



UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

Politics and Power

van der Brug, W.; Heemskerk, E.

DOI

[10.2307/j.ctt1zqrmq0.4](https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1zqrmq0.4)

Publication date

2017

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Political Science and Changing Politics

License

Article 25fa Dutch Copyright Act Article 25fa Dutch Copyright Act
(<https://www.openaccess.nl/en/in-the-netherlands/you-share-we-take-care>)

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

van der Brug, W., & Heemskerk, E. (2017). Politics and Power. In P. van Praag (Ed.), *Political Science and Changing Politics* (pp. 11-30). Amsterdam University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1zqrmq0.4>

General rights

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

1 Politics and Power

Wouter van der Brug and Eelke Heemskerk

1.1 Introduction

This book is an introduction to political science. What is it that political scientists are actually studying? Or, to put it another way: What do we mean when we talk about politics? Politics is about conflict, struggle, decision-making, power and influence. But not every conflict and not every situation in which power is exercised is widely regarded as politics. A football coach who decides to leave a player on the bench because he has given him a bit of lip, is exerting power – and there is conflict here, too. However, few people would consider this a political issue. The same applies to a mother who quarrels with her adolescent daughter about going to a house party, a schoolteacher who gives a student detention, and so on. But if we were to limit our understanding of politics to official decisions that are taken by governments, in parliaments or on municipal councils, we would fail to recognise the political meaning of trade unions, lobbyists, protest groups, corporations and other more-or-less organised groups that influence collective decision-making.

In the first part of this chapter, we will look at two key concepts in political science: politics and power. Although these are key concepts within political science, there are no generally accepted definitions of either term. Political scientists have defined them in various ways, so they have sometimes drawn different conclusions, such as about the distribution of power. Without wanting to take a position in these debates, we consider it useful to offer insights into the ways these two concepts have been defined by political scientists. That helps clarify the concepts themselves as well as their various aspects. In the second part of this chapter, we will give a brief outline of the research conducted on power. How is political and economic power distributed in democratic societies, and what are the different perspectives on this?

1.2 What is politics?

Although most people have an image of what politics is, it is not easy to define just what we mean by it. If we look at different definitions of the term, three elements are frequently mentioned: decision-making, conflict and power. Each is discussed here, starting with decision-making.

Wherever people live together, they must come to agreement on many issues. That is true even in very small communities and in relatively simple societies. Not every decision, however, is a political decision. Individual decisions are never seen as political, because politics always refers to arranging matters for a group of people. If I decide to buy a house or to go to the beach on Sunday, everyone would agree that this is not a political decision. The mere fact that a group of people is involved, however, still does not automatically mean that the decision-making is political in nature. If a family or a group of friends makes a joint decision to buy a home or go to the beach, these are still not political decisions. A major reason is that if someone does not agree with the idea of buying a house, or does not feel like going to the beach, the others cannot force them. A crucial element of political decisions is that they have a binding character, which means that you cannot pull out if you do not agree. This applies particularly to government decisions. If the city council decrees that I can put out my garbage only on Sunday and Wednesday evenings after 8 pm, I have to comply, even if I disagree. That is why many political scientists define politics as those matters that relate to the affairs of governments or of the state. A characteristic of a state, national or otherwise, or of a government is, after all, that it takes binding decisions. The first Dutch professor of political science to work after World War II, Jan Barents, defined the field as follows: 'Political science is the science that studies the life of the state'. Dutch professor Andries Hoogerwerf defined politics as 'government policy and how it is established'. Approaches that define politics as pertaining only to the domain of governments or the state are referred to as *domain approaches*.

Some scholars find these approaches problematic. One of the problems is that the question of whether a particular problem is the responsibility of government, is itself a point of political dispute. An example is domestic violence, which was generally seen in the nineteenth century as a social problem that should be solved in the private sphere. At most, a pastor or a priest might intervene, but the government should play no role here. Orphanages were private or church institutions. In the Netherlands in the early twentieth century, legislation on child protection was introduced and government agencies were set up, such as the Guardianship Council established in 1905. This was preceded by a political struggle. This is just one example, but there are many domains where an important part of the political struggle is about whether the government has a role to play in regulating these matters. Consider, for instance, drug policy, public transport, the cultural sector or public housing.

Another objection raised against domain approaches is that they are too restrictive, because binding decisions are frequently made outside of the government sphere. For example, a university may decide that students have the right to retake any examination. Even if professors disagree, they cannot simply refuse to go along with the policy. Because it involves a binding decision, one could interpret this as a political decision. By this reasoning, anyone who becomes involved in decision-making of this kind is engaging in (university) politics: the Executive Board, students and staff represented on the Community Board, and so on. Approaches that define politics on the basis of certain aspects of human behaviour (such as the process of taking binding decisions) irrespective of the domain in which these activities occur, are known as *aspect approaches*.

