

# Power, Politics, and Society: The Lens of Social Science

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## **Abstract:**

*This article explores the intricate relationship between power, politics, and society through the lens of social science. It delves into various theoretical frameworks and empirical studies to elucidate the dynamics shaping these interconnected realms. By examining power structures, political processes, and societal mechanisms, this paper aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how these elements intersect and influence one another.*

**Keywords:** *Power, Politics, Society, Social Science, Power Structures, Political Processes, Societal Dynamics*

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## **Introduction:**

The study of power, politics, and society lies at the heart of social science inquiry, offering insights into the complexities of human interactions and societal organization. Power, in its various manifestations, plays a central role in shaping political dynamics and societal structures. Understanding the distribution and exercise of power is essential for comprehending the functioning of political systems and the mechanisms through which societies operate. Moreover, the interplay between power and society is reciprocal, as societal norms, values, and institutions often shape power relations, while power configurations influence the trajectory of societal development. This article aims to explore these intricate relationships by synthesizing key theories and empirical findings from the field of social science.

## **The Conceptualization of Power in Social Science**

The conceptualization of power in social science is multifaceted, reflecting the diverse perspectives and approaches within the discipline. At its core, power is understood as the ability to influence others' behavior or outcomes, encompassing a range of dimensions beyond mere coercion. Social scientists have proposed various definitions and dimensions of power, each shedding light on different aspects of its operation. For instance, French and Raven's seminal work identified five bases of power: coercive, reward, legitimate, referent, and expert. This framework illustrates that power can derive from diverse sources, including authority, expertise, and interpersonal relationships.

Power is intricately linked to social structures and dynamics. Power structures within societies determine who holds authority and influence, shaping patterns of dominance and subordination. Michel Foucault's concept of "disciplinary power" highlights how institutions and systems of knowledge production exert power through surveillance, normalization, and discipline. Similarly, Marxist perspectives emphasize the role of economic relations in structuring power dynamics, with capitalists wielding power over workers through control of the means of production.

Power is not static but subject to contestation and negotiation. Dahl's pluralist model of power suggests that power is dispersed among multiple groups and individuals within society, with competing interests leading to a constant struggle for influence. This perspective challenges traditional notions of power as solely hierarchical and centralized, highlighting the complexity of power relations in democratic societies.

In addition to its formal manifestations, power operates at various levels, from interpersonal interactions to global geopolitics. Foucault's notion of "micropower" emphasizes the ways in which power operates at the microlevel through everyday practices, discourses, and technologies of control. Understanding power in its myriad forms and contexts is essential for grasping its pervasive influence on social life and for addressing issues of inequality, oppression, and social change. Thus, the conceptualization of power in social science offers a rich and nuanced framework for analyzing the dynamics of human societies.

### **Definitions and dimensions of power**

The concept of power is multifaceted and has been defined and theorized in various ways within the social sciences. At its core, power refers to the ability of individuals or groups to influence the behavior, beliefs, or actions of others. One commonly cited definition of power is provided by Max Weber, who conceptualized it as the ability to achieve one's goals despite resistance from others. This definition emphasizes the capacity to exert control or influence over others, whether through coercion, authority, or persuasion.

Power can be understood along multiple dimensions, each shedding light on different aspects of its manifestation and operation. Firstly, power can be categorized into formal and informal forms. Formal power is typically associated with institutional roles and positions, such as political office or managerial authority, where individuals hold legitimate authority to make decisions and enforce compliance. In contrast, informal power operates outside of formal structures and may be based on personal charisma, social connections, or expertise.

Another dimension of power concerns its sources or bases. French and Raven identified several bases of power, including coercive power (the ability to punish or impose sanctions), reward power (the ability to provide incentives or rewards), legitimate power (derived from formal roles or positions), referent power (based on admiration, respect, or identification with the influencer), and expert power (stemming from knowledge or expertise in a particular domain). These bases of power can overlap and interact in complex ways within social interactions and institutions.

