

Which theoretical
perspective of politics
is most persuasive?



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This essay will highlight that pluralism is the most persuasive political state theory as it reflects democracy and equality within the state. I will indicate why I am persuaded most by pluralism by highlighting its ontological and epistemological position, pluralistic beliefs on the diffusion of power, plurality of groups and the presence of pluralist issues, such as multiculturalism, in our current society. This essay will go on to explain that despite being persuaded most by pluralism, like all theories, it has downfalls, for example its limited belief in faces of power. In order to highlight weaknesses in pluralist state theory I will draw on Marxism and elitism, which are becoming increasingly persuasive as their presence in society escalates.

Pluralists " argue that there are essential differences of 'being' that provide the foundations upon which social life is built" (Marsh & Furlong, 2002, p. 18). This statement reflects pluralists as ontologically foundational as they recognise the importance of social interaction in order for a state to function efficiently. Elitists and Marxists, on the other hand, are anti-foundational by believing nothing is definitive as everything can be altered. Ontologically, pluralism's foundational belief is more persuasive as they identify that social differences in norms and belief shape our society; they recognise that change occurs at a local level but in order to maintain stability diversity must remain at the base of society.

In order to explain behaviour pluralists " establish causal relationships between social phenomena" emphasising their positivist epistemological positioning (Marsh & Furlong: 2002: 20). Positivists promote unity within a society to maximise equality and prevent power being unfairly dispersed.

Realism, which includes Marxism and elitism, is the opposite to positivism in <https://assignbuster.com/which-theoretical-perspective-of-politics-is-most-persuasive/>

terms of epistemological positioning. Realists concentrate on government and power rather than society in order to focus on their own national interests instead of the interests of society (Ferraro: mytholyke. edu). They disregard society from political processes in order to act in the interest of the state rather than the people; for example Marxism focuses on individuals who want to maximise capital for their own benefits. This highlights that pluralist's foundational position is more persuasive as, unlike realism, it focuses on the interests of the people, as society and politics are interrelated.

Pluralism is perceived as instrumentalist as it sees 'the state as an instrument rather than a set of structures' (Hay: 2002: 174) meaning pluralists do not regard the state as 'a uniform and primary body in itself, but rather as a society of societies' (McLennan: 1995: 33). Pluralists believe the state's responsibility is to allow society to voice its beliefs by placing citizens at the heart of the institution; rather than a centralized state based purely on politics and governments (Stears cited in Smith: 2006: 24). The pluralist view of the state is more socially inclusive than Marxist and elitist state theory as they believe groups and the diffusion of power within society provides the foundations of the state and politics (Smith: 2006: 23). This is juxtaposed by elitist state theory which believes 'power is concentrated in the state and citizens have little or no impact on policy decision' (Kavanagh, Richards, Smith & Geddes: 2006: 25). Elitism and Marxism, like pluralism, see the state as instrumentalist, however, whilst pluralists believe the state to be an instrument used by society to maintain equality and democracy, Marxism and elitism see the state as 'an instrument in the hands of the ruling class for

enforcing and guaranteeing the stability of the class structure itself' (Sweezy cited in Hay: 2006: 61). Here the state is observed as a vital nodal point in societal functioning as elites hold onto power and use it to influence and imprint their wants on society. Pluralism's view of the state is the most persuasive as it grants society with the ability to bring about change instead of elites dominating society, politics and the economy.

Over the years Pluralism has adapted to social changes and academic critiques in order to advance in the political arena by offering a more realistic view of society and politics (Smith: 2006: 37). All three pluralist models - classical, reformed (elite) and neo-pluralism - acknowledge the dispersion of power between a variety of institutions and interest groups, Mouffe states that a pluralist society is 'the articulation of a multiplicity of identities' (cited in Buckler: 2002: 190). By allowing group plurality it encourages the dispersion of power, preventing 'a single group or interest to dominate society' which is common in elitism and Marxism (McAnulla: 2002: 278). Pluralists believe the dispersion of power between a variety of groups is key to a democratic state as it is the 'building block of politics and the state' (Smith: 2006: 23). It allows non-governmental organisations, media and political parties to voice their beliefs in a society which appreciates the importance of an eclectic range of attitudes and beliefs. Group plurality and the interests of the citizens are key in maintaining a diverse socio-culture and preventing elitists dominating society.

