Lecture Notes

# Chapter 12: Politics and Economics: Probing Power, Dissecting Distribution

## Learning Objectives

1. Describe the sociological definition of power.
2. Discuss the importance of power and privilege in societies.
3. Compare the key points of the pluralist and elite theories of power.
4. Explain why some people participate in political systems and others do not.
5. Describe the major types of governmental systems in operation today.
6. Provide examples of the threats political systems can face from internal and external groups vying for power.

## Chapter Overview

Chapter 12 includes an extensive analysis of the interconnections of micro-, meso-, and macro-levels of the political system. The subtitle, “Penetrating Power,” focuses both on how power penetrates our lives and on how a sociological lens can help us penetrate the meanings and consequences of power and what power means in the lives of people. The chapter focuses on politics, but it also connects to the economic systems of privilege and power. Finally, the question of why nations go to war is examined.

## Lecture Outline

I. Introduction

A. The concept of power is critical to understanding many aspects of our social world

II. What is Power?

A. Social philosophers since Plato, Aristotle, and Socrates have addressed the issue of political systems and power.

B. Weber is credited with the most often used definition of power in social sciences: “the ability of a person or group to realize their own will in communal action, even against resistance of others participating in the action”

C. Building on Weber’s analysis:

i. One perspective is that there are various arenas where power is exhibited including politics, work, and culture

ii. A second perspective sees power as the ability to influence social life

iii. A third perspective focuses on a traditional Marxist approach to class structures, arguing that the control of mechanisms of (economic) production allows the ruling class to “exercise its rule and keep state power…”

III. Power and Privilege in the Social World

A. Power is operative at the most micro-levels of interaction, from individuals to family groups

i. Husband-wife, parents-children interactions involve power issues

B. Politics also operates at the meso-level

i. Cities, counties, states/provinces, governments make decisions and pass laws that regulate everything

ii. Large bureaucratic organizations and corporations are also hierarchies of power, operating at the meso-level

C. At the macro-level, global systems of power include international organizations such as the United Nations and World Bank, and military, political and economic alliances such as North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)

D. The power process pervades the micro-, meso-, and macro-levels

E. Power can be studied in political structures such as governments, in political parties, and in different types of political systems

IV. Theoretical Perspectives on Power and Privilege

A. Among the common theoretical perspectives are the following:

i. Interaction theorists focus on symbols and constructions of reality that allow some persons to assume power

1. A core concern is on the legitimacy of power

ii. Rational choice theorists emphasize that people calculate their own self-interests and make choices, including political choices, based on benefits to themselves and avoiding inconveniences or costs

iii. Functionalists believe that citizens legitimize political systems by supporting them

iv. Conflict theorists believe that the state protects the privileged position of a few

1. The power elite theory stems from conflict theory’s contention that power is concentrated in the hands of the elite

B. Micro- and Meso-Level Perspectives: Legitimacy of Power

i. For symbolic interactionists, a central question is how loyalty to the power of the state is created

1. Acquiring and maintaining power involves intense socialization

ii. Social Constructions of Politics: Legitimacy, Authority, and Power:

1. Weber distinguished between legitimate and illegitimate power

a. Legitimate power (or authority), is recognized as rightful by those subject to it

b. How Do Leaders Gain Legitimate Power?

i. Leaders generally gain their positions in one of three ways:

1. Traditional authority – is passed on through the generations so that the positions are inherited

2. Charismatic authority is power held by an individual that results from the claim of extraordinary, even divine, and personal characteristics

3. Rational-legal authority is most typical of modern nation-states; leaders have the expertise to carry out the duties of their positions, and the leadership structure is usually bureaucratic and rule-bound

ii. Each of these three types of authority, according to Weber, is a legitimate exercise of power because the people being governed give their consent

iii. Macro-Perspectives: Who Rules?

1. Pluralist Theory

a. Pluralist theorists believe that power is distributed among various groups so that no one group rules

b. Politics involves negotiation and compromise between competing groups

c. Multiple power centers offer the best chance to maintain democratic forms of government because no one group dominates and many citizens are involved

2. Elite Theory

a. Power elite theorists believe it is inevitable that a small group of elite will rule societies

b. Michels described this pattern of elite domination as the *iron law of oligarchy*

c. C. Wright Mills argues that there is an invisible but interlocking power elite in U.S. society consisting of leaders in military, business, and political spheres who make the key political, economic, and social decisions for the nation

V. Micro-Level Analysis: Individuals, Power, and Participation

A. Political systems influence our personal lives in myriad ways, some readily apparent (e.g., taxation and regulations on food and drugs)

