

POLS 202
Enbysk

Theories of Power in American Politics

Introduction

I wanted to provide an overview of four competing theories of power in American Politics and then provide some summation of the Domhoff chapter. This is important this week for I think it can help us understand something of what's at stake in Carr's discussion of the bureaucratic phenomenon but it also gives us the chance to look at other ways in which power manifests itself in American Politics. Ultimately, the question at the heart of Chapter 6 in *Polity*, requires us to think about who has power in America – Who Rules? It is still common to hear the United States referred to as a democracy and hear it suggested, somewhat thoughtlessly, that “the people rule”. However, as the German (and later American) economist and sometimes political theorist, Joseph Schumpeter (*Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*) suggested, in order to sustain that claim we have to be able to say “who the people are” and be able to say “how they rule”. For Schumpeter, it was simply foolish to assert that “the people” rule, control or dominate the policy-making process in any significant sense. Carr, like Schumpeter, agrees that the discussion of power has to include those that helm society's largest institutional and bureaucratic structures and that an adequate understanding of the policy-making and implementation process simply could not be understood without them.

The argument in Chapter 6 therefore suggests that those who make up and helm the various bureaucratic apparatuses in the United States not only have quite a bit of power because of their positions, but also because of their expertise and the way that they can shape the bureaucratic response to the problem of social management. Now, we may think this amounts to a kind of *benign* power so long as it is balanced with a general bureaucratic commitment to serve the public interest by remaining committed (or working to ensure bureaucratic commitment) to solving the social and political problems members of the polity want solved. We also might satisfy ourselves that sufficient public or governmental oversight (the President, Congress, and courts) exists to mollify concerns about bureaucratic overreach. Carr however supposes there is something else at work here – a propensity for bureaucratic institutions to develop their own unique internal cultures. If that's true, then it seems there is little that can guarantee that bureaucracies maintain their commitment to the public good if bureaucratic response is more significantly shaped by the bureaucratic culture.

Still, it pays to introduce some different and competing theories of power to see whether the question about who has power in the United States can be answered in a different way. **The four classical theories of power in American Politics are:**

- **Majoritarian Electoral Democracy**
- **Elite Theory**
- **Pluralism (or Majoritarian Pluralism/Competitive)**
- **Neo-Pluralism (or Biased Pluralism)**

Majoritarian Electoral Democracy

The Majoritarian Electoral Democracy model will be perhaps the most recognizable to students who have grown up in the United States and have gleaned most of their knowledge of politics from standardized text books. The model assumes that politics in the United States is fundamentally democratic via a representative party system. Elections and average citizens, or so-called “median voters”, play a prominent role in producing democratic outcomes as a result of citizens supporting parties, parties winning majorities, and winning parties working to enact the policies of their supporters. That is, parties work to capture majorities by courting those voters at the median point of the political spectrum. If one assumes, as many do, that most American's political beliefs lie somewhere near the center, than the

electoral strategy of appealing to the average citizen ought to ensure the capturing of majorities and at the same time ensure that the interests of the party are aligned with the interests of the median voter. This is, of course, the basic representative model of democracy and it still significantly informs many people's understandings of power in the politics of the United States – even if it is no longer a very compelling model.

Elite Theory

Elite Theory of course suggests that, in fact, “the people” do not rule – that instead, only some of the people rule – the people who manage to occupy positions of power and authority in the largest organizations and institutions (corporate, non-profit, or governmental) in the state. Thus, elite theory does not necessarily suggest only an economic elite (though of course people that occupy these positions are generally relatively well-off, occupying the upper quintiles in terms of wealth), rather, elite theory suggests, as we've already seen in Domhoff, that they are people “who hold ...top positions...[and who] have the money, time, contacts with other organizations, and authority...to shape political and many other outcomes outside their organizations.”(Domhoff, *Who Rules America?*, p. 214.) Also, as Domhoff suggests, they need not be made up only of corporate elites (see class-dominance theories) but rather a broader array and network of elites in education, law, think-tanks and those within the public-interest network.

We've seen some hints of this theory in *Polity* already. Carr suggests that politics is really about social management, however, as modern life has become greatly shaped by industrial, technological and economic forces, the resultant complexity requires a more complex, but also more organized and specialized system of social management. In other words, centralization. However, once we centralize management, we also, automatically create the need for a class of managers – elites. While it was John Stuart Mill who was perhaps one of the first to recognize the stakes in an era of rapid industrialization, both Schumpeter (mentioned above) and the sociologist and theorist Max Weber thought this probably resulted in the undermining of liberalism (freedom) and democracy (political equality) and there was probably little to be done about it. Thinking carefully then about Elite Theory requires us to ask whether there is anything of liberalism or democracy that can be salvaged as the modern world continues down the road of technological industrial, and commercial growth.