A second element of politics, closely linked to taking binding decisions, is conflict. In a small group of people, it is sometimes possible to take decisions that are supported unanimously, especially if the members of that group have a shared interest in the decisions to be taken. But the larger and more complex the society, the more often the interests and views of different groups will collide, and the more often conflicts will arise. Conflicts divide society. Groups of people on both sides of a conflict stand opposed to each other. Partly as a result, forms of cooperation arise among people who are on the same side of a conflict: by working together with others, you make it more likely that you can settle a conflict to your advantage. Not only in domestic, but also in international politics, this means that there are often long-lasting military or trade partnerships. Conflict and cooperation are thus inseparable, and are considered by many to be essential elements of politics. Michael Laver (1983: 1) argues, for example, that 'any mixture of conflict and co-operation is politics'. This definition is a typical example of the *aspect approach*.

A third element of politics is made up of power and the closely related concept of influence. When there are different positions on an issue and the outcome of the decision is very close to the position of one group, we would tend to say that that group has had more influence. If some actors (individuals, companies, action groups, and so on) frequently succeed in influencing decision-making, we often conclude that these actors are powerful. In addition to conflict and cooperation, power and influence are also key concepts in political science, and there are political scientists, such as Robert Dahl (1963), who put the exercise of power at the heart of their definition of politics.

One disadvantage of definitions of politics that put power, the exercise of power, or conflict and cooperation at the centre, is that the definition of

politics thus becomes very broad. When two groups of football hooligans get into a fight with each other, we have a clear case of cooperation and conflict. But to say that the supporters are thus engaging in politics would seem quite far-fetched. The same applies to the exercise of power. There are many situations where power is exercised, but where few would say that politics is involved. Consider a teacher who sends a troublesome student out of class, a bouncer at a disco who for some vague reason refuses entry to someone at the door, or a parking warden who, rightly or wrongly, writes up a parking ticket. In each of these cases, power is being exercised, but it would be quite a stretch to say that politics is involved.

Limiting definitions of politics to the actions of governments, however, also has its drawbacks, as we have seen. For this reason, the definition of politics offered by David Easton (1965) is popular. He defines it in a rather abstract way as ‘those interactions through which values are authoritatively allocated for a society’. In this definition, politics is a matter of ‘interactions’ – so not the actions of an individual, but the interactions among several people. In addition, it is about ‘the authoritative allocation of values’. ‘Authoritative’ indicates the binding nature of the allocation. Certain cases are settled authoritatively. This means that a group of people is bound to comply with the outcomes. The ‘allocation of values’ is intended to make it clear that politics is not just about material things, but also about immaterial goods to which people attach importance: cultural, ethical, moral or religious matters. Examples include such topics as abortion (under which conditions and when can a pregnancy be terminated), marriage (how many people you can marry; whether they must have reached the age of majority and/or be of the opposite sex), the official languages or the conditions in which you can demonstrate, how often and when you are allowed to ring a church bell, whether you can subject an animal to ritual slaughter, and so on. Authoritative decisions are taken not only domestically: international and transnational politics are also in this category. Trade agreements, military alliances, participation in humanitarian interventions and European directives have consequences for citizens in the countries concerned. Because the citizens in those countries are bound indirectly by these agreements, politics is engaged in at this level, too. There is, after all, an authoritative allocation of values.

Finally, in Easton’s definition, it is a matter of issues that are settled ‘for a society’. Easton is not explicit about what he means by this, but he seems primarily to be referring to nation states. This is, in our view, too restrictive. After all, there are many situations in which issues are settled ‘authoritatively’ for a smaller group of people. In addition, we mentioned that

politics occurs at the transnational level, too. Easton's definition of politics is therefore rather useful, provided that 'society' is interpreted broadly.

This schematic overview shows that there is no generally accepted definition of politics. This is partly because it is a rather complex and abstract concept – and that always makes it difficult to provide a precise definition. In addition, politics is what is known as an 'essentially contested concept'. Such a concept has normative elements – that is, aspects that one can value positively or negatively. In the definition, normative (evaluative) and descriptive elements are usually mingled together. You will come across this often in your studies. If someone says that Russia is not a 'real' democracy, that politician A is a populist and politician B a bureaucrat, or that the financial sector is powerful, we are dealing with statements that are only partially descriptive, but that, above all, imply a normative judgment. In each case, it is important to define what you mean by terms such as democracy, populism, bureaucracy and power. Providing a fuller description and elaboration of a concept, aimed at defining it more clearly, just as we have done with the concept of politics, is something we call 'conceptualising'. Although it is useful to engage in conceptualisation to avoid confusion, we must realise that, in the end, definitions of concepts such as democracy and populism will never be value-free or uncontested.

While there may be no generally accepted definition of politics, it is not the case that political scientists are all studying utterly different topics. It *is* the case, however, that political science as a discipline is not sharply delineated from other research fields, such as economics or sociology.

1.3 Power, sources of power, and influence

Although it is not easy to develop a clear definition of politics, most political scientists do agree that politics has to do with power and influence. In any case, many political scientists are concerned with the question of how political power is distributed within and among countries, and with the ways in which different groups influence political decisions. The concept of power, however, is at least as tricky to define and delineate as is that of politics.

