

2 Power

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- ⊙ Power is ubiquitous.
- ⊙ It occurs when an actor gets another to change their actions or dispositions.
- ⊙ Key types of power include authority, coercion, force, inducement, persuasion, and manipulation.
- ⊙ The exercise of power depends partly on possession of economic, status, knowledge or other resources.
- ⊙ Power can be unintentional as well as intentional.
- ⊙ Unintentional power is exercised by individuals, institutions and unorganised groups.
- ⊙ Those appearing to exercise power are themselves often constrained by others or by structures.

Power relationships pervade society. In coming to read this chapter, you almost certainly had power exercised over you, and yourself exercised power over others. You probably would not be reading these words unless your lecturer had instructed you to do so. In order to read them, you possibly had to ask your sister to wash up instead of you, or to tell your friends to go home, or to get your children to turn down the television. The common element in these examples is that they involve relationships in which some people get others to act in a certain way. As a first approximation, then, power can be defined as the American political scientist Robert Dahl has done: 'A exercises power over B to the extent that he (or she) changes B's actions or predispositions in some way.' (1976: 29).

First thoughts about power

If you keep this definition—sometimes called the one-dimensional view of power (Lukes 1974: 11–15)—in mind, and think back over the things you have done in the past few days, you will see that many of your day to day activities involve power.

Several points are worth making here. First, Dahl defines power in terms of changing someone's actions or dispositions, but this definition could be usefully extended to include instances in which someone deliberately prevents an individual's actions or dispositions from changing. Consider, as an example, a government wishing to pull down a historic building. The government knows that if it announces its decision to do this, conservationists will embark on a series of disruptive protests. So it keeps the decision a secret, and in the dead of night, while the conservationists snore on, the building is demolished. The government has exercised power, not by changing the conservationists' immediate actions (sleeping), but by ensuring that those immediate actions do not change. Power exercised in this way to exclude certain views or people from a decision-making process is sometimes called the second dimension of power (Lukes 1974: 16–20).

Second, the relationships described above as power relationships are often described in other ways. When people think about relationships within their families, they probably think of them in terms of love, or caring, or getting jobs done. This is perfectly valid, but it is equally valid to think about these relationships as power relationships. To do the latter is simply to take a different perspective—the perspective of the political scientist.

Third, power may be exercised in mundane environments such as families, or in very significant ones such as the prime minister's office. Political scientists generally concentrate their attention on the more significant power relationships in a society. Nonetheless, a prime minister ordering the government to pursue a policy and a mother sending her daughter to bed early are both doing the same thing—exercising power.

Fourth, power as it is defined above describes relationships between people; for example, between a parent and child, or between a prime minister and government ministers. Power of this sort does not exist outside relationships between people. When students of politics write about the power of John Howard, they have in mind the Prime Minister's power over other people. Power is not something like money or property which people can possess. It is a relationship which only exists in interactions between people (Foucault 1994, *passim*). If Howard were the sole undiscovered

survivor of a plane crash on a desert island, he might be able to retrieve food, clothes and other property from the wrecked plane, but there is no way that he could retrieve his power.

It might be objected that if power is a relationship and not property, then people cannot be properly described as 'powerful' (full of power). In response to this objection, it should be pointed out that to call someone 'powerful' is to summarise his or her relationships with other people, to claim that he or she often gets other people to alter their actions or predispositions, and is likely to be able to do so in the future.

Fifth, power is not intrinsically bad or good. Particular instances of power may result from good or bad motives, may result in good or bad consequences, and may be appropriate or inappropriate to the circumstances, but power in general is morally indeterminate. Although powerful people are often seen as real life versions of Darth Vader, the power they wield can be, and often is, used for the good. Whatever you value in Australian society, you can be sure that it exists because some people got other people to change their actions in order to create and maintain it.

A sixth point is that not all power is the same. A parent getting a child to turn the television down by persuading her to do so and a parent threatening to hit the child if she does not do so have both exercised power, but it is power of a quite different sort. Similarly, a government which gets people to pay extra taxes because the people earlier elected the government to spend more money on health programs exercises quite different power from a government which gets people to pay taxes by sending out soldiers to forcibly confiscate citizens' money and property.

Types of power

Quite ancient disputes exist about how to characterise different types of power. Almost everyone writing about power has a different list of types of power and different names for the types of power on the list. With this in mind, the following list of types of power should be treated as introductory and somewhat arbitrary.

Authority

Authority is a form of power in which one political actor obeys another without question. Political actor A expresses a wish, instruction or command, and political actor B acts in accord with it without need for further stimulus, because B accepts A's

right to command him or her. Wrong (1979: 35) writes: 'In authority, it is not the content of a communication but its *source*, that is, the perceived status, resources or personal attributes of the communicator, which induces compliance.'

Coercion

This refers to power in which a political actor secures change in another's actions or dispositions by threatening that other actor with force. This may be force against the individual ('Either you come quietly or we'll beat you up') or against persons or things valued by the individual ('Come quietly or we'll hurt your children, shoot your dog, and burn down your house'). Coercion is not the same as force, although the two are closely linked. Coercion is the threat of force, not the exercise of force. People submit to coercion to avoid the use of force against them.

Force

Force is direct physical intervention to change a political actor's actions or dispositions. In its most extreme form, force means eliminating actors altogether, a practice found in assassinations, wars and genocide. In a less extreme form, force involves direct physical manipulation of individuals, such as occurs when police remove demonstrators from the steps of Parliament House.