Pluralism (or Majoritarian Pluralism/Competitive)

In fact, it was J.S. Mill who seemed to think that only a deeply pluralistic and developmental democracy could withstand and work to domesticate these modern forces. Pluralism, as a theory of power suggests a competitive model of politics where individuals align themselves with different groups, who collectively work to advocate for and achieve their group interests as they compete for influence over the policy-making process. Pluralism supposes that, given the depth and breadth of different competing interests in society, no single interest or set of interests will be able to dominate the political competition setting up the possibility of overlapping (as opposed to permanent) majorities as different groups temporarily align themselves with other groups (think coalitions) around basic core commitments as they also seek to promote their particular interests. Thus, pluralism will also be well known to the student of American Politics as “Interest Group politics”. This model prevents majorities from dominating politics and government and secures political power for minorities.

Democracy, under this model then requires a commitment to fair, open, competitive elections (undergirded by constitutional protections) as well as fair and open access to decision-makers who hold office and who mediate between different interests. In fact, the pluralist model's fundamental assumption is that the various interest groups are more or less equal in terms of their power, influence and ability to get a hearing. Pluralism solves the problem of power by encouraging, and working to ensure (via constitutional mechanisms) that no one group or set of interests is able to dominate politics and government. Groups will be motivated, not only to pursue their own interests but also to protect themselves against the hostile interests of other groups. As long as the competition for political power is fair and democratic, however, groups ought to accept outcomes hostile to their own interests since they have a fair chance to

win next time as interests or coalitions realign. If groups accept losing sometimes – as long as they also win sometimes, then pluralist theorists argue that pluralism makes for a very stable political system because power is widely dispersed and shared and that “is a crucial obstacle to the development of excessively powerful factions and an unresponsive state.” It can also be a very frustrating political model as it also appears that policy may remain perpetually unsettled and open-ended. We may ask ourselves whether that also reflects something inherent about democracy. (For more on this model, see. Held, D., *Models of Democracy*, Chapter 6, p. 173).

Neo-Pluralism

Neo-Pluralism is sometimes called “biased” pluralism or “elitist” pluralism except that under this version of pluralism, the political agenda is biased towards *corporate* power and the state is seen as one amongst many other interest groups with its own sectional interests and where even different departments within the state are in competition with one another. All of this happens in a political environment defined by radically unequal economic resources which also limits the ability of less-well-off groups to compete successfully for influence in the political competition. This affords great advantages to some (corporations) and marginalizes other groups. Notions of the privatization of public functions also fall within this theory as corporations come to play a significant role in the regulatory institutions of their own industries which raise serious questions about the openness of government and its capacity to serve public over private interests. Often, under this model, corporate actors become as powerful if not more powerful than state actors. (Again, Held is instructive here when thinking about his model and the description provided comes mainly from his work mentioned above.

Domhoff – How the Power Elite Dominate Government

The models above tell us what the different theories of power and politics in the United States look like; the purpose of the Domhoff chapter is to describe how power operates in one of the models and you’ll want to ask yourselves how closely this reflects Carr’s discussion in Chapter 6 and in the rest of the book.

One important aspect of elite domination of government is Domhoff’s notion of the ***policy-planning network***. Whether it is the corporate-conservative policy network or the liberal-labor network, the various actors (lobbyists, lawyers, former officials, and experts) are central to the networks ability to provide information, services and financial support to the wealthy, the business sector and corporations. It is vital, Domhoff argues, to the material interests of elites that they capture and work to control the federal government and its regulatory function. If you recall, as you were reading Krugman on Thomas Piketty, you may have come away with this idea that the elite’s interest in dominating politics is so that they can 1) protect and 2) grow their wealth. For corporations, this means, not eliminating the regulatory environment, but working to dominate and control it.

Domhoff distinguishes between the ***special interest process*** and the ***policy-planning process***, however, and it is in the latter where it seems Domhoff sees more evidence for a class dominance theory. Members of policy organizations (think tanks and policy discussion groups such as the Business Roundtable) have significant contact with members of Congress and their staff and directly exchange viewpoints with them. Members of these networks also get appointed themselves to government commissions and advisory committees and participate in unofficial venues like the Business Council and Roundtable. Historically, these elites have played a role in the forming of regulatory agencies themselves. The ubiquitous presence of corporate elites within the top-levels of the regulatory environment can be seen as one looks at the social, political, educational and occupational backgrounds of political appointees. They mostly come from corporate backgrounds or from the positions in the policy-planning network. Domhoff argues that this didn’t change much in the Obama administration. The backgrounds of Supreme Court justices is telling as well – many of them have been from elite law schools and have practiced corporate law. In all of this then, one can see the existence of an elite network where members move from elite educational institutions to elite positions in the corporate and policy-planning world, to elite positions in government agencies, commissions and committees. No doubt this is all reinforced by social

networks and family connections as well. We may worry that the people in these networks normally interact with and share ideas with other people in their network, and one can wonder about what kinds of norms, values, and culture forms within this network as well. To conclude, however, it seems clear that if one has access to people in the network, then one has access to power. If one does not have access to people in the network, one may struggle to get one's interests recognized in the policy-planning process.