In everyday language, we sometimes say that someone 'is powerful', 'powerless', 'has a lot of power' or 'has the power' to do something. Apparently, power is something one can possess. But what does it mean to say that one has power? Let's start with a definition offered by the aforementioned political scientist, Dahl – that power is a 'successful attempt by A to get B to do something he would not otherwise do'. In this perspective, power

involves a relationship between two actors, A and B. The actors can be people, but also groups. Political power is therefore relational.

Another element in Dahl's definition is that he assumes that A – the one who exerts power over B – is acting deliberately. Both elements, 'acting' and 'deliberately', can be questioned. When Dahl refers to actions of A that partially steer the behaviour of B (who, after all, does something else than he would have done had A done nothing), then Dahl is talking not so much about power as about its *exercise*. It is, of course, possible that A has power over B but does not exercise it. A general in the army has the *ability* to order his soldiers to storm an enemy position. Because he has the *capacity* to order these soldiers to do something they would not otherwise do, we can say that this general has power over them. Yet, only if he gives the order to attack, is he actually exercising his power. In that case, he is having them do something they would otherwise not have done. We must therefore make a distinction between power and the exercise of power. Whoever has power has the *capacity* to partially steer others' behaviour. Power is exercised only when this capacity is actually used.

We can also question the other element: 'deliberately'. If Dahl speaks of a 'successful attempt by A', then he is in fact saying that power is exercised only if the outcome is in accordance with A's intentions. But there are many situations in which the behaviour of B is partly directed by A, without its being based on any intentional behaviour by A. In domestic and international politics, there are all kinds of situations in which power is exercised, but where the one exercising it is not successful in directing the actions of others. Thus many countries have imposed trade sanctions on North Korea, hoping to force it to stop developing nuclear weapons. North Korea, however, just keeps on developing these weapons and testing long-range missiles. The economic sanctions inadvertently affect the people of North Korea in particular. In domestic politics, too, we are continually seeing examples of situations in which politicians exercise power, but in which they do not manage to achieve certain outcomes. When David Cameron, then Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, announced a referendum on membership in the European Union, he was exercising power. After all, millions of Britons did something they would not otherwise have done – vote. And as a result, the UK will be leaving the EU. This outcome in the summer of 2016, however, was precisely the opposite of what Cameron had wanted to achieve, which was to win the referendum, defeat the UK Independence Party and Eurosceptics within his own Conservative Party, and strengthen his own position. Instead, he found himself forced to resign.

We can therefore conclude that the word 'successful' in Dahl's definition of power is unnecessary and that it creates confusion. An actor *has* power over other actors when that actor has the capacity to partly direct the behaviour of others. Power is *exercised* when this actually happens. Power thus has a lot to do with freedom. Whoever has a lot of power is largely autonomous. Anyone with power can determine their own choices. If someone else has power over you, that person can partially determine your choices. But if your choices are determined by others, or if others exercise power over you, then you are less autonomous than if others were to exercise no power over you. However, power does not necessarily have to be used to limit the freedom of the other (the one over whom it is exercised). As Rob Mokken and Frans Stokman rightly point out, power can be used to expand the freedom of the other (see Helmers *et al.* 1975). Slaveholders have an extraordinary degree of power over 'their' slaves, but do not need to use that power to limit the slaves' freedom. After all, they can also use their power to free these slaves. Power is thus a matter not of others having their freedom curtailed, but of the possibly of having their options shaped or changed. Following Mokken and Stokman (see Helmers *et al.* 1975: 37), we can define power as 'the capacity of actors (individuals, groups or institutions) to shape or change, wholly or in part, the set of behavioural alternatives and choices of other actors'.

This definition has a number of implications. The first is that power is always relational. Actors have power over other actors if they can determine, wholly or in part, their behavioural alternatives. That means that, when we talk about power, it is in fact always a matter of *power relations*. Although power relations are often unequal, in practice they rarely involve absolute power (the choices of A are wholly determined by B, but B has no influence at all over A's choices). A state has power over the citizens of the country, but these citizens usually have power over the state, if they can change state institutions or can bring about changes in state leadership. In a democracy, the state has less power over citizens and citizens have more power over the state than in an authoritarian system, especially when it is a well-functioning constitutional state. But even in a country that is ruled in a very authoritarian way, citizens usually have some 'countervailing power', however slight. The same applies to power relations between and among states. Within the European Union, Germany is more powerful than Lithuania or Greece, but this does not mean that these countries have no power in relation to Germany.

A second implication is that power is based on *sources of power*. Sources of power are tools that actors can use to partly shape or change the behavioural

alternatives of other actors – that is, to exercise power. The ability to apply physical violence is, of course, a powerful source of power, thus control over police and the military confers power. Military power in international politics is very important, but only in situations where the threat of military intervention is realistic. Within a country's borders, states usually claim a monopoly on violence. This means that the government has the sole right to use violence to enforce the law, for instance. Control over the means of production is another important source of power, economic and otherwise, both in domestic and international politics. Trade boycotts can be a forceful way to exercise power in international politics, but domestically also, businesses can deploy their sources of economic power to influence policy. Other sources of power include financial capital, networks and relationships (social capital), as well as knowledge and formal positions of authority.