Inducement

Inducement occurs when one political actor gets another to change his or her actions or dispositions by offering that actor a reward. This reward may be material (for example, money), status oriented (a knighthood), or even spiritual (a passage to heaven).

Persuasion

This form of power exists when a political actor changes another's actions or dispositions solely by communicating to the other actor the virtues of, or reasons for, such a change. The first actor convinces the second to change by appealing to the second actor's intellect or emotions. Thus, for example, someone may convince a friend who normally supports Labor to vote for the Australian Democrats in an

election by arguing that the ALP had sold out on its policies and thus no longer deserved support.

Manipulation

Manipulation is any exercise of power in which a political actor conceals his or her intentions or identity from the individual whose actions or dispositions are changed. Consider, as an example, a spy who befriends a government official in order to gain access to secret information.

In situations where power is exercised, it is often difficult to work out exactly what form of power is involved. If a voter at the last federal election decided to vote Liberal following a speech by John Howard, did she change her disposition because she was persuaded by Howard's arguments, or because she was induced by Howard's promise of more money for parents not in the workforce? Forms of political power are rarely found in their pure types, and students of politics have to exercise careful judgments in deciding which types are present in specific political situations.

A temptation which sometimes befalls students of politics in attempts to distinguish types of political power is to ascribe to these different types positive or negative moral overtones. Force, coercion, manipulation and sometimes inducement are seen as bad; persuasion and authority are seen as good. The problem with these moral overtones is that they cannot be applied consistently. In some circumstances, force may be bad; in others—such as the apprehension of violent criminals—it may be very good. Likewise, someone may persuade another to commit bad as well as good acts.

The main feature distinguishing types of power is not morality at all. Rather, each is distinguished by the reason for which one political actor responds to another in the exercise of power. In inducement, it is for reward; in coercion, it is to avoid force; in persuasion, it is by conviction; in authority, the status of the power wielder; in force, through lack of choice; and in manipulation, through unwitting cooperation.

Types of power resources

Each of these reasons can only be achieved if the political actor attempting to wield power possesses appropriate types and amounts of 'power resources'. Thus the police can only exercise coercive power if they are physically fit and possess batons, handcuffs and guns. A prime minister can only persuade electors if he or she has a good research staff and speech-writer, and possesses oratorical skills. Power resources

can be defined as individual or collective assets necessary for providing their controllers with the potential to exercise power (see Wrong 1979: 124–6). A list of such assets in contemporary political systems would include:

Economic resources

Attempting to exercise power almost always requires economic resources. Parties need money to pay organisers; pressure groups need money to publicise their causes; it even costs a few cents to post a letter to a parliamentarian. At a more basic level, control of substantial amounts of capital or labour brings with it the potential for significant power. When mining companies threatened to reduce gold mining in Australia because of a gold tax proposed by the Hawke Government in 1986, the Government abandoned the tax. Similarly, when the Maritime Union threatened disruptive industrial action in 1995, the Keating Government halted its plans for the sale of the ANL shipping line. According to Marxist theorists, economic resources are fundamental in explaining the patterns of power in a society (see chapter 14).

Status resources

Status resources derive from the fact that all societies are divided according to social rank. The bases for these divisions are culturally determined, depending on which qualities are valued by the people within a society. Race, religion, gender, intellect, accent, caste, sporting ability, beauty, noble birth, occupation, mastery of certain arts and wealth are some attributes which, singly or in combination, determine a person's status. These attributes may be used to exercise power over others. Australian environmental groups, for example, have used rock singer Peter Garrett to promote their cause, because they believe that he has the status to change a number of young people's actions and dispositions.

Knowledge resources

Control over knowledge forms a basis for power in a number of ways. Those with information about what actions have or have not worked in the past, or about current factors which need to be taken into consideration, can suggest plausible courses of action for the future. This is the basis for much public service power (see chapter 9). Information about how the political system works is essential for citizens who want

to change or affect government decisions. This is the basis for the power of professional political lobbyists.

Control of the dissemination of information can cause people to change their actions or dispositions, as the power of the media indicates (see chapter 19). Possession of information about another individual's past behaviour may give its possessor power over that individual. Examples of this can be found in the forced resignations of Australian Cabinet ministers who are found to have misused their ministerial positions (see chapter 7).

Solidarity resources

Solidarity exists whenever two or more individuals identify characteristics, goals, enemies, sympathies or interests which unite them. Solidarity enables individuals to combine their other power resources to achieve goals which they could not have achieved on their own. Trade union power, as the very name 'union' suggests, is ultimately based on the solidarity of workers. Unless all the relevant workers refuse to work during a strike, the strike will fail. Similarly, while one vote is not a powerful political resource, the combined vote of several hundred thousand people who recognise that they have common interests is, as the continued existence of Australia's rural party—the National Party—indicates.

Physical coercion resources

These include physical strength and weapons or other instruments with the capacity to 'damage a person or to damage what (s)he values.' (Sederberg 1977: 39). Chinese leader Mao Tse-tung once said, 'Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun'. If this is true, the coercive basis of power remains largely hidden in Australian society. It emerges in the politics of some families, where husbands use their physical strength to exercise power over their wives and children. Physical coercion resources are also sometimes used by individuals wanting to exercise power in local branches of the ALP. Nonetheless, coercion is used openly and routinely as a power resource only by government agencies such as the police. Even for governments, physical coercion is the resource of the last resort, used only when all other resources have failed.

This is only a partial list of power resources, which could easily be extended (see Dahl 1961: 223–67). Rather than do this, it might be more appropriate to develop some propositions about power resources and power.