what seems "boring" or even irritating as a vague concept can be transformed.

Suddenly politics can become a compelling challenge to adventurers, provide unexpected drama for readers, or be the secret backbone driving entire plot structures and adventure hooks.

Here are some ideas on how to accomplish that.

### How Politics Work

First we need a better understanding of the nature of politics and role it plays in a society. I'm not going to write a political science tome here (happy googling if that's what you're up for), but I will reduce this to a few guidelines helpful for this aspect of creating a fictional world.

#### Cooperation, Conflict, and Power Dynamics

In every group where people work together or must reconcile different views about what the group is doing, there is a dynamic tension revolving around power. Who has it, and what are they doing with it? This tension can be managed either cooperatively or through conflict (and often a mix of both in varying measures).

When cooperation rules, we see things like alliances, friendly agreements, possibly much input and varying viewpoints heard on a subject under consideration. Sincere effort is made to reach a compromise that reconciles competing interests.

When conflict rules, we see contentious exchanges that lead to escalating tensions: an Us versus Them mentality shows up where in-group preferences are given priority over those of the minority or outsiders or foreigners. Conflict-based resolution devolves into contests of might, whether that is through obvious force or hidden intrigue and manipulation. The victor in the conflict has the power and gets to dictate or at least disproportionately influence courses of action.

The power dynamics of cooperation and conflict (and often the struggle between these two different modalities) is what underlies all politics. Put another way, politics is one method by which the dynamic tension between different interests and power factions is worked out.

### **Politics and Power: the Tip of the Iceberg**

The public display of politics is just the tip of the iceberg. Because politics (of whatever stripe) are the outworking of deeper power dynamics, what is visible to the public is normally just the surface actions of a whole body of complex interactions, most of which occur behind the scenes and (relatively) out of the public eye.

If public politics truly impacts the underlying mechanisms, then we think of politics as effective and deeply connected to what is going on in a population. On the other hand, the less that politics really affects the hidden power mechanisms, the more it can be said to be (or is actively perceived to be) "for show." This leads to what we commonly call "political theater": the show of politics put on to legitimate power factions and make it appear that groups (like, for instance, minorities in certain democracies) are playing a role in politics when in fact they are completely ineffectual.

This is not limited to modern times, of course. The dynamic itself has existed throughout history, just taking on different trappings according to the era.

### **Manipulation, Hidden and Otherwise**

A "political machine" (as we have come to call a political organization that is very skilled at influencing things) is adept at putting on politics-as-set-dressing, while manipulating the levers of power very deftly and for the most part completely out of the view of the public or power elites who could interfere with the process. A political machine elevates "politics as set dressing" to a fine art.

While this term evolved out of machinations in democratic societies ([Tammany Hall](#) remains a dark role model for machine politics), the concept of manipulating power behind the scenes while pacifying the public or other power elites has been around for eons. Monarchies and

theocracies are not immune to the basic dynamic here. An effective political machine manipulates power in service to the goal of one group of elites at the expense of others, and keeps onlookers either happy enough or intimidated enough that they do not interfere with the process. Cardinal Richelieu ran a notable political machine, as did various emperors and governors of China, the pharaohs of Egypt, and certainly the leaders of ancient Rome.

## Ways to Approach Politics in a Fictional World

With the above factors in mind, then, here are my suggestions for making politics interesting in a fictional setting.

### 1. Who are the Players?

You the world creator must understand the interest groups and factions that are movers and shakers in your world. Who are they? Are they cooperating or are they in conflict? If they're butting heads over something, what, specifically, is that bone of contention?

These factors are the birthplace of the power struggles and power dynamics that will shape all political interactions in your world. For your world, you need to know:

a) Who knows who? What are the networks of association and connection between the power players?

b) Figure out what these players have put in place to help them exercise and control power. What structures have they grown? How are they organized or how do they associate when not doing politics in the public eye? Is there a "secret cabal" involved? It is just a nobleman or two meeting at each other's manor houses? Is there a network of spies and political appointees in place to support them?

### 2. What's *Really* Going On

At its deepest level, people support one thing or another out of emotionally driven interest. Choices are made, policies are set, and movements grow from an individual's stance or the synergy (at the very start) of only two people working together. When numbers are small and the group intimate, people will often be frank about what drives them, but as the group or audience grows, they speak more to general principles and rallying cries, and not so much to their personal (and often secret) agendas.

This means that the *real* reason that things are happening is a truth that is usually known to only a very few people at the heart of the matter. There can be multiple layers of knowledge and involvement, and almost all of these take place at that "behind the scenes", hidden layer of power and politics. When it becomes politics in the public eye, the real reasons and rationale that underlie decisions are often never given, or are said in a slanted way calculated to gather support.

For your fictional world, this has some implications:

a) What is going on that the public can see is rarely the full story

b) Public statements about policies or events will almost never cite the unvarnished truth. Rather, it will be slanted in a way that justifies actions, or quells opposition, or otherwise makes the exercise of power or politics easier.

c) There are only a few spiders in the center of the web. Know who they are. Yes they may be supported by staff, conspiracies, or birthright, but there are usually no more than a handful of individuals who are really the architects of a movement or political action, be it ever so vast on the surface. These "inner circle" masters of power dynamics will be drawn from your "players" list (1b), but will be only a subset of those.

### 3. What is the Public Seeing?

Rather than go on about the hidden machinations--which your characters are unlikely to know anyway--simply ask yourself, "what is the public seeing?" You now know the power players and the issues they are contending with. You have an idea what resources or power structures are contending over these things.

Ask yourself, what part of this will be visible to the public, and what does that look like? Is it happy town council meetings and never-contested votes? Is it heated debates in parliament? Is it personal insult and duels breaking out at the king's privy council? Is there a popular movement involved, with protests on the streets or a Reign of Terror beheading the nobility? Or perhaps everything seems benign, and it is all "business as usual"--until characters run afoul of one of the hidden threads of power. In which case, again: what will the *characters* see, if not the general public? And characters will see even more interesting things if they have ties to one of the power factions themselves.

Here's where you really need to put on your thinking cap. Happy invention. ;) And as bonus reading, [Machiavelli's "The Prince"](#) might go down really good right about here, or to help get you to this point. He's the man who gave us the term "machiavellian," for very good reason.

### 4. How Does this Impact Your Characters?

When it comes to events unfolding in your setting, politics are not something happening at a remove--if they are, then yes, you may have blundered into the "boring! too much info!" area of setting creation. Instead, make politics personal and immediate.

It is not about the cardinal's reformation of tax schedules for the kingdom to finance a war. Instead, it's about the tax collector's unexpected visit and huge assessment levied on the character's home and belongings, and the one week she now has to pay it all.

It is not about the movement of displaced cottage industry laborers trying to destroy factory machinery. It's about your hero getting caught in the riot where the magistrate called out the military to attack and kill Luddites threatening a cotton mill.

**Ask yourself:**

- a) What is the underlying power struggle about? (It may well be something the public is oblivious to.)
- b) What kinds of conflicts might emerge from this power struggle?
- c) How might this affect daily life?
- d) What kind of unusual circumstances might happen as a result?
- e) How can I get my characters caught up in this situation or its fallout, or the machinations behind the scenes?

Once you know the answer to those questions, you'll have great new ways to drive your (sub)plots, hook your characters, and generally complicate life in a fun way for all concerned.