Power can be analyzed in terms of its distribution within societies or social systems. Power structures refer to the hierarchical arrangements and patterns of authority that characterize a given society, organization, or community. These structures may be centralized or decentralized, formal or informal, and they often shape the opportunities and constraints faced by individuals or groups within the social order. Understanding power structures is crucial for comprehending issues of social inequality, political domination, and collective action.

In addition to its distribution, power also operates through processes of negotiation, contestation, and resistance. Michel Foucault's work on power emphasizes its relational and productive nature,

highlighting how power operates not only through repression or coercion but also through practices of surveillance, discipline, and normalization. Power relations are dynamic and contingent, shaped by historical, cultural, and contextual factors, and subject to ongoing struggles for control, autonomy, and emancipation.

Definitions and dimensions of power are central to understanding social dynamics, political processes, and societal organization. By examining the sources, distribution, and operation of power within different contexts, social scientists can elucidate the mechanisms through which individuals and groups exert influence, negotiate conflicts, and shape the contours of social life.

### **Power structures and dynamics**

Power structures and dynamics are fundamental concepts within the realm of social science, encompassing the distribution, exercise, and contestation of power within societies. At its core, power structures refer to the hierarchical arrangements through which individuals or groups exert influence over others. These structures may manifest in various forms, including political, economic, and social realms, and they often shape the opportunities and constraints individuals face in pursuing their interests and goals.

One prominent dimension of power structures is the distinction between formal and informal power. Formal power is codified within institutional frameworks such as government bodies, corporations, or legal systems, where individuals hold positions of authority granted by established norms or laws. In contrast, informal power operates through less formalized channels, relying on social networks, cultural influence, or personal charisma to exert control or influence over others. Understanding the interplay between formal and informal power is crucial for grasping the complexities of power dynamics within societies.

Power structures are not static but rather dynamic and subject to change over time. Shifts in political regimes, economic conditions, or social movements can alter the distribution of power within societies, leading to the emergence of new power elites or the empowerment of previously marginalized groups. These dynamics of power often involve processes of negotiation, conflict, and cooperation among various actors seeking to advance their interests and agendas within the social landscape.

Additionally, power structures are often intertwined with systems of privilege and oppression, contributing to patterns of inequality and social stratification. Certain groups may possess greater access to resources, decision-making processes, or social status, enabling them to maintain and reproduce their power over time. These structures of privilege and oppression are deeply embedded within societal institutions and norms, shaping the lived experiences and opportunities of individuals across different social groups.

Power structures and dynamics are central to understanding the functioning of societies, influencing everything from political governance to economic distribution and social interactions. By analyzing the complex interplay between formal and informal power, recognizing the dynamic nature of power relations, and addressing systems of privilege and oppression, social scientists can

gain insights into the mechanisms shaping power within societies and work towards more equitable and just arrangements.

### **Sources of power: coercion, authority, persuasion**

#### **Coercion:**

Coercion represents a form of power that relies on the threat or use of force to compel compliance or obedience from others. This source of power operates through fear of punishment or reprisal, exerting control over individuals or groups through the imposition of constraints or restrictions on their behavior. Coercive power can be wielded by both state institutions, such as law enforcement agencies or military forces, and non-state actors, including criminal organizations or extremist groups. While coercion may achieve short-term compliance, its long-term effectiveness often depends on the willingness of those subjected to it to resist or acquiesce.

#### **Authority:**

Authority is a source of power that derives from perceived legitimacy and the recognition of one's right to influence or govern others. Unlike coercion, authority operates through consent rather than coercion, as individuals voluntarily defer to those who possess authority based on their position, expertise, or moral standing. Authority figures, such as political leaders, religious leaders, or experts in a particular field, wield influence over others by virtue of their perceived legitimacy and the trust placed in their guidance or directives. Authority can be formal, vested in official roles or institutions, or informal, arising from personal charisma or expertise.

