What Does It Mean to Politicize Science?

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This paper explores how different conceptions of politics shape academic and public debate on the politics of science. Some scholars claim that science and technology are essentially political, others categorize various ways that science and technology are political, and some argue that only actors and not analysts should determine what counts as politics. Ambiguity arises when scholars suggest both that science is essentially political and that actors continually recreate boundaries between science and politics. Further ambiguities appear when commentators fail to distinguish between science as political (adjective) and science as a site of politics (noun), between latent politics and actual politics, and between political activities and political spheres. The paper argues that the politics of science and technology is best studied with concepts and methods that facilitate dialog between actors and analysts, so that their respective conceptions of politics become more explicit and inform each other. The paper also sketches a provisional conception of politics, according to which science and technology become sites of politics whenever they become intertwined with relations of power, conflict, and pressure for collective action. Other conceptions of politics remain plausible for particular purposes, but the view of politics defended here has two key advantages: it illuminates the relation between the politicization and democratization of science, and it facilitates empirical research on the politics of science in democratic societies.

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