



IBP - Political Science

HOW FAR IS POLITICAL POWER DISPERSED IN
MODERN DEMOCRATIC SOCIETIES?

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In “Polyarchy, Pluralism and Scale” Robert Dahl defines the key characteristic of Democracy as government being responsive to its citizens, and that those are considered politically equal (Dahl, 1984). When trying to map out the extent to which extend modern democratic societies live up to their democratic ambitions, we must therefore examine, how far political power is dispersed in these societies. In other words, does every citizen hold equal power, or are there social elites, that hold it unproportionally? *This assignment will argue, that in modern democratic societies political power is not equally dispersed among all citizen, but instead is centered around the social elites.* To support my argumentation, I am going to describe different kinds of political power these elites hold as a group, and then narrow it down to the individual. Furthermore, I will provide argumentation for why this misbalance of power is self-sustaining. Lastly, I am going to present a few opposing points of view to my thesis, and then provide counter argumentations for these.

Industries that are highly important to the performance of a market economy in a democracy, have significant political bargaining power. As an executive in a powerful company or a lobbying representative for an entire industry, you do not simply hold your voting power in general elections just as any of your employees but are often directly shaping regulatory policies that impact your industry. For example, in 2010 through a successful marketing campaign several large Australian mining companies managed to turn public sentiment against the planned introduction a new tax. In 2010, mining products made up 55% of Australia’s export earnings, making this industry one of the most important ones for the Australian economy (Bell & Hindmoor, 2014). On May 2nd 2010, the government made public plans to introduce a new tax on the industry, arguing, that it would more equally distribute the fast-rising profits, the industry

had seen in the previous years. The mining industry countered with a multimillion-dollar TV advertisement campaign. They predicted a severe (??) decline in tax revenue, if the tax were to be introduced and successfully painted a dim picture of a possible unemployment rise in the industry. Many working-class people who would be affected by a recession in the industry got scared and backed the mining companies. After a controversial public debate in which, as an empirical survey by Dowding and Boulus (2014) has shown, the arguments from the mining industry had dominated, the Labor Party prime minister resigned, and the new government introduced the tax at far more favorable conditions for the mining companies. This case shows that financial resources come along with political power, that can be bigger than that of a democratically elected government.

As seen in the previous paragraph, with their vast financial resources, large international firms have the possibility to influence public debates through well-funded marketing campaigns. This does not always have to be harmful to the public, but it can be and often is. An example where a marketing campaign did heavily influence the public debate, is the petroleum company BP, and its "Beyond Petroleum" campaign in the early 2000. As part of their campaign, BP, as one of the first petroleum companies, acknowledged the industry's impact on climate change in 1997. They introduced a carbon footprint calculator on their website in 2005. Today the carbon footprint is a widely used concept, and even large environmental organizations like the WWF have their own calculator online (Solman, 2008) (WWF Footprint Calculator, n.d.). This impressively successful campaign made BP to be seen as the greenest firm of the petroleum and energy sector in a customer survey (Solman, 2008). Much more importantly, however, they managed to influence the public debate about the climate crisis to be to be centered around

what the individual can and should do, rather than the impact large corporations like BP have on climate change (Solman, 2008). The problem with this abundant political power large corporations hold is that they are not elected in a general election. They are not held accountable to the same degree as elected officials are. They do however still heavily influence political decision making. They act in the best interest of the company and / or themselves and not the public or the environment.

Large corporations do not just have a lot of financial leverage to influence the public, they can also use those financial assets to influence politics more directly. Especially in democracies in which electoral campaigns rely on donations by individuals, individuals and corporations with the ability to donate higher amounts have more political power, since well-funded campaigns can be much more present and are much more likely to succeed. ("Where Does Political Power Lie in Liberal Democratic States?," 2020). A closer look at Hilary Clinton's and Bernie Sander's 2016 presidential campaigns shines a light on this power dynamic. Clinton's campaign had raised a total of 563.8 million US-dollars (Hillary Clinton (D), 2017) compared to 228.2 million for Sanders's campaign (Bernie Sanders (D), 2017). But not only did Clinton's campaign manage to raise substantially more money, the average amount per donation was also much higher. With 52.8%, more than half of her campaign donations were above 200 dollars and only 18.5% where donations of less than 200 dollars (Hillary Clinton (D), 2017). Sanders' campaign donations in comparison were quite different. With 57.7 % of his donations being less than 200 dollars, his average supporter donated substantially less than that of Hillary Clinton. Since money can make a campaign more successful through media presence, this means, that the average supporter of Hillary Clinton, held more political power than that of Bernie Sanders.