#### **Persuasion:**

Persuasion is a source of power that operates through the use of communication and rhetoric to influence beliefs, attitudes, and behavior. Unlike coercion or authority, persuasion relies on the voluntary acceptance of ideas or proposals by those being persuaded. Persuasive power can be wielded through various means, including logical reasoning, emotional appeal, or social influence tactics. Politicians, advertisers, and public speakers often employ persuasion to sway public opinion, mobilize support for their causes, or negotiate agreements. Persuasion can be a potent source of power, as it can shape perceptions and motivations without resorting to force or authority.

#### **Hybrid Forms of Power:**

In practice, sources of power often intersect and combine in complex ways, creating hybrid forms of influence that blend coercion, authority, and persuasion. For example, a government may rely on a combination of legal authority, coercive measures, and persuasive communication strategies to maintain social order and legitimacy. Similarly, leaders within organizations may use a mix of positional authority, persuasive communication skills, and occasional coercive tactics to achieve their objectives and maintain control. Understanding these hybrid forms of power is essential for analyzing the dynamics of influence in various social, political, and organizational contexts.

## **Dynamics of Power Relations:**

The relative effectiveness of different sources of power depends on the specific context, the resources available to those seeking to exert influence, and the perceptions and responses of those subjected to power. Power relations are dynamic and subject to negotiation, resistance, and transformation over time. While coercion may be necessary in certain situations to enforce compliance or deter defiance, sustainable power often relies on a combination of authority and persuasion to build trust, foster cooperation, and achieve shared goals. Recognizing the interplay between coercion, authority, and persuasion is crucial for understanding the complexities of power dynamics in diverse social settings.

## **Politics as a Site of Power Contestation**

Politics serves as a primary arena for the contestation and negotiation of power in society. At its core, politics revolves around the distribution, exercise, and legitimization of power among individuals, groups, and institutions. Various theoretical perspectives, such as pluralism, elitism, and Marxism, offer differing explanations of power dynamics within political systems. Pluralists view power as dispersed among competing interest groups, with political outcomes determined through bargaining and compromise. In contrast, elitist theories argue that power is concentrated in the hands of a small, privileged elite who dominate decision-making processes.

Political institutions and processes play a crucial role in shaping power dynamics within societies. Institutions such as legislatures, executive branches, and judiciaries provide formal structures through which power is exercised and contested. Elections, political parties, and interest groups serve as mechanisms for citizen participation and influence within the political sphere. However, these institutions are also sites of power struggles, as different actors vie for control and influence over policy outcomes.

Political participation and mobilization are key mechanisms through which individuals and groups seek to contest and shape power relations. From voting in elections to engaging in protests and social movements, citizens express their preferences and assert their interests within the political realm. Social movements, in particular, can challenge existing power structures and advocate for social change by mobilizing collective action around specific issues or grievances.

The media and communication technologies play a crucial role in shaping political discourse and influencing power dynamics. Through news coverage, social media, and other forms of communication, political actors seek to shape public opinion, mobilize support, and contest competing narratives. The media's framing of political issues and events can have significant implications for public perceptions of power and legitimacy within the political system.

Politics serves as a dynamic and multifaceted arena for the contestation of power within society. Understanding the complexities of power dynamics within political systems is essential for comprehending how decisions are made, resources are allocated, and interests are negotiated in society. By analyzing politics as a site of power contestation, scholars and policymakers can gain insights into the mechanisms through which power operates and evolves within democratic and authoritarian contexts alike.

## **Theories of political power**

Theories of political power encompass diverse perspectives that seek to explain how power operates within political systems and shapes governance structures. One prominent theory is the pluralist perspective, which posits that power in society is dispersed among various competing groups, each advocating for its interests through democratic processes. According to pluralist theorists like Robert Dahl, political power is not concentrated in the hands of a few elites but rather diffused across multiple actors, including interest groups, political parties, and individual citizens. This view emphasizes the role of participation and competition in shaping political outcomes, highlighting the dynamism and openness of democratic societies.

In contrast, the elite theory of political power proposes that power is concentrated in the hands of a small, privileged elite who wield disproportionate influence over political decision-making. This perspective, championed by thinkers like C. Wright Mills, argues that elites, such as corporate leaders, political officials, and wealthy individuals, dominate key institutions and use their resources to maintain their privileged position. Elite theorists contend that formal democratic processes often serve as a facade, disguising the underlying reality of elite control and manipulation of power dynamics.