B. A key issue at the micro-level is decisions by individuals to vote or otherwise participate in the political system

C. Participation in the Democratic Processes

i. Ideology and Political Attitudes

1. Political ideology affects how people think about a variety of issues related to power

a. What do we believe about the power of the individual versus the power of the state?

b. Do we believe in equal distribution of resources, or do we think that those who are most able should receive more of the wealth?

c. Do we believe that change is desirable?

ii. Levels of Participation in Politics

1. Wealthy people are more likely to vote

2. US voter turnout is lower than most democratic governments

3. Eligible voters under 30 have been turning out to vote in higher numbers in 21st-century U.S. elections

VI. Meso-Level Analysis: Distributions of Power and Privilege Within a Nation

A. Meso-level political institutions include state or province governments as well as national political parties

B. Meso-level political institutions are influenced by other institutions: family, education, religion, health care, an economics

C. What Purposes Do Political Institutions Serve?

i. Six activities are typical functions of meso-level political institutions:

1. To maintain social control

2. To serve as an arbiter in disputes

3. To protect citizens of the group

4. To make plans for the future of the group

5. To provide for the needs of their citizens

6. To represent the group in relations with other groups or societies

D. Meso- and Macro-Level Systems of Power and Privilege

i. While politics refers to the social institution that determines and exercises power relations in society, economics is the social institution that deals with production and distribution of goods and services

ii. Both focus on questions related directly to the concept of power and power relationships

iii. Government officials have a vested interest in the well-being of the economy, nor should it fail, the state is likely to fail as well

iv. Types of Political Systems

1. Authoritarian Systems-controlled by absolute monarchs or dictators who allow limited or no participation of the population in government and control much of what happens in the lives of individuals

a. The *totalitarian form-any form of government that almost totally controls people’s lives* is often based on a specific political ideology and run by a single ruling group or party, often referred to as an *oligarchy*

b. *State terrorism* – terror is used as a tactic to deal with both internal and external dissent

c. The majority of human beings throughout history have lived under authoritarian or totalitarian systems

2. Democratic Systems

a. Democratic systems are characterized by accountability of the government to the citizens and a large degree of control by individuals over their own lives

b. “Ideal-type” democracies share the following characteristics:

i. Citizens participate in selecting the government

ii. Civil liberties are guaranteed

iii. Constitutional limits are placed on governmental powers

iv. Governmental structure and process are spelled out

v. Written documents such as constitutions are the basis for the development of legal systems

3. *Proportional representation* means that each party is given a number of seats corresponding to the percentage of votes it received in the election

E. Technology and Democracy – the Internet and other telecommunications can be a boon or a burden to democracy

i. Boon, an opportunity for people to gain information necessary to be an informed electorate

ii. Burden, hinders thoughtful debate and civic engagement in ideas through negative campaign tactics

iii. Features of technology that can produce contradictory outcomes

1. Speed and the need for careful deliberation in democratic process

2. The tendency of digital media to reduce everything to simplistic binary opposites, as though only two choices are possible;

3. The tendency to isolate individuals behind their own keyboards and monitors, so that collaborative skills may wane;

4. Pictorial images that sensationalize issues so that decisions are based on emotional responses more than reasoned deliberation;

5. Immoderate, impulsive rhetoric, divisive attacks by people who know little or nothing about the history of the problem (as often happens on blogs and talk shows);

6. The tendency for the Internet (and many other media) to be primarily about commerce—creating a consumer mentality rather than a place for debate and problem solving;

7. A confounding of information (with which we are sometimes overloaded) with wisdom, which is solely needed

iv. Types of Economic Systems

1. As societies become industrialized, one of two basic types of economic systems evolves: planned or market systems

a. *Planned or centralized systems* involve state-based planning and control of property

b. *Market systems* stress individual planning and private ownership of property, with much less governmental coordination or oversight

c. These basic types seldom occur exactly as described

d. Market Systems

i. The goal of *capitalism* is profit, made through free competition between competitors for the available markets

ii. Capitalism was closest to its pure form during the industrial revolution

iii. Marx predicted that capitalism would cause a split into two main classes, the “haves” and the “have nots”

iv. Marx argued that institutions like education, politics, laws, and religion would evolve to preserve the position of the elite

v. One of the major criticisms of pure capitalism is that profit is the only value that drives the system

e. Planned Systems

i. All matters of production and labor are controlled by the government with the common good in mind

f. Democratic Socialism

i. *Democratic socialism* refers to the collective or group planning of the development of the society, but within a democratic political system

ii. Private profit is less important than in capitalism and the good of the whole is paramount