Reformed and neo-pluralists have identified that in certain areas, such as the business sector, power may become more concentrated as the influence businesses hold over the government increases and state policies are

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created in consideration of 'key business sectors' (McLenna: 1995: 36).

Lindblom, a neo-pluralist, saw 'business as not just having power through its lobbying ability but having structural power' (cited in Smith: 2006: 28). In today's society, globalisation has led to a rise in the power and influence of businesses as governments recognise that trade and business relations assist their state as they reap the social, political and economic benefits. The acknowledgement of the concentration of power in certain areas augments pluralism's persuasive power as reformed and neo-pluralists highlight adaptations made to the classical model in order to make it more precise. This belief sways me to believe pluralism is the most persuasive theory by offering a true representation of society's attitudes and beliefs.

Pluralists believe that power is located within society, however, elitists believe it originates in the political arena and Marxists in the economic arena. Pluralism provides the most appropriate and democratic arena for power as it relies on the people in society to voice their beliefs and influence politics; representing national interests rather than self-interest (McAnulla: 2002: 278). Marxism, however, believes politics and economics are interlinked, whilst pluralists 'are careful to separate politics and economic power' as they identify that all economically powerful actors do not automatically have political power (Kavanagh, Richards, Smith & Geddes: 2006: 24). Marxists think that economic power equals political power but this is not the case in a democratic world. This places pluralism in a more persuasive position as it recognises that capital is not necessary in order to gain power.

Pluralism is visible in society by the presence of multi-level governance, meaning 'there is not a single centre of government but many, which link together as a whole variety of actors, be they at the local, national or supranational level' (Smith: 2006: 31). Multi-level governance allows greater, more influential social involvement with the government and politics. This reiterates pluralists belief in the dispersion of power as it prevents the concentration of political power and decision-making in one political arena, instead disperses it between local government constituencies (Widdicombe report cited in Wilson: 2003: 270). Local government is important to pluralists as they believe it is the most comprehensive method of social involvement in politics by reflecting the political beliefs of citizens in peripheral areas. Multi-level governance is present in order to represent the people, however, this is contrary to the views of elitists and Marxists who are self-interested actors and do not share similar beliefs about the dispersion of political power.

In elitist theory there is a clear dichotomy between classes, Evans states:

In all societies... two classes of people appear - a class that rules and a class that is ruled. The first class, always the less numerous, performs all political functions, monopolizes power and enjoys the advantages that power brings, whereas the second, the more numerous class, is directed and controlled by the first. (2006: 39)

Elitists believe politics is characterised by elite domination; individuals who do not communicate and form relationships with society, instead create legislation favourable only to elites. They see the state as consisting of 'us' -

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elites - and 'them' - citizens without social or political standing - instead of recognising that to achieve an efficient and democratic state the two classes must be inter-related. This lack of communication between politics and society is detrimental to the existence of elitism as citizens want their voice heard in the political arena and without multi-level governance this is difficult to achieve.

Self-interested Marxists also fail to recognise the importance of multi-level governance as 'their concern is not the public good, but increasing budgets because this increases their power, status and job security' (Kavanagh, Richards, Smith & Geddes: 2006: 28). Marxists are concerned with legislation which maximises economic returns for the government, for example income tax, rather than focusing on social or political issues. The elitist and Marxist conceptions of a governing elite and ruling class are very similar 'as both concepts highlight socio-economic and political inequalities between rulers and the masses' (Evans: 2006: 39). However, both are undermined by their lack of attention to the presence of politics in the social arena, they disregard citizens as both theories see them as underdogs to political and capital elites. Pluralism, on the other hand, recognises the importance of society's voice in political proceedings, justifying the existence of multi-level governance. The presence of multi-level governance, therefore, is evidence why I believe pluralism to be a persuasive theory - the people come first.

