

Pluralist and ruling elite accounts of power



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Pluralist Power Political

Compare and contrast the pluralist and ruling elite accounts of political power

This essay will discuss the above question and analyse the relevance of similarities and differences to the modern political system. It will look at empirical evidence from a number of pluralist and elite writers and explain the weaknesses in both arguments.

The differentiation of the distribution of political power between the pluralist and elitist accounts is relatively simple to determine loosely. The elite approach argues that there is one group which dominates in a political system, although that class is not necessarily determined by the economic system. Pluralist theories state that political power should be regarded as analytically distinct from economic power and, in contrast to elitists, power is not concentrated in the hands of a single group, but widely dispersed among a variety of groups and actors. ¹

The central position of pluralist power is that all citizens have a chance to become politically active through either individual or group action. Views are represented in policy making not only through representative elections but also through the participatory mechanism of group politics. The process of decision making is merely the outcome between different groups, with government institutions acting as a mediator. No group tends to dominate this process because of the plurality of political resources. The diverse base of group power means that if a group has little money, it may call on public opinion to sustain its views in the decision making process. The electoral

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mechanism assumes that government doesn't persistently favour one group as bias alienates the government from the rest.

The government acts as a broker, independent from interest, and responds to pressure from different sides. The outcome of the policy making process is an even gamble - all win some bets and lose others, in contrast to the elitist view that the odds are stacked in favour of the house. ²

Mosca used the term ruling class to denote the permanent group of organised rulers in society, but his use of the term 'class' creates an element of confusion in that his ruling class is very different in its function and characteristics from those of the Marxists. Power exercised by Mosca's ruling class occurs from the organisational capacity of the ruling minority. This is the basis for their power and the characteristics that distinguishes them from the powerless minority. ³

Criticism of classical elite theorists by writers such as Meisel centres on the notion that the ruling elite is claimed to be a class. ⁴ It is an important idea in Pareto's theory and Mosca founds the power of the elite on their greater organisational capacity. The three functions that Meisel identifies Mosca's elite must have - consciousness, coherence and conspiracy, mean that such an elite should be able to maintain itself purely by its organisational capacity, its ability to adapt to new forces and its dynamic positive relationship expressed through the rule of law.

The elite in a modern sense connotes a looser group of individuals, each exercising power and united by one or more factors such as wealth, social

origin or achievement. What remains of classical elite theory is the powerlessness of the masses and the rational unifying capacities of the minority groups.

Power pluralists such as Dahl and Polsby argue that a pluralist approach is far more rigorous than the elitist model when determining the distribution of power in political systems. Power is defined as an ability to influence policy outcomes rather than having a reputation for power. Studies of power distribution should be analysed using empirical methods finding those groups responsible for the decision making process

Dahl contended that ' although there are many different approaches and theories of power, so long as we can subject the hypothesis contained within these thesis' to empirical investigation then it will be possible to arrive at an all embracing definition of power'.⁵

The pluralist approach stresses a need to look at actual decision making. A study by Dahl in 1965 looked at electoral apportionment, urban development and education to see who tended to dominate. The conclusion showed that it was impossible to identify a single powerful elite. Decision making tended to be a complex bargaining process between a plurality of different sectors.

Pluralist theory has not been unchallenged by elite theory. Elite theories emphasise the stability and survival of political rule through the visible exercise of power. The difference of perspective results in research methods which are more approximate in their definition of power distribution.

' Power involves relationships between individuals and groups, both controllers and controlling. It is a relatively constant factor in social relationships with policies as a variable and structured on national and local levels'.⁶

Elitists argue that expressed or perceived political preferences can be distinguished from objective interests. But this is because of the influence of the dominant class circulating a political formula, as Mosca put it. In this approach such perceived intent is the product of a power relationship rather than the pluralist approach of being the basis for understanding these relationships.