iii. The government uses tax money to nationalize education, health plans and medical care, pensions, maternity leaves, and sometimes housing and transportation for its citizens

iv. Typically, public service industries are government controlled

VII. Macro-Level Analysis: National and Global Systems of Governance and Power

A. Power and the Nation-State

i. A *nation-state* is a political, geographical, and cultural unit with recognizable boundaries and a system of government

ii. There are over 200 nation-states in the world today, 192 of which are represented in the United Nations

iii. The notions of the nation-state and of “nationalism” are so completely internalized as “realities” that we do not stop to think of them as social constructions of reality

iv. Revolutions and Political Rebellions

1. *Revolution* refers to “social and political transformation of a nation, resulting from failure of state regimes”

2. They typically occur when the government does not respond to citizen needs and when leadership to challenge the existing regime emerges

B. The Meso-Macro Political Connection

i. State and national political parties are meso-level organizations that operate beyond the local community but have less influence than national or federal governments

ii. Decisions at the state government level can have major influences in political processes at the national level

1. For example, state and federal policies on same-sex marriage

2. For example, in some states, each political party runs its own causes while other states have primary elections run by the state government (even these are not all the same) – Michigan and Florida in 2008 are good examples of potential conflicts

C. Revolutions and Rebellions

i. Revolution – social and political transformations of a nation that result when states fail their expected

D. The Meso-Macro Political Connection

i. Decisions at the state or provincial government level can have major influences in political processes at the national level

1. Some states use their own caucuses (face to face meetings of voters in homes, schools, and other buildings) to discuss policy and carry out public votes to determine who will nominate the presidential candidate

2. Other states have primary elections run by the state government

ii. Global Interdependencies: Cooperation and Conflicts

1. Dependency theorists and world systems theorists point out the inequality between rich core countries and developing peripheral countries that are dependent on core countries for survival.

2. The more dependent a country is, the more inequality is likely to exist between that country and core countries

3. Young democracies are emerging in peripheral countries; several factors were important for these countries to develop stable democracies

a. Political participation, interest groups, economic growth, control of corruption, and maintenance of order without reducing liberty

iii. Violence on the Global Level

1. War is armed conflict occurring within, between, or among societies or groups

2. It is sometimes called “organized mass violence”

3. War is a frequent but not inevitable condition of human existence

4. Many countries are now engaged in wars that are debilitating

5. Why do Nations go to War?

a. Leaders use moral, religious or political ideology to legitimize war

b. *Functional theorists* think underlying social problems cause disruptions to the system, including war, terrorism, and revolution

c. Some functionalists argue war brings social solidarity

d. *Conflict theorists* see war, terrorism, and revolution as the outcome of oppression by the ruling elite and an attempt to overthrow that oppression

iv. How Can Nations Avoid War?

1. *Deterrence* is one approach to avoiding war

a. Some government officials argue that if a nation is militarily strong, no one will dare attack it and the country will be secure

b. Deterrence is extremely expensive

c. Building weapons does provide jobs and is profitable for companies, giving rise to what is often called the “military-industrial complex”

d. World military expenditures in 2006 were $1,204 billion

2. *Negotiation* is a second approach to avoiding war and resolving conflict

a. The inherent problem, however, is that negotiation means a partial win—and a partial loss—for each side

v. Terrorism

1. *Terrorism* is “the planned use of random, unlawful (or illegal) violence or threat of violence against civilians to create (or raise) fear and intimidate citizens in order to advance the terrorist group’s political or ideological goals”

2. It usually refers to acts of violence by private non-state groups but *state terrorism* is government use of terror to control people

3. *Why do terrorists commit hostile acts?*

a. Without understanding the underlying causes of terrorism, we can do little to prevent it

b. Your terrorist may be someone else’s freedom fighter!

c. Religious and political beliefs lead some terrorists to commit violent acts

i. For example, Timothy McVey and the bombing of the Oklahoma City Federal Building

d. Structural explanations help explain when conditions are right terrorism

i. Terrorism and war are unlikely to exist unless there is conflict and strife within and between societal systems

e. Conflict theory explanations of terrorism lie in the unequal distribution of world resources and the oppression of groups in the social world

i. “The rich get richer and the poor get poorer”

VIII. What Have We Learned?

A. The most direct source of power is the political system, with the ability to influence decisions about how society is run

B. There is no one right way to organize a political system, however, some systems do a between job distributing power, ensuring accountability, and providing checks on abuses of power

C. Healthy political systems need diverse voices and critics—regardless of which party is currently in power—in order to create vibrant societies that represent the citizens