Authority is a very specific source of power. From their positions, government leaders, heads of state, judges, officials, flight attendants, police officers, supermarket managers and many others derive a formal right to exercise power within a specific context. The extent to which authority is indeed a source of power depends greatly on the extent to which those over whom the power is exercised accept that authority and do not call it into question. This acceptance is based mostly on the recognition of the authority as legitimate. In a democratic system, important positions of authority are distributed based on the results of elections. If most people consider this system to be fair, they will often be inclined to recognise the authority of politicians who have acquired power this way and not to call that power into question, except if they think electoral fraud has been committed. The same is true of power that is based on hereditary succession, which historically is or has been the most common way to distribute political power and authority. For a long time, this authority was considered by many to be legitimate, except when there were doubts about blood ties. Paradoxically enough, authority is both a strong and a weak source of power. If those who are subject to the authority of those in power recognise their position as legitimate, they will often comply voluntarily with the power that is exercised on the basis of that position. However, if the authority is not recognised, the position is, by definition, meaningless as a source of power. In general, positions of authority are therefore also supported by other sources of power, such as the army and police, but also by more subtle and seemingly objective and institutionalised mechanisms, such as the granting of awards and titles. If such additional sources of power are lacking, such as in international law, positions of authority often prove to be rather shaky sources of power.

A third implication of Mokken and Stokman's view on power is that power relations are highly dependent on the specific context involved. The extent to which actors can derive power from each of the sources that we mentioned is context-dependent. On the basis of a position of authority, a professor can exert power over a student – for instance by forbidding her to use social media during a seminar. But if that student also works as a flight attendant on an airline, she can prohibit that same professor from using the toilet while the plane is landing. The same is true of politics. A threat of violence is potentially a strong instrument of power, but one that can be used only in rare circumstances. If the Netherlands and Belgium enter into a conflict about the dredging of the Western Scheldt for the port of Antwerp, a military threat is not a useful instrument of power, if only because both sides know that the costs outweigh the possible benefits. Not only is power based, then, on sources of power – it is highly dependent on whether it is plausible that these sources of power will actually be deployed. Power is largely based on reputation. If an actor (a country, a person, a group of people or an organisation) has a reputation for being powerful, other actors will anticipate this and will try to avoid a conflict. If this happens anyway, the actors with the reputation of being powerful have to back it up. Otherwise, they run the risk of damaging their reputation and losing power.

Up to now, we have talked about power, but not yet about the related concept of influence. Many authors regard influence as the deployment of political power. In this perspective, political power is the capacity to determine the behaviour of other actors, while influence is the actual partial determination of others' choices. Mokken and Stokman distinguish power from influence in another way, however – namely on the basis of the choices that actors *have* and of the choices they *make*. In their view, power is about partially shaping the options – that is, the choices – that an actor has. Influence has to do with the determination, in whole or in part, of the choices that another actor makes. This seems a useful distinction, according to which power and influence are related but can still be distinguished from each other. By participating in the euro, countries have ceded some power. They have, after all, given up certain options, such as that of devaluing their own currencies to make them more competitive. Countries then try to exert influence over the policy of the European Central Bank in Frankfurt. Producers exert power over consumers, for example, by offering or not offering certain products. In addition, they try to influence the choices of consumers through advertising. A government that decrees that the rent can go up only by a fixed percentage each year exerts power over landlords. But landlords can lobby each year to influence that percentage.

Seen from this perspective, power has to do with restrictions on, or expansions of, freedom. The options other actors have are broadened or narrowed when power is exercised. When influence is exercised, only the choices actors make are partly directed by other actors, but the options they can choose from do not change. The conceptualisation offered by Mokken and Stokman (in Helmers *et al.* 1975) gives us the following definitions:

- *Power* is the capacity of actors (individuals, groups or institutions) to shape or change, wholly or in part, the set of behavioural alternatives and choices that other actors have.
- We speak of the *exercise of power* when actors (individuals, groups or institutions) shape or change, wholly or in part, the set of behavioural alternatives and choices of other actors.
- *Influence* is exercised when actors (individuals, groups or institutions) determine the behaviour or the choices of other actors within a set of behavioural alternatives and choices that are available to the latter.

1.4 Research on power and elites

There is a long tradition of empirical research in political science on power, the exercise of power, and influence. The remainder of this chapter provides an overview of the most important traditions in power research. This overview also serves to illustrate how the scholarly debate has led to more developed research methods and theoretical conceptualisations of power.

Research on power typically focuses on people or groups that have or exercise power. These powerful actors can be regarded as elite: a privileged group. Someone can belong to an elite because of their special and outstanding competences (such as athletes, soldiers, academics, writers), because of financial capital (such as those in the top 1% of the richest people in the world), because of their social origin (for example, the nobility) or because they occupy influential positions (see, for instance, the annual top 200 in the Dutch newspaper *de Volkskrant*). The one naturally does not exclude the other, and they regularly overlap, such as in the case of a football player who is also a multimillionaire. In practice, privileged positions in one domain often lead to privileged positions in another. Thus, influential jobs can lead to the accumulation of financial capital (for example, because of corruption). And it works the other way too: social origin can help you get a top managerial position, enabling you to exercise power. For example, even after World War II in the Netherlands, members of the nobility and the

aristocracy were significantly over-represented in the top board positions in government and business.

