

Wilson's Theories of Governance

Four Theories of Elite Influence

At least four theories purport to describe and explain the actions of political elites. One theory is associated with the writings of Karl Marx. To Marxists—or at least to some of them, since not all Marxists agree—government, whatever its outward form, is merely a reflection of underlying economic forces, primarily the pattern of ownership of the means of production. All societies, they claim, are divided into classes on the basis of the relationships of people to the economy—capitalists (the bourgeoisie), workers, farmers, intellectuals. In modern society two major classes contend for power—capitalists and workers. Whichever class dominates the economy also controls the government, which is nothing more than a piece of machinery designed to express and give legal effect to underlying class interests. In the United States the government “is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie.”

A second theory, closely related to the first, argues that a nongovernmental elite makes most of the major decisions but that this elite is not composed exclusively, or even primarily, of corporate leaders. C. Wright Mills, an American sociologist, expresses this view in his book *The Power Elite*. To him the most important policies are set by a loose coalition of three groups—corporate leaders, top military officers, and a handful of key political leaders. Different people have different versions of the “power elite” theory. Some would add to the triumvirate listed by Mills the leaders of the major communications media; others would add major labor leaders or the heads of various special-interest groups. The essential argument is the same, however: Government is dominated by a few top leaders, most of whom are outside the government and enjoy great advantages in wealth, status, or organizational position. They act in concert, and the policies they make serve the interests of the elite.

A third theory directs attention to the appointed officials—the bureaucrats—who operate government agencies from day to day. Max Weber, a German historian and sociologist who wrote in the early years of last century, criticized the Marxist position because it assigned exclusive significance to economic power. Weber thought Marx had neglected the dominant social and political fact of modern times—that all institutions, governmental and nongovernmental, have fallen under the control of large bureaucracies whose expertise and specialized competence are essential to the management of contemporary affairs. Capitalists or workers may come to power, but the government agencies they create will be dominated by those who operate them on a daily basis. This dominance would have advantages, Weber thought, because decisions would be made more rationally; but it would also have disadvantages, because the political power of the bureaucrats would become “overtowering.”

A fourth answer has no single intellectual parent but can be described loosely as the pluralist view. Political resources, such as money, prestige, expertise, organizational position, and access to the mass media, are so widely scattered in our society and in the hands of such a variety of persons that no single elite has anything like a monopoly on them. Furthermore, there are so many governmental institutions in which power may be exercised—city, state, and federal governments and, within these, the offices of mayors, managers, legislators, governors, presidents, judges, bureaucrats—that no single group, even if it had many political resources, could dominate most, or even much, of the political process. Policies are the outcome of a complex pattern of political haggling, innumerable

compromises, and shifting alliances. Pluralists do not argue that political resources are distributed equally—that would be tantamount to saying that all decisions are made on a majoritarian basis. They believe that political resources are sufficiently divided among such different kinds of elites (business people, politicians, union leaders, journalists, bureaucrats, professors, environmentalists, lawyers, and whomever else) that all, or almost all, relevant interests have a chance to affect the outcome of decisions. Not only are the elites divided, they are responsive to their followers' interests, and thus they provide representation to almost all citizens affected by a policy.¹

¹James Q. Wilson and John J. DiIulio Jr., *American Government: Institutions and Policies*, 9th ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2004), 8–10.

Theoretical Checklist

Directions: Indicate by letter which of the following theories is described in each statement: bureaucratic theory (*B*); elitist theory (*E*); Marxist theory (*M*); pluralist theory (*P*).

- _____ 1. Economic factors shape political outcomes.
- _____ 2. All decisions are made by a few rather than the whole.
- _____ 3. Policies are shaped by collective bargaining.
- _____ 4. Is a large organized system with slow decision-making ability
- _____ 5. Is characterized by a great deal of discretionary authority
- _____ 6. Is very weakly influenced by public opinion
- _____ 7. Special interests are widely represented.
- _____ 8. Is usually tied to foreign policy and defense policy
- _____ 9. Is a theory that calls for an overthrow of the bourgeoisie
- _____ 10. Power is not dependent upon the ability to win votes.
- _____ 11. Agenda politics have added to the size and demands of this theory.
- _____ 12. Does not account for the role of the judicial branch
- _____ 13. Is most closely related to the current political situation in the United States.
- _____ 14. Is more concerned with following rules than people's wishes
- _____ 15. Power is derived by personal attributes.
- _____ 16. Believes that shaping public policy and distributing resources is key to corporate power