Pluralists encourage group plurality not only in politics but also in everyday society. Multiculturalism 'is based on the idea that no single set of norms or values should dominate a society', therefore, reinforcing the pluralist belief of equality and power dispersion (Smith: 2006: 35). In a multicultural society, <https://assignbuster.com/which-theoretical-perspective-of-politics-is-most-persuasive/>

a range of cultures, attitudes and beliefs from a variety of ethnic backgrounds become integrated within the community, producing an impartial framework without elite domination (Modood: 2005: 109). Over the years, Britain has been witness to a growing number of cultures in our country, welcoming and incorporated them into our own, such numbers have arrived that we can no longer state that whites are Britain's elite. For example, London is one of the most cosmopolitan cities in the world as it is home to '300 languages, 50 non-indigenous communities with populations of 10, 000 or more... almost a third of the city's residents were born outside England (2. 2m)' (guardian. co. uk: 2005). Pluralism believes multiculturalism within Britain highlights the importance of social diversity and the acceptance of a different cultures and norms in order to maintain equality, thus offering concrete evidence for pluralism being the most persuasive state theory.

Like all theories there are weaknesses in pluralist state theory, to highlight these I will now critique pluralism with elitism and Marxism. The most controversial issue surrounding pluralism is their view of power. Classical pluralists believe in the 'first face of power' which states that power is witnessed by an individual, so can therefore be measured. It was the Classical pluralist, Robert Dahl who defined the first face as " A had power over B to the extent that s/he can 'get B to do something B would not do otherwise'" (cited in Hay: 1997: 46). The first face of power is known as the decision-making process as the decision made by A consequently influences the actions of B. Pluralists believe that powerful actors 'are those whose

opinion holds sway in the decision-making arena, whether a parliament, cabinet or diplomatic negotiation' (Hay: 2002: 172).

Elitists believe that there are two faces and that decision-making is not the only means of attaining power. The pluralist 'first face' provides the foundations of elitism's 'second face' of power. This face was created by Bachrach and Baratz who recognised that power could be gained through the process of agenda-setting, not only decision-making (Hay: 1997: 46).

Agenda-setting occurs when A sets an agenda leaving B with a restricted number of options in the decision-making process. Bachrach and Baratz believed that the process of agenda-setting would 'broaden the concept of power, and with it the political' as pluralism's 'first face' restricted these (Hay: 2002: 175). Pluralists describe power as explicit as it can be easily observed, the elitist 'second face', however, is more implicit and unobservable as it depicts how power can be handled by A in an attempt to alter B's decision.

In 1971, a 'third face' of power was created by Steven Lukes, a Marxist. His 'third face' recognises a person's ability to manipulate a person's wants through the 'mechanisms of institutionalised persuasion' via a process known as 'preference shaping' (Lukes cited in Hay: 2002: 179). Marxists accept that it is not always possible to observe power, so focus their ideas around the second and third faces of power. This highlights weaknesses in the pluralist view of power as they fail to consider the possibility of power being manipulated or concealed within society. This means the pluralist view of power is not the most persuasive, instead the Marxist view can be seen as

most persuasive as it identifies unobservable power and acknowledges the ability to manipulate power (Hay: 1997: 47).