Another influential theory of political power is the Marxist approach, which views power relations as fundamentally rooted in economic structures and class conflict. According to Marxist theorists like Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, political power is a reflection of the underlying economic base of society, with the ruling class (bourgeoisie) exerting control over the means of production and exploiting the working class (proletariat). In this framework, the state serves as a tool of the ruling class to maintain its dominance and perpetuate capitalist relations, leading to inherent inequalities and exploitation within society.

A related concept in political power theory is that of structural functionalism, which emphasizes the role of institutions and social structures in maintaining stability and order within society. Proponents of this perspective, such as Talcott Parsons, argue that political power serves functional purposes by regulating social interactions, resolving conflicts, and promoting collective goals. From this viewpoint, power is not solely concentrated in individuals or groups but is distributed across various social roles and institutions, contributing to the smooth functioning of society.

Finally, post-structuralist and feminist theories challenge traditional conceptions of political power by highlighting the intersecting dynamics of power and identity, including gender, race, and sexuality. Scholars like Michel Foucault and Judith Butler argue that power operates through discourses, norms, and social practices that construct and regulate individual subjectivities. These perspectives emphasize the importance of recognizing marginalized voices and power relations beyond traditional institutional frameworks, shedding light on the complexities of power dynamics in contemporary societies.

## **Political institutions and processes**

Political institutions and processes constitute the framework within which power is organized, exercised, and contested in society. These institutions, ranging from formal structures like

governments and legislatures to informal mechanisms such as interest groups and social movements, play a pivotal role in shaping political dynamics. Electoral systems, for instance, are fundamental processes through which political power is legitimized and transferred in democratic societies. The design of electoral systems influences political representation, party competition, and the accountability of elected officials. Moreover, institutions like the judiciary serve as guardians of the rule of law, adjudicating disputes, and ensuring the protection of rights within the political system.

Beyond formal institutions, political processes encompass a wide array of activities through which decisions are made, policies are formulated, and interests are negotiated. Political processes include legislative deliberations, executive decision-making, and the mobilization of public opinion through media and advocacy campaigns. These processes often involve negotiation, compromise, and conflict among various actors vying for influence and power. Furthermore, political institutions and processes are not static but evolve over time in response to changing societal needs, technological advancements, and shifting power dynamics. Adaptation and reform of political institutions are essential for maintaining their legitimacy and effectiveness in addressing contemporary challenges.

Political institutions and processes also reflect underlying power structures and inequalities within society. For example, electoral systems can either amplify or mitigate social cleavages based on factors such as ethnicity, class, or gender. Similarly, the functioning of political processes may be influenced by the concentration of economic resources or the dominance of particular interest groups. Understanding these power dynamics is crucial for analyzing the functioning and outcomes of political institutions and processes. Moreover, the study of political institutions and processes intersects with other fields such as sociology, economics, and psychology, highlighting the interdisciplinary nature of political science. Overall, political institutions and processes are central components of the political landscape, shaping governance, policy outcomes, and the distribution of power within society.

### **Political participation and mobilization**

Political participation and mobilization are fundamental aspects of democratic governance and societal engagement. Participation encompasses a broad spectrum of activities through which individuals and groups influence political processes and decision-making. This includes voting in elections, joining political parties, engaging in protest movements, attending public meetings, and utilizing digital platforms for advocacy. Mobilization, on the other hand, refers to the organized efforts to rally individuals or groups around a common cause or political goal. It involves the coordination of resources, messaging, and actions to stimulate participation and effect change.

At the heart of political participation and mobilization lies the notion of civic engagement, wherein citizens actively contribute to the functioning of democratic societies. By participating in political activities, individuals exercise their rights and fulfill their civic responsibilities, thereby shaping the direction of public policies and governance. Moreover, political participation serves as a mechanism for the expression of diverse interests, viewpoints, and grievances within society. It

fosters pluralism and inclusivity by providing avenues for marginalized groups to voice their concerns and demand accountability from political authorities.