We can distinguish at least four distinct traditions in political science power research. Each emphasises a different aspect of power. The *positional approach* examines power by focusing on actors who occupy influential positions. The *reputational approach* identifies power on the basis of the judgements of those involved. The *decision-making approach* tries to identify power, by closely analysing the process of decision-making, and thus to determine which actors are best placed to have their interests prevail. And the *network approach* focuses on the links among people and institutions. These diverging perspectives on power were an important source of one of the main scholarly controversies in political science: that between the elitists and the pluralists.

Elitists

In his seminal study, *The Power Elite* (1956), sociologist C. Wright Mills argues that a coherent power elite exists in the post-war United States. This power elite, he holds, consists of a network of senior managers, top military figures and leading figures from the state apparatus. Through this network of overlapping relationships, this power elite is coherent. This is the core of the elitist notion: that there is a coherent or unified power elite that dominates society. Mills takes the *positional definition* of power as his starting point. The elite derives its power from the positions its members occupy at the top of large organisations. According to Mills, the members of the power elite occupy the 'strategic command posts of the social structure, in which are now centered the effective means of the power and the wealth and the celebrity which they enjoy' (Mills 1956: 73-74). This elite takes crucial decisions that affect security, the economy and the well-being of the whole society, and thus exercises power.

An elite has two important characteristics: it is a group that has some coherence and whose members recognise each other as such. A group identity thus arises that distinguishes those who belong to it from those who do not. This identity is the basis for a social class whose members accord each other recognition as equals. Max Weber calls this a status group: 'a plurality of persons who claim a special social esteem for themselves' (Weber 1978: 306). Although it is often said of Mills that he sees the power elite as a social class, he himself is strikingly cautious on this issue. He merely points out that the members of the power elite are particularly strongly interconnected, through tight-knit social networks. By taking this

step, Mills adds a network perspective to his concept of power. In his view, it is precisely through relational coherence that the power elite is able to take the most important decisions in society *as a group*.

Mills's well-written study relies on many sources, statistics, newspaper articles, anecdotes, observations and references to other research. This approach makes his study comprehensive, but also rather imprecise. That cannot be said of another important pillar in the theory of power elites: Community Power Structure by Floyd Hunter (1953). In this study, Hunter takes a detailed look at power relations of city politics in Atlanta, Georgia, in the United States. Instead of Mills's *positional approach* he develops the *reputational approach*.

First, Hunter asked each of 14 experts on politics in Atlanta (with a population at the time of about half a million inhabitants) to name 10 politically powerful people in that city. On the basis of the experts' assessment, he cut this list down to 40 names. As a check, he posed the same question to leaders of the African-American community and to social workers. Here, too, the same names were raised.

Fully in line with the power elite theory, Hunter found that political power in Atlanta was in the hands of only a small number of business people, senior officials and lawyers. In addition, this elite group was a network. Local policy was established in a structure 'held together by common interests, mutual obligations, money, habit, delegated responsibilities, and in some cases by coercion and fraud' (Hunter 1953: 113). Whereas Hunter had used a reputational method to determine the power elite and Mills a positional one, they shared the view that the power elite is held together by strong social networks and shared interests. But not everyone could support their findings or their research methods – far from it.

Pluralists

The elitists came under criticism from the pluralists. Hunter's reputational method in particular was criticised: the pluralists saw it as fundamentally problematic. In their view, he should not have asked *who* the power elite was in Atlanta, but *whether* there was a power elite in the first place. By using the reputational method, they said, Hunter came up with answers that were a foregone conclusion (namely that there is a power elite). Pluralists point out that while there may very well be a group of influential people, there are major and irreconcilable differences among various factions within it. The elite is not uniform but pluriform. The most famous critique of Hunter is in Dahl's *Who Governs?* (1961). According to Dahl and his colleagues, research

should always be carried out on the basis of empirical observations that are focused on testing and refuting assumptions. In addition, they use a 'behaviouristic' approach and investigate only on observable behaviour.

Dahl examined the political decision-making on urban renewal, education, and party nominations in the town of New Haven, Connecticut, in the United States. To this end, he used neither the positional method nor the reputational method, but developed his decision-making method. This approach to power research focuses on decision-making around central points of political struggle, where observable conflicts of interest exist, as well as conflict itself. After all, only if there are conflicts of interest, it is possible to determine who wins and who loses. Whoever sees their interests prevail when it comes to decision-making is regarded as powerful. For every political decision on the three aforementioned topics, Dahl thus determined who had taken part in the decision-making process. For all participants, he then determined who had proposed alternatives and whether these had been rejected or adopted, as well as whether there had been a veto. On this basis, Dahl came up with an index of success or failure for each participant. The outcomes of his research were remarkable. On the one hand, Dahl confirmed that power is not distributed equally. In New Haven, too, there was a small group of decision-makers. On the other hand, and by contrast to Mills and Hunter, Dahl observed not a cohesive power elite, but a political arena where various stakeholders had access to policy-making processes and could assert their influence. Sometimes one group won, and sometimes another. There was no dominant group that dominated decision-making. And although there was a small group of decision-makers (indeed an elite), Dahl emphasised the differences within it. The elite was so pluriform that there was too little cohesion for them to be one ruling class or power elite.