Pluralism can be seen as an idealised view of the state where everyone is equal, a view which is not wholly realistic in today's world. Many believe that Marxism and elitism provide more accurate representations of the world today due to globalisation. Whilst pluralism is preferred by citizens as they feel it gives them hope for political and social equality, in reality Marxist and elitist beliefs control our society due to a select number of institutions and actors dominating decision-making arenas. Globalisation is vastly important for global trade and development, however, it is run by elites purely to maximise capital; the wants of the people are not considered. In recent years elitism has paved the way for globalisation as we have seen the 'emergence of new elites at the transnational (e. g. multinational corporations), supranational (e. g. the European Union bureaucratic elite) and international (e. g. international policy-making elites associated with global financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank) levels' (Evans: 2006: 40). These institutions are supervised by elites who have the power to dictate our lives from afar. A key example of elitist domination is the Lisbon Treaty recently ratified by the European Union (EU) which many believe to be undemocratic as it limits member states sovereignty. Due to the Treaty, the European Parliament, Council, Commission and the Court have the power to make decisions which member states have to abide to by EU law (Maurer: 1999: 3). The decision-making process here is centred around EU institutions and left in the hands of elites

who dictate laws to member states; the citizens lack the power or influence to instigate change.

One could say that elitist globalisation requires aspects of pluralism, as in order for these institutions to operate a network must exist allowing co-operation between parties. These institutions recognise the need for a support network in order to maximise efficiency, a global elite network is thus created in order to 'maintain its power base in society' (Evans: 2006: 40). It is clear to see how elites, whether political or business, can dominate global decision-making via globalisation, globalisation has aided elite domination by restricting society's hold on politics.

Globalisation can be interpreted, not only through elitist beliefs, but also Marxist beliefs as globalisation is the 'internationalisation of capital' (Jessop cited in Hay: 2006: 77). Globalisation centres around trade as trade generates capital accumulation which is of primary importance to capitalists. Engels stated 'the modern state... is essentially a capitalist machine' as maximising profit was the only aspect of the state deemed important (Cited in Hay: 2006: 62). Marxists highlight the influence self-interested capitalists have had on the globalisation process by centralizing economic greed, rather than considering the political or social needs of the state. Marxist theory can therefore, offer an accurate analysis of globalisation as capitalists, like the elites, are working against the people in an attempt to fulfil their own needs. This highlights that Marxism and elitism, despite disadvantaging society, are more persuasive theories in reality due to the impact and influence globalisation is having on the world.

Elitists believe 'rulers of society are engaged in an ongoing process of competitive elitism' (Evans: 2006: 40). Competitive elitism allows elites to compete against each other in order to achieve something they other party may also want, for example politicians see the electoral arena 'like a market and have to attract the greatest possible number of votes' (Kavanagh, Richards, Smith & Geddes: 2006: 27). At face value, politicians want to appear to consider the wants of society in order to win votes, however, in reality they do not care as much about the people as they appear to; winning the election and beating their opponent is more important. A prime example of competitive elitism occurring in society is the upcoming elections as each party is focussing on the oppositions negatives rather than what they will offer the country if they win the election. This is an attempt to smear their rivals campaign by highlighting negatives within their agendas, for example, the Conservative Party's campaign posters for the 2010 elections mar Gordon Brown's actions whilst Prime Minister with headlines such as 'I doubled the tax rate for the poor. Vote for me.' And 'I took billions from pensions. Vote for me.' (conservatives. com: 2010). Actions such as these undertaken by political actors emphasise competitive elitism within politics; the national interest takes second place to the wants of the political elites. Competitive elitism highlights the occurrence of elitism within society as elites are self-interested and want to maximise power, despite degrading politics and society in the process.

I conclude that pluralism is the most persuasive political state theory due to its belief in the dispersion of power and group plurality enhancing equality, both socially and politically, making the state more democratic as the voices'

of the people are heard. However, emancipation of the people has not yet succeeded as pluralism is seen as too idealistic, instead elitism and Marxism remain in control and restrict society. Globalisation is fuelling these state theories as institutions and actors are too concerned with their own interests to consider others. This essay concludes, therefore, that despite pluralism comprising of idealistic qualities there are aspects of it in today's society, which gives society hope for the future. An equal and democratic pluralist state is within reach providing globalisation and the actions of elites are monitored.