Over the previous paragraphs, I have examined several ways in which the social elite holds disproportionate political power over public debates and decision-making processes. Now I want to lay out that, because of this disproportionate political power, political leadership is, also over longer periods of time, disproportionately responsive to the political ideas of different social classes. In his book, “Economic Inequality and Political Representation”, Larry Bartels (2009) examined US Senators’ responsiveness to different income groups. As can be seen in figure No1 in the appendix, Bartels came to conclude, that for each of the 101st, 102nd and 103rd US Congress, Senators were significantly more responsive to middle income Americans, than Low income and to high income than to middle income Americans (Bartels, 2009). This means that the political ideas of the elite in the American society were overly represented in that part of the US’s legislative branch. Consequently, the political power of the elite in the US exceeds that of middle- and low-income US Americans.

Academic elites have large political power because they are over-proportionally represented in national legislatures. The academic background of parliamentarians in Sweden provides us with a clear example to examine this disproportionate power. Through its strong labor movements, public education and folk high schools, Sweden is known to have achieved a comparably wide range of possible pathways to political power (Erikson & Josefsson, 2019). Yet still 72 per cent of Swedish members of parliament compared to 42% of the adult population, have enjoyed college education. This gives the countries academic elite a higher representation, and thus more political power in the legislative body per person, compared to the rest of society. In their article concerning higher education in relation to the power of MP’s in Sweden, Erikson and Josefsson

(2019) also examined the positions held inside the parliament, and whether they correlate to the academic background. They came to conclude, that 16.3% of leadership positions, such as speakers, committee chairs, party leaders etc. were held by MP`s with higher education compared to 11.7% being held by those with lower education degrees. In contrary 85.7% of the less powerful positions, such as a seat in one of the 16 parliamentary committees were held by MP`s without higher education compared to 72.3% being held by those with. So, in addition to a general overrepresentation of the academic elite in the national legislature in Sweden, the more powerful positions within the legislature are also more likely to go to someone with a higher degree. To conclude, the academic elite of the Swedish society holds disproportionately more political power within the legislature.

The disproportionate political power of academic elites, as elaborated in the previous paragraph, is also self-sustaining. Access to higher education in many countries heavily depends on students' socio-economic background. In 2010, 10% of the political representatives in the US got educated at one of the eight Ivy League institutions (Morella, 2010). At one of those eight institutions, namely Harvard university, the average parental income sits, with 168,000 US dollars, three times above the US median (Bolotnikova, 2017). This means, that at least one out of 10 political representatives in the US, received an education, the median American parent would never be able to afford for their children. This shows that political power is disproportionately in the hands of an academic elite and that, because of the high education fees in many countries, this misbalance of power is self-sustaining. The higher your education, the more likely you child is to get higher education. Vice versa the lower your education the less likely your child is to get higher education.

So far, I have argued, that political power in modern democratic societies lays in the hands of social and academic elites. However, theories of majoritarian electoral democracy, as described by Gilens and Page (2014) see the average citizen as empowered by democratic elections. And writers, such as Anthony Downs, talk about the median voter theorem, which would lead vote seeking parties to position themselves in the center of the median voters preferred positions (Gilens & Page, 2014). When we look at the European political party landscape, and how it has changed over recent years, we come to see the flaws of this theory. Italy for example, has alternately been governed by two different political parties, one far right, and the other far left (Bartolini et al., 2004). France saw a dramatic change to its political party landscape in the 2017 legislative elections, where the socialist party, that had been ruling since 2012, and was a constant figure in the country's political history, fell from 280 to 31 MP's, and with La République en Marche a completely new party captured over 50% of the seats in France's national assembly (Surel, 2019). And lastly in Austria the traditionally centrist party ÖVP governed together with the far-right populist party FPÖ between 2017 and 2019, before it fell due to a corruption scandal (Kluth, 2019). These few examples show that the political party landscape in Europe is ever more fragmented, than being characterized by steadily large vote seeking parties at the center of the median voters preferred position.