In a short period of time, the scholarly debate between the elitists and pluralists produced three research methods: Mills's positional method, Hunter's reputational method and Dahl's decision-making method. Mills and Hunter adhered to an elitist view of power; Dahl to a pluralistic one. Pluralists criticised the elitists' research methods because they could never lead to a conclusion other than that there is a single power elite. However, the research of the pluralists also came under criticism: that the decision-making method was too restrictive.

1.5 Two faces of power

In their famous article 'The two faces of power', Peter Bachrach and Morton Baratz (1962) criticized the pluralists' conceptualisation of power. They found the pluralist vision of power superficial, limited and misleading. Dahl might be right, they said, that power manifests itself when A gets B to do something he would not otherwise do. But with their emphasis on observable decision-making, the pluralists studied just one side of power, namely the decision-making processes already underway. In addition to this 'first face', they argued, power also has a 'second face', which is about agenda setting. After all, actors can exercise power if they can ensure that the interests of other actors do not make it onto the political agenda and thus do not even reach the decision-making process. In this way, A limits B's scope for action and thus exercises power. According to Bachrach and Baratz, if a topic does not make it onto the political agenda, there is a 'non-decision'. The crucial insight was that power can be exercised even in the case of non-decisions. Determining the political agenda is also part of the exercise of power.

Incidentally, Mills already recognised that researchers should look at more than just observable decision-making. He writes that the power elite's 'failure to act, their failure to make decisions, is itself an act that is often of greater consequence than the decisions they do make' (Mills 1956: 4). For Mills, the insight that non-decisions are also part of the exercise of power was precisely why he believes researchers should not look at decision-making only to determine who has power. The researcher will lose sight of all these non-observable aspects. Therefore, Mills developed his positional approach. Bachrach and Baratz, however, did follow the pluralists' perspective, according to which research should focus on the results of decision-making where there are conflicts of interest. Their critique of Dahl is that not only are the overt conflicts of interest relevant, but also those that are covert. Researchers who use the decision-making method of power research should therefore always record exactly what individuals (or groups of people) think of certain topics. Attention should be paid here both to openly expressed objections and to covert concerns and grievances that are unspoken.

1.6 The third dimension of power

Steven Lukes sums up the discussion on power research in his *Power: A Radical View* (1974). He argues that the pluralists have a one-dimensional

vision of power, and that Bachrach and Baratz, with their addition of the notion of power through non-decisions, have a two-dimensional vision. Lukes subsequently sharply criticises the behaviourist approach, whereby research on power revolves around actual, observable conflicts. He argues that power can be involved even where there are no observable conflicts. He calls this the third dimension of power. There may also be 'latent conflicts', in which, because of the exercise of power by another, actors do not have clear insight into their own 'real' interests. As Lukes writes: 'A may exercise power over B by getting him to do what he does not want to do, but he also exercises power over him by influencing, shaping, or determining his very wants.' If we see things in this way, we cannot assume that the absence of conflict or disagreement amounts to actual consensus.

If we take 'real' but 'unknown' interests as our point of departure, A has power over B by determining what B wants. For is it not so, as Lukes argues, that the supreme form of power involves getting others to have desires that you want them to have? According to this vision, a politician can exercise power by whispering certain wishes into his constituents' ears. On the one hand, the introduction of this third dimension of power is appealing. It is likely that ideology or culture may lead people to develop blind spots regarding their 'true' interests. It is therefore not difficult to understand why Lukes's approach became popular among academic and political movements such as Marxism, which set themselves up as defenders of people's true but veiled interests. On the other hand, the third dimension is rather problematic for the empirically oriented power researcher. After all, how can a researcher reveal somebody's 'true' interests?

1.7 The Amsterdam network approach to research on power

Political scientists in Amsterdam in the late 1960s also paid significant attention to the important discussion between pluralists and elitists. A group around Rob Mokken and Frans Stokman offered a fundamental critique of the research being conducted by both the elitists and the pluralists. Their view was that power and influence were seen in terms that were too personalistic in both camps; it was all about individuals and groups of people who had power to a greater or lesser extent. According to Mokken and Stokman, the question of power had to do precisely with the extent to which these individual 'leaders' were linked together in a community of interests made up of organisations and institutions. They thus turned the social coherence that Mills and Hunter stressed, and that Dahl *et al.* called

into question, into a research topic. In addition, they broadened the research field by making organisations such as businesses, banks, universities and ministries into objects of research. They used a broad definition of politics that was more in the tradition of Mills than of Dahl.

