What Is Power?

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The preceding essay discussed the relationship between politics and power. Its focus was on political power. This essay gives more focused attention to the concept of power by providing a brief overview of various perspectives on power. The goal of this essay is to find concepts that clarify and explain power. Power has been defined as "the ability of A to somehow affect the behavior of B." How then does A get B to do what B would not otherwise do? Each power perspective offers its answer to this question.

Power is a central but elusive concept in the study of politics. While we might argue that power relationships are involved in almost every aspect of human relations, this essay will confine itself to the examination of power in political relations. An important part off this discussion is to ascertain possible determinants of political power, including money, expertise and knowledge, official position, status, prestige, and the like. Stated differently, what social, economic, and political factors inform how power is exercised?

While some sources of political power make the concept clearly observable, the boundaries of political power are ambiguous. We know that the President of the United States is a powerful actor. But consider the university classroom. Who has power in this setting? Is it the instructor or the institutional framework which distinguishes higher education? Is the instructor simply an "agent" of the institution? This ambiguity makes the study of power an especially difficult undertaking.

Four theoretical perspectives of power—pluralism, elitism, coalitional bias, and political economy-are discussed below. A thorough understanding of these perspectives is not necessary for purposes of this essay. They will be treated at their most elementary level. Each of these perspectives has some plausibility, but none by itself can explain the whole of power. Each perspective contributes to understanding how A gets B to do what B would not otherwise do. Taken together, we get a more complete picture of power.

The main point to be made here is that neither of the four perspectives can be said to be a theory of power in an absolute sense. Each view engages its study of power at different levels of inquiry. Each view has its respective unit of analysis and assumptions that "bias" the formation of questions intended to inform its analysis. In other words, how one goes about studying power has a lot to do with what one will find. The levels of power to be briefly discussed below are a result of differently conceived notions of power. Clearly, power can be defined in different ways and there will always be disagreement about which level of analysis captured the most far-reaching definition of power. However, pluralist, elitist, coalitional bias, and political-economy perspectives reach a common ground of agreement by accepting as fundamental to the notion of power that A in some way affects the behavior of B.

We should keep in mind that the exercise of power is not neutral. If politics is the struggle for who gets what, when, and how, then power determines who wins and loses in this struggle. We will find that there are certain patterns of bias in U.S. politics, and wealth plays an important role in understanding political power. But who cares if there are poor people? Nothing is perfect and life can be unfair sometimes. But if you care about the quality of democracy in U.S. society, you have a vested interest in caring about economic inequities. The biases of U.S. politics can be overcome in some cases.

Perspectives on Power[1]

In applying the concept of power, we immediately encounter the problem of "units" and "levels" of analysis. Do we choose the group, institution, or individual as the unit of analysis? At what level is our analysis? Are we examining observable political behavior or the subtle aspects of power? What assumptions should guide our analysis?

But the basic question remains: How does A get B to do what B would not otherwise do?

The Pluralist Perspective: Pluralism[2]

How does A get B to what B would not otherwise do? The pluralist perspective would answer: A has more group resources than does B. How does pluralism reach this conclusion?

The pluralist perspective's main focus is on observable conflicts of interest within the political decision-making process. It is based on group theory, or the description and examination of group behavior. Power is conceptualized in terms of the ability of A to prevail over B in formal decision-making on one or more key issues, when there is direct and observable conflicts between A and B over policy outcomes. The methodology used ranges from research based on descriptive accounts of group participation in the policy-making process to research based on the quantifiable aspects of a "key" issue or decision. Essentially, issues and decisions are not viewed as significant in the analysis of power if they are not observed within the formal aspects of government.

Pluralism assumes that there are multiple centers of power, not a single center, in society and politics. Power is considered to be widely dispersed among a variety of groups in society. These groups have some degree of essential political resources, including group size, financial revenue, social status (prestige and legitimacy), cohesiveness, effective leadership, and political skill and knowledge. Pluralism asserts that these resources are noncumulative; thus, groups advantaged in one resource (e.g, social status) may be weak in another resource (say, effective leadership). Political strategies stem from available resources: a financially poor but numerically large group may stress electoral politics over campaign financing in its attempt to influence the policy process. One group may have more of a particular resource than another, but overall resource equality is maintained through the noncumulative pattern of group resources.