Mobilization plays a crucial role in channeling the collective energies of individuals and groups towards specific political objectives. Whether it involves grassroots organizing, social movements, or electoral campaigns, mobilization serves as a catalyst for social change and political reform. Through strategic communication, coalition-building, and advocacy tactics, mobilizers galvanize support, build solidarity, and amplify the voices of those seeking to challenge the status quo. Moreover, mobilization efforts often transcend traditional boundaries of geography, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status, forging alliances among diverse constituencies united by shared values or interests.

However, political participation and mobilization are not without challenges and limitations. Structural barriers, such as restrictive electoral laws, economic disparities, and social inequalities, can hinder the full inclusion of certain groups in the political process. Moreover, apathy, disillusionment, and distrust towards political institutions may deter individuals from actively engaging in civic life. Additionally, the proliferation of misinformation and manipulation in the digital era poses new challenges to the integrity and efficacy of political mobilization efforts.

Political participation and mobilization are vital mechanisms for democratic governance and social change. They empower citizens to exercise their rights, influence decision-making, and hold political leaders accountable. By fostering civic engagement and collective action, participation and mobilization contribute to the vitality and resilience of democratic societies, ensuring that diverse voices are heard and that the principles of justice, equality, and representation are upheld.

### **Society: Structures, Norms, and Power Relations**

Society serves as a complex web of interconnected structures, norms, and power relations that shape human interactions and behavior. At its core, societal structures encompass various institutions, organizations, and systems that provide the framework for social order and organization. These structures include but are not limited to governmental bodies, economic institutions, educational systems, and cultural organizations. Each of these components contributes to the maintenance of social stability and the regulation of individual and collective behavior within society.

Norms, on the other hand, represent the unwritten rules and expectations that govern social behavior and interactions within a given society. These norms encompass a wide range of behaviors, values, beliefs, and customs that are shared and reinforced by members of a community. They serve as guidelines for appropriate conduct and help to establish social cohesion and solidarity. Norms can vary significantly across different cultures and social groups, reflecting the diversity of human societies and the dynamic nature of social norms over time.

Power relations form a critical aspect of societal dynamics, influencing the distribution of resources, opportunities, and privileges within a society. Power operates through various channels and mechanisms, including economic, political, and social spheres. Economic power, for instance, often translates into control over material resources and financial capital, shaping patterns of



wealth and inequality within society. Political power, on the other hand, involves authority and influence over decision-making processes and governance structures, determining policies and laws that impact societal outcomes. Social power, meanwhile, encompasses influence derived from social status, networks, and cultural capital, shaping social hierarchies and access to opportunities.

These power relations are not static but are constantly negotiated and contested within society. Social movements, activism, and advocacy efforts often seek to challenge existing power structures and advocate for social change and justice. Additionally, the intersectionality of power relations, including how factors such as race, gender, class, and other forms of identity intersect to shape individuals' experiences and opportunities within society, further complicates the dynamics of power.

Understanding the intricate interplay between societal structures, norms, and power relations is essential for analyzing social phenomena and addressing issues of inequality, oppression, and social justice. By examining these dynamics, scholars and practitioners can develop strategies to promote inclusive societies, foster social cohesion, and address systemic barriers to equitable outcomes for all members of society.

### **Societal institutions and their role in power distribution**

Societal institutions serve as the bedrock upon which power distribution is built and perpetuated. These institutions encompass a wide array of structures, including government bodies, educational systems, economic organizations, and cultural norms. Each of these institutions plays a crucial role in shaping power dynamics within society. Government institutions, for instance, wield authority through the enactment and enforcement of laws, regulations, and policies. The allocation of resources and the provision of services by government agencies further influence the distribution of power, often reflecting and reinforcing existing societal hierarchies.