In their pioneering study *Graven naar macht* (Tracing Power, Helmers *et al.* 1975), they examined economic power structures and focused on the largest companies in the Netherlands. They thus latched onto a very topical discussion that was then being conducted. In 1968, the corporate elite came into the public eye when the President of the Dutch Catholic Trade Union, P. J. J. Mertens, said at a meeting in Sneek, the Netherlands, that the country's entire economy was in the hands of around 200 people. 'Of a group of people who know each other well and who often meet each other on various boards. It is a group that is as knowledgeable and financially strong as it is frightening', he said. All the newspapers went looking for this so-called 'Mertens's 200', and lists of senior figures appeared in major newspapers: *Het Parool*, *de Volkskrant*, and the *Haarlems Dagblad*. The Political Party of Radicals (*de Politieke Partij Radicalen*, PPR) called for a parliamentary inquiry into economic power in Netherlands. Mokken and Stokman decided to scientifically investigate the existence of 'Mertens's 200'. They saw this as an excellent opportunity to apply the newly developed method of network analysis (based on mathematic graph theory) to a political science topic. It was ground-breaking research, where for the first time computer assisted network analysis was used in social science. With this new method, they mapped out the 'old boys' network' of companies that were linked together by overlapping memberships of boards of directors or supervisory boards. The outcomes of their study confirmed that there was indeed a group of almost 200 people who, by creating interlocking directorates and dual functions, bridged different parts of a close-knit network that connected the boardrooms of the largest companies in the Netherlands. Banks played a central role in this network. 'Banks have the power', ran the headline in one newspaper. But entirely contrary to their aim, attention in the media then focused far more closely on the people who spanned the network than on the organisations and businesses whose interests were being served.

The conclusion that there was a connected close-knit corporate elite in the Netherlands was to a large degree in line with the conclusions of the elitists in the United States. The network analysis was, however, a more powerful test, because other outcomes had been possible, namely that there were multiple networks operating separately.

1.8 Research on power in the twenty-first century

Politics and power are key concepts in political science, and form the basis for much of the research in the field. Today, research on power is no longer limited to fairly specific investigations, such as those done by Dahl, Hunter and Mills, but is conducted on a wide range of topics and issues. If you look closely, however, you will see that the theoretical and methodological discussion between the pluralists and the elitists still influences present-day political science research. We will mention a few examples of current research themes where power and influence play a more or less explicit role. This is certainly not an exhaustive list, and during your studies you will regularly encounter fundamental issues relating to politics, power and influence.

Power and influence naturally play a role in research on lobbying activities. Through lobbies, interest groups (companies, NGOs, governments, and so on) aim to influence political decision-making. The power base of a lobby is closely linked to the advantage it has in terms of knowledge, financial resources and political contacts. The car industry lobby, for example, has both strong political networks and a solid financial base. It has effectively exerted its influence to ensure, for instance, that the strict limits on the emissions of pollutants were measured and recorded in a flexible way. An effective lobbying campaign does not start when a topic is ready for decision-making, but long before that. You have the greatest impact when the agenda is being shaped (see also chapter 9). An important period for lobbyists in the Netherlands is therefore the moment when political parties are setting up their election platforms. A good lobbying effort ensures that all its interests are being promoted at that early moment when agendas are being shaped. In the process of European policy-making, lobbyists play an even more important role than in the Netherlands (Lelieveldt & Princen 2015).

Comparative political economists study the direct influence of businesses through lobbies, as well as the 'structural power' of corporate business. Political parties and politicians depend on business, because they make important investment decisions that affect the economy and employment. Because politics depends on business, it will try to serve its interests well. The argument is that politics does this on its own initiative, without any need for business to ask. Thus, business has a 'structural' influence on politics (Culpepper 2015).

A related field of political-economic research focuses on the politics relating to financial markets. Stock exchange and currency rates are unruly and sometimes chaotic, but at the same time they have an enormous influence

on our well-being. Consider the financial crisis that began in 2008 and the plight that then arose when governments such as in Greece, through the failure of bailouts and through declining economic growth, proved to be technically insolvent. A key issue in political economy is who wins and who loses in such times of economic uncertainty, and this is largely determined by which groups have more power and influence and can thus affect the results.

Another important field of research in political economy examines how financial and other markets are regulated by national and international institutions, and just what power and influence these institutions can exert. There are international rules on how much capital banks must keep in reserve in relation to the loans they make. Small changes can have a major impact on economic growth, but also on the emergence of market bubbles and crises. The decision-making process generally has a rather technical character, but this does not mean that important issues of power do not play a role (Pagliari & Young, 2013).

In public administration, close attention is paid to the power and influence that citizens and interest groups wield over political decision-making at the local, regional, national and international levels. An ongoing topic of research is how the decision-making process can be set up in such a way that there is an optimal mix of input and influence from all concerned parties without this hindering the effective exercise of policy. This kind of research goes beyond the idea that power involves a relationship between two actors. Here, power is studied as a set of interactions within a policy network. Research is also being done on how actors can exercise power by giving an authoritative *interpretation* of the rules, and thus in effect, exercising power and influence. Consider, for example, the government that, in view of the changing welfare state, calls on citizens to behave responsibly and to take an active part in civil society. We clearly see here elements of the third dimension of power discussed above (Lukes 1974).