In elite theory, where perceived interests differ from objective interests, evidence of the dominant class shaping the values of those whose power is exercised can be seen. Pluralists ignore the concept of objective values as it suggests that group goals can be determined from information of the social or economic nature of the group. They argue that such goals are vague and contradictory and difficult to determine.⁷

Marxist theories have tended to show a link between economic and political power. The notion that there is a political authority which can be separate from economic relationships is one which runs through Western politics. Aristotle argued that the polis allowed free men to take decisions, for the good of the citizens and not for the private advantage of the powerful.⁸

Hegel distinguishes between the public authority of the state as distinct from the relationships that prevail in civil society.⁹

This view is widely shared in pluralist political science that since power is a type of influence, a power holder may owe his power to his wealth, ability, reputation or any favourable position with regard to any value. ¹⁰

Elite theory argues that the basis for assessing political power lies in the assessment of the degree in which particular groups can produce policy outcomes which are in their interests. Pluralist approaches reject the idea that an explanation can be based on the argument of the policy outcome with the interests of a certain group or class. Rather they argue the need to establish that a group consciously wants a particular policy outcome and take successful measures to secure it. ¹¹

Just as important as the plurality of resources, pluralist approaches stress the ability to transform the potential of those resources into the actual exercise of power. It's not enough for a leader to be popular; he must have strategies to exercise his influence. In this sense power is not something that individuals and groups do; rather it is something gained through the deployment of political resources in order to achieve objectives. ¹²

Power in pluralist analysis, is not just a property given or denied on the basis of social or economic position. The link between these and political power is weakened by the fact that strong political resources can coexist with weak political influence through the influence of inappropriate strategies.

Like elite theory, pluralist theory doesn't assume that those in formal positions of authority are necessarily those with political power. Those without policy making authority may be highly influential, and vice-versa.

Where elitists differ from pluralist approach is that they argue that the influence of outside powers of government is limited to those exercised by specific economic and social classes. Pluralists stress that the types of pressures on government come from a wider array of different types of interest. Whilst they cannot suggest that there is a perfect distribution of power in government decision making, pluralists argue that more groups are involved in decision making than elitists, who claim that a particular class or group has a monopoly of influence. ¹³

A study in 1980 showed the style of policy making in the UK. When drafting legislation based upon engineering reports, the government consulted over 500 groups, 16 of which were deemed to be influential. ¹⁴

There is now a clear distribution between the two strands of modern elite theory. Mainstream elitism refers mainly to the interaction and function of ruling and strategic elites, and though it differs in emphasis from earlier theories, the normative assumptions are not that different from classical elitist like Pareto. The second strand of elite theory is neo-elitism, and is highly critical of both mainstream elitism and pluralism, which it regards as a revision of democratic theory. ¹⁵ Its main issue with pluralism is over the community power debate, which had implications for the definition of power.

There are many criticisms of pluralism who object to its normative implications. ' Elitist ideals can logically contrast with facts without being invalidated by empirical research which does not in any obvious way call for its general revision'. ¹⁶

It is argued that pluralists ignore the 'face of power' which contains the scope of decision-making to safe issues.

The main weakness of the pluralist approach to power is that it is a description instead of an analysis of power relationships. This has been recognised because, if true, the elitist idea of the importance of non-observable influences and constraints from one group would have important repercussions for the way that western political systems are characterised.

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Elite theory is still opposed to class analysis at several levels, arguing the interests and power of elites are not based on economic factors. Elitism lends itself to a concentration on organisational identification of power. These differences in orientation separate elitism and pluralism, rather than the argument over the distribution of power. Power is not central to elite analysis; it is given in a certain way.¹⁸ The main criticism of elitism is that it assumes what it should be proving - the distribution of power.

The other major similarity between the two theories is the idea of democratic elitism. This suggests that modification of democratic theory accepts that most citizens do not take part in politics. It argues that a number of elites who are forced to compete for power through public support, as is the case with party politics.

The most influential democratic elitists were Schumpeter and Dahl, who argued that elites could exist whilst democracy was in place. They also stress that elites do exist but are in control of different policy areas.

Schumpeter stated that the key to democracy was the existence of the mechanism which forces elites to compete for support and that the majority of citizens aren't capable of taking part in governing.¹⁹

Dahl analysed these ideas forming the argument that politics is a ployarchy, essentially meaning rule by a number of elites. This reworking of pluralism into pluralist elitism is the synthesis of the two theories.

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¹⁴ J. Richardson, *Governing Under Pressure* (Oxford: Robertson, 1979) P126

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