The greatest strength of the pluralist perspective is its ability to empirically test and verify observable conflicts of interest. Its reliance on the observable, in turn, makes the approach descriptively sound. Pluralists are able to identify important group resources, including leaders, number of members, an agenda for political action, political knowledge and expertise, legitimacy of the group, and so forth.

Yet, the pluralist perspective's greatest strength leads to its greatest weakness. Concentrating only on the observable limits its explanatory powers to the extent that the unseen is unaccounted for. The pluralist approach ignores such concepts as "the mobilization of bias," "non-decisions," and "agenda setting." The more abstract considerations of power are given little analytical attention. In the long run, not accounting for the hidden aspects of power does not contribute to one's complete understanding of the nature of power.

The Elitist Perspective: Elitism[3]

How does A get B to do what B would not otherwise do? The elitist perspective would answer: A occupies key decision-making positions in the major economic, political, and social institutions. How does elitism reach this conclusion?

Elitism complements pluralism by identifying the "other face of power." Elitism searches beyond the narrow focus on .observable political phenomena and locates the exercise of power outside of the formal decision-making process of government. It uses as its unit of analysis the structures of society. Power is evaluated according to its social, economic, and political context. Elitism attempts to identify political actors from a particular socioeconomic class that control and manage the affairs of social, economic, and political institutions. It finds that one's decision-making position in an institution very much influences the political actor's power. Accordingly, the CEO of Ford Motor Company exercises more power than do the corporation's autoworkers; a university president exercises more power than any single faculty member.

Their control of the major institutions allows elites to determine what issues will reach the agenda for decision-making. Conversely, elites control which issues will <u>not</u> reach the agenda. Herein lies their power of "non-decisions." By controlling the agenda, elites can also "frame" the dialogue or discourse of any given policy issue. This type of control suggests that many decisions have been predetermined. Political participation among the masses is simply a facade.

Elitism asserts that economic, political, and social elites are connected by a common interest. This interest is reflected in the dominant ideology which they maintain and attempt to enhance. There is a strong consensus among elites on what values, beliefs, attitudes, and norms are important. While there is political competition among elites, their common interests require them to "play according to the rules of the game." But, the rules have been determined by elites.

Because it introduces concepts that identify the implicit side of power, the elitist perspective can be said to be broader in scope than pluralism. Power is conceptualized as the ability of A to prevail over B in determining outcomes of observable conflicts of interests in formal decision-making (as is believed by pluralism), but A also prevails over B in determining what is to be deemed a formal issue. In this view, A determines the agenda fqr decision-making. Accordingly, the agenda's items represent A's interests.

While it can be said that the elitist perspective widens the scope of power, it also has weaknesses. In particular, the methodological approach of the elitist perspective creates an *a priori assumption* of elite rule. Elitism tends to focus on finding evidence to substantiate the expected conclusion of elite rule. Elitism also becomes a descriptive approach to the degree that it clearly specifies the profile of "the elite." But to postulate that throughout history a socioeconomic elite has always ruled is to say little about the nature of power. How have the elite persisted over time? Can elites be replaced? How? Does one assume that power relations do not change over time? Does one accept as a base for research that elites of society have an agreed upon definition of elite interests and the abilities and capacities by which to maintain those interests?

Coaiitional Bias[4]

How does A get B to do what B would not otherwise do? The perspective of coalitional bias would answer: A has more resources than B, resulting in A occupying key decision-making positions in the major institutions of society.

The perspective of coalitional bias stems from elite theory, but also incorporates some elements of pluralism. Coalitional bias can be viewed as an elitism-pluralism approach to the study of power. As the discussion unfolds below, the reader is asked to look for elements of both pluralist and elitist explanations of power.

Like elite theory, the perspective of coalitional bias argues that there are essentially two major groups in society: a small group of powerful elites and the powerless masses. The elite group is well organized and controls the major economic, political, and social institutions. While the masses might influence government through elections and other political actions, their influence is seen as marginal rather than as a serious challenge to elite dominance, which is embedded in socioeconomic institutions and reinforced by ideology, or a dominant set of values, beliefs, attitudes, and norms.