Another opposing viewpoint to my argument that political power is centered around the social elites, is the idea that the general right to vote equally disperses political power in the society. It is correct, that on paper citizens in these societies all enjoy the right to exercise the same political power through their vote. Examining voter turnout by social class in these very societies

however, yet again proves that the political power eventually lays more in the hands of the social elites than being equally dispersed. In her article “Unequal Political Participation in Europe”, Aina Gallego examined Data from the European social survey concerning voter turnout in comparison with their social class (Gallego, 2008). Her summary of the data, as can be seen in figure No 2 shows, that business owners, or service class employees have a much higher likelihood to use their vote, compared to manual, temporary or unemployed workers. And since this theory of majoritarian electoral democracy is based upon the assumption, that citizens are mainly empowered through their right to vote, political power can, based on the data from the European social survey, not be equally dispersed among citizens, but lays more in the hands of the social elites.

Pluralist writers examine political power regarding the first face of Lukes’ three dimensions of power (Ferdinand et al., 2018). In Robert Dahl’s words, this first face of power is when “A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do” (Ferdinand et al., 2018 p.57) Pluralist theory thus suggests, that a particular group, whose political preferences are met, holds political power. This idea of political power however completely leaves out the differing importance of different political issues. (Ferdinand et al., 2018) The earlier discussed case of the petroleum company BP, shows, why this pluralist argument is too simple, and thus not applicable. One could say that the public won the debate when BP in 1997 eventually acknowledged the impact of fossil fuel emissions on climate change (Solman, 2008). We must however see, that, as I have examined in the 2nd supporting paragraph, BP acknowledged the impact of fossil fuels, while simultaneously putting the blame on the individual consumer and its carbon footprint. So, while pluralists would say that the political

power in this debate was laying with the public, it was actually with the petroleum industry that managed to steer the public debate in its interest.

Another viewpoint, that opposes my argument that political power accumulates around the elites, is, that by granting every citizen basic democratic rights, such as free speech and the right to vote, democratic constitutions, spread political power equally among the population. Yet again, pluralist theory works under the assumption, that this is the case, and political power therefore is far dispersed in modern democratic societies. (Ferdinand et al., 2018) There are however clearly visible phenomena happening in these democracies, that counter argue this idea, one of which being the free-rider problem. As Ferdinand et al. (2018) say in their book, the large number of voters in a democracy lets the individuals vote be unlikely to have big political power. This leads many to the assumption, that it will not make a difference whether they do, or do not use their vote. As data from the German Max-Planck institute for social research shows, there was a clear correlation between social class and voter turnout in the German federal elections 2009 (Max-Planck-Institut für Gesellschaftsforschung, 2009). Among those voting, 28% came from the uppermost income fifth compared to 12% from the lowest. And among those not voting, 16% came from the uppermost fifth compared to 33% coming from the lowest fifth. Thus, the uppermost income fifth was overly represented among those voting and consequently also had more political power per person, than the lowest fifth. Democratic elections thus do not equally disperse political power in the population. Rather political power is still is more concentrated in the social elites.

The last argument countering mine, that I want to come to, is that social movements, can achieve the same political power, as the corporate elite. This would mean, that the entirety of society had the same potential political power as the elite, since anybody regardless of social background, education, or other factors, can engage in a social movement. And political power would thus be dispersed among the whole population. The agenda setting power of social movements might in some cases be comparable to that of the corporate elite. However when we look, at the outcomes of political debates in which social movements managed to set the political agenda, we see, that the political power over these outcomes was eventually laying with the elites yet again. The climate change debate offers us another example, based on which, we can see, that this argument is only true to a certain extent. Inspired by Greta Thunberg's protest in front of the Swedish parliament building, the Fridays for Future movement grew very quickly in early 2019. The movement mainly consists of students skipping school or university on Fridays, to raise awareness for the consequences of climate change and to demand government policy compliance with the Paris agreement to limit global warming to well below 2 degrees Celsius (Sommer et al., 2019).

As Scheitle examines in his paper on the movement, it enjoyed great media presence and triggered a large public debate about climate change over the course of its first year of existence (Scheitle, 2020). Scheitle (2020) further elaborates, that on the agenda of cabinet meetings of the federal government the words "climate protection" are only mentioned once in the entirety of 2018, compared to six times in 2019. And that the government installed a climate cabinet, which was not mentioned in the coalition agreement of the 2017–2021 German federal government. There is thus no doubt, that the movement achieved great agenda setting power.