Similarly, educational institutions contribute to power distribution by imparting knowledge, values, and skills that can either perpetuate or challenge prevailing power structures. Access to quality education, for instance, can empower individuals to navigate and challenge systemic inequalities, while disparities in educational opportunities can entrench existing power differentials. Economic institutions, such as corporations and financial systems, also wield significant influence over power distribution through control over resources, employment opportunities, and economic policies. The concentration of wealth and capital within certain segments of society often correlates with disparities in political influence and social status.

Cultural institutions, including religious organizations, media outlets, and social norms, shape power dynamics by influencing beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors within society. Cultural norms and values define what is deemed acceptable or deviant, thereby legitimizing certain power structures while marginalizing others. Religious institutions, for instance, may serve as both sources of moral authority and mechanisms of social control, influencing individuals' perceptions of power and hierarchy. Similarly, media outlets can shape public discourse and perceptions, thereby influencing the distribution of power by amplifying certain voices while silencing others.

In sum, societal institutions play a multifaceted role in power distribution, shaping and perpetuating power dynamics through their organizational structures, practices, and ideologies. Understanding the interplay between these institutions is crucial for comprehending the complexities of power within society and devising strategies for promoting more equitable distributions of power and resources.

### **Social stratification and inequality**

Social stratification and inequality are pervasive features of human societies, delineating hierarchical arrangements that allocate individuals and groups different degrees of resources, opportunities, and prestige based on various social characteristics. At the heart of social stratification lies the concept of inequality, which encompasses disparities in wealth, income, education, occupation, and access to essential services such as healthcare and housing. These inequalities often intersect, compounding the challenges faced by marginalized groups and perpetuating cycles of disadvantage. Social stratification not only shapes individuals' life chances but also influences societal cohesion, economic productivity, and political stability.

One of the primary drivers of social stratification is economic inequality, which reflects disparities in income and wealth distribution within a society. Economic stratification can lead to the concentration of resources among a privileged few, exacerbating social divisions and limiting upward mobility for those at the lower end of the socioeconomic spectrum. Moreover, economic disparities intersect with other forms of inequality, such as race, gender, and ethnicity, creating compounded disadvantages for marginalized communities. For instance, racial minorities and women often experience disproportionate levels of poverty and limited access to economic opportunities due to systemic discrimination and historical injustices.

Education plays a crucial role in perpetuating or mitigating social stratification. Access to quality education can serve as a pathway to upward mobility, enabling individuals to acquire the skills and credentials necessary for higher-paying jobs and socioeconomic advancement. However, disparities in educational resources and opportunities can exacerbate social inequality, particularly for disadvantaged groups. Unequal access to educational resources, such as well-funded schools, qualified teachers, and extracurricular activities, can perpetuate disparities in academic achievement and future prospects, reinforcing existing social stratification.

Social stratification also manifests in the form of occupational hierarchies, where individuals' social standing and access to resources are closely linked to their occupation and employment status. Occupational stratification reflects not only differences in income but also disparities in job security, benefits, and opportunities for career advancement. Certain occupations, such as those in the fields of finance, law, and technology, often offer higher salaries and greater prestige, while others, such as service and manual labor jobs, are characterized by lower wages and limited upward mobility. Occupational stratification intersects with factors such as education, race, and gender, further shaping individuals' socioeconomic trajectories and reinforcing patterns of inequality.

Social stratification and inequality are complex phenomena that permeate every aspect of society, shaping individuals' life chances and societal structures. Addressing these issues requires comprehensive strategies that tackle the root causes of inequality, including economic disparities,

unequal access to education and opportunities, and systemic discrimination. By promoting social justice, equitable distribution of resources, and inclusive policies, societies can work towards reducing social stratification and creating a more just and equitable world for all.

### Summary:

This article provides a comprehensive examination of the nexus between power, politics, and society, drawing on insights from the field of social science. It explores the conceptualization of power, the dynamics of political processes, and the structures of societal organization. By elucidating the reciprocal relationships between power, politics, and society, this paper contributes to a deeper understanding of the complexities inherent in human social life. It underscores the importance of interdisciplinary approaches in analyzing and addressing issues of power dynamics, political governance, and societal change.

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