Where coalitional bias diverges from the elitist perspective is in regard to the extent of elite control over the political system and insurgent capabilities of excluded groups. Theorists of elitism tend to hold a view of the disparity between elite and excluded groups that grants the former virtually unlimited power. Excluded groups are seen as functionally powerless compared to the enormous power wielded by the elite. Under such conditions, the chances for successful insurgency are practically nil. The perspective of coalitional bias suggests that there is potential for insurgency, and political efficacy is crucial for awakening latent insurgency. That is, members of excluded groups must believe in their ability to mobilize significant group resources and in their skill to effectively exercise political influence.

Coalitional bias is consistent with David Easton's views on "insiders" and "outsiders" and the conservatism of the political system.[5] According to Easton, political actors inside a political system hold the values of that system and perceive its interests as their own. Political interaction within the system involves disagreements, to be sure, but within the bounds of a basic consensus or with the parameters of "the accepted ways of doing things." Political actors outside a political system typically will not share certain basic values with the groups and authorities inside the system. The different values held by insiders and outsiders involve political engagements around a clash of values.

Following Easton's way of thinking, the perspective of coalitional bias suggests that political action by insiders reflects the maintenance of the status quo. Insiders resist changes that would threaten the realization of their interests, mobilize against the loss of power, and work to exclude admission to the political system of political actors whose interests conflict significantly with their own.

This conservatism, or unwillingness to change by including other interests, brings up the factor of social stratification to better understand power arrangements.[6] That is, sociologists maintain that socioeconomic status has clear and major implications for the distribution of power in the socio-political system. And herein lies the basic tenant of the perspective of coalitional bias:

> Government officials depend heavily on upper-class groups or interests because they possess most of the resources necessary to advance governmental activities and policies. Not only do upper-class interests have a greater quantity of resources-more durable and more indispensable-than others. Some upper-class groups, including large businesses and corporations, hold what is essentially public power to the extent that upper-strata interests are a factor in all that public officials do.

The importance of this sociological view for understanding certain power relations is its *Intersection* of race and class. Because a group's social-class position serves as a clear indication of its attractiveness as an insider or outsider, "minority status" connotes an image of a group that is undesirable, undeserving, and probably has little to offer politically. People of color and low-income groups, therefore, are perceived as less desirable than upper-class groups. The upper-strata (or "winners") prevail consistently though not totally because they enjoy a *systemic* advantage in the policy process. Over time, "losers" suffer a cumulative systemic disadvantage and become outsiders to the policy process. In the end, a relationship between race and class exists, and "minority" political opportunities and influence are especially limited by that relationship.

In the final analysis, government forms an enduring coalition with the most influential political actors. This coalition is biased in favor of upper-class interests.

Political Economy

How does A get B to do what B would not otherwise do? The perspective of political economy would answer: A owns the "means of production."

As presented in this essay, this view *does not stem* from a Marxist perspective. I am not encouraging revolution and the overthrow of capitalism and our representative democracy. However, from the viewpoint of democratic theory, it would be wise to promote the influence and well-being of the lower strata within the existing social system. Pragmatic solutions to the needs of the most needy should be considered. Practical solutions to meet educational, employment, housing, and health needs are required.

The political-economy perspective offers a more objective view of power relations than do pluralism or elitism. This view of power is objective to the extent that it attempts to understand the whole of the human experience. That is, the political-economy perspective views the economic, political, and social factors that impact human behavior as mutually bound and intertwined. This perspective finds it unacceptable to distinguish between economic, political, and social sources of power.

How might one understand the perspective of political-economy? The political-economy perspective assumes that the relationship of economics to politics is the best starting point for understanding the distribution of power in society. The attempt is to find the ideological origins behind the ideas that bring people together to solve their most basic economic needs. Consider that a socialist political-economy elicits socialist culture, education, laws, organizations, governmental forms, and, in the end, "socialist" authoritative values. Similarly, in the United States, capitalism has structured society according to capitalist culture, education, laws, organizations, and "capitalist" authoritative values which protect and nurture capitalist production and private property.