The movement did however not achieve great political power, to press the decision makers to act in their interest. While the Fridays For Future movement demands political decisions in accordance to the Paris 2 degree goal, and thus that Germany reaches the net-zero before 2035, the government settled on the goal to reach net-zero by 2050, which would not be compatible to the Paris agreement. So, while social movement can indeed achieve a greater agenda setting power, their political power is relatively small compared to that of the corporate elite.

In Conclusion, political power in modern democratic societies is concentrated around elites. I argued that the financial resources, that elites possess give them a powerful tool for agenda setting. Furthermore, I focused on structural imbalances, such as the disproportionate representation in the legislative, and how they favor the elites. Lastly, I supported my argumentation by showing how, and why these power mismatches are in some ways self-sustaining and would thus always be very hard to break for the individual, if nothing was to be done against those. In the second half of my paper, I presented a few viewpoints, that would see political power be far dispersed among citizens, and thus oppose my argumentation, and then fended them off. An example of these was, that social movements, that are open to every individual of the society, can achieve as much political power, as the elite. However, by showing why the political power that the elites, and social movements possess, eventually is not comparable, I counter argued this opposing point. When we discuss the extent to which political power is dispersed in modern democratic societies, we must thus look further than concentrating on institutionalized dispersion of political power. Because despite being determined to be in the hands of the people via the constitution, many modern democratic societies show a disproportionate amount of political power in the hands of elites.

Appendix:

Figure No 1:

- Responsiveness of US Senators in the 101st, 102nd and 103rd US Congress to different income groups in the US American society.

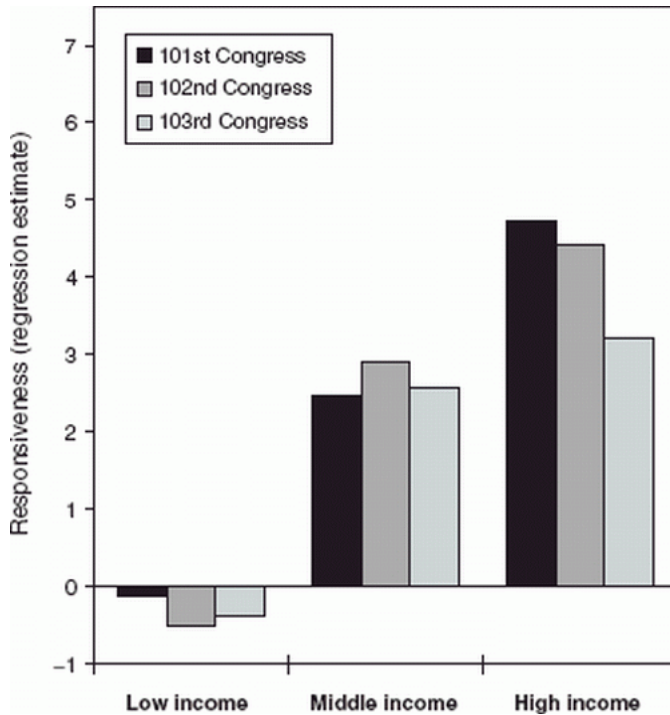


Figure No 2:

Personal characteristics of European citizens and their likelihood to vote

	Zero-order models		Full model (partial effects)	
	Logit coefficient	Change in predicted probability	Logit coefficient	Change in predicted probability
Woman	-0.068*	-0.011	-0.092*	-0.014
Age (years)	0.084**	0.014	0.076**	0.011
Age squared	-0.068**	-0.011	-0.050**	-0.007
Education (years, six to twenty)	0.060**	0.010	0.078**	0.012
Income (seven categories)	0.134**	0.021	0.095**	0.014
Owners	0.501**	0.071	0.269**	0.037
Service class	0.801**	0.118	0.401**	0.057
Nonmanual	0.243**	0.037	0.153**	0.022
Skilled manual	0.058	0.009	-0.016	-0.002
Temporary	-0.427**	-0.078	-0.185*	-0.029
Unemployed	-0.700**	-0.135	-0.341**	-0.055
Inactive	-0.020	-0.003	0.016	0.002
Constant			-2.296**	
Predicted probability				0.8194
N			31,261	

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