The research tradition initiated by the Amsterdam school of network research on power and influence has also been continued. The pioneering early work of Meindert Fennema on international power networks between banks and industry (1982) is the basis for follow-up studies that map out how and to what extent the financial-economic elites around the world are cross-linked with each other (Heemskerk *et al.* 2016). With the help of advanced analytical techniques and increasingly large data files, we are getting better at measuring how business is cross-linked around the world and what this means for, among others, global geopolitical relations (Heemskerk & Takes, 2016). Recent network research also gives us a better understanding of the rapidly growing position of power that financial

institutions, such as passive investment funds, have on business through the concentration of ownership (Fichtner *et al.* 2017).

These are just a few examples of how power and influence are the subject of research in political science. In addition, there are numerous other social issues where power turns out to be crucial, such as in discussions on limiting top incomes in business and the public sector, or in the debate triggered by Thomas Piketty (2014) on the inequality created by the consolidation of power in the hands of the richest one percent. Also, there is still much attention being paid to the lists of who does and who does not belong to an elite. For example, the Quote 500 defines a Dutch elite on the basis of capital as a source of power, but beyond that, does not necessarily seem interested in just how powerful these people are. The annual '200 Most Powerful People' in *de Volkskrant* newspaper is interested, though. This ranking of the governing elite is drawn up on the basis of a positional network analysis and a journalistic interpretation of the results. Power and influence continue to be key concepts in both academic research and public debate.

1.9 Conclusion

This discussion of a number of currents in research on power shows that good research is no simple matter. Following in the footsteps of many others, we have defined power as a capacity that does not necessarily have to be used. This means that power often is invisible, making research on it quite difficult. The danger is that the concept will quickly be equated with the sources of power available to actors. Comments such as 'the rich are powerful' are true, then, by definition, and cannot be subjected to empirical scrutiny. This problem also makes itself felt in the work of Mills, since he uses only important positions as a source of power in defining the power elite. The behaviourists' solution – to put only the observable exercise of power at the centre – is, however, similarly problematic, especially because determining just who is exercising power is not always straightforward. Research on power research is also tricky because most people are inclined to ascribe less power to themselves and more to others than is realistic. This can lead to conspiracy theories in which the power of certain groups is overestimated by exaggerating cooperation within those groups and denying the social dynamics that produce certain outcomes. When looking from the outside at the elite, one is prone to overestimating the power that they have and the unity and connectedness that bind them. We should avoid these kinds of pitfalls by investigating power relations systematically.

References

- Bachrach, P. & Baratz, M.S. (1962). 'Two Faces of Power', *American Political Science Review*, 56 (04): 947-952.
- Culpepper, P. (2015). 'Structural Power and Political Science in the Post-Crisis Era', *Business & Politics*, 17 (3): 391-409.
- Dahl, R.A. (1961). *Who Governs? Democracy and Power in an American City*. New Haven/London: Harvard University Press.
- Dahl, R.A. (1963). *Modern Political Analysis*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall.
- Easton, D. (1965). *A Systems Analysis of Political Life*. New York: Wiley.
- Fennema, M. (1982). *International Networks of Banks and Industry*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers.
- Fichtner, J., Heemskerk, E.M. & Garcia-Bernardo, J. (2017). Hidden Power of the Big Three? Passive Index Funds, Re-Concentration of Corporate Ownership, and New Financial Risk, *Business & Politics*, 19(2): 298-326.
- Heemskerk, E.M., Fennema, M. & Carroll, W.K. (2016). The Global Corporate Elite after the Financial Crisis: Evidence from the Transnational Network of Interlocking Directorates, *Global Networks*, 16 (1): 68-88.
- Heemskerk, E.M., & Takes, F.W. (2016). The Corporate Elite Community Structure of Global Capitalism, *New Political Economy*, 21 (1): 90-118.
- Helmers, H.M., Mokken, R.J., Plijter, R.C. & Stokman, F.N. (1975). *Graven naar macht* [Tracing Power]. Amsterdam: Van Gennep.
- Hunter, F. (1963). *Community Power Structure: A Study of Decision Makers*. Doubleday.
- Lakshman, H. & Princen, S. (2015). *The Politics of the European Union* (2nd ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Laver, Michael (1983). *Invitation to Politics*. Oxford: Martin Robertson; New York: Basil Blackwell.
- Lukes, S. (1974/2005). *Power: A Radical View*. Basingstoke/New York: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Mills, C.W. (1956/2000). *The Power Elite*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Pagliari, S. & Young, K.L. (2014). Leveraged Interests: Financial Industry Power and the Role of Private Sector Coalitions, *Review of International Political Economy*, 21 (3): 575-610.
- Piketty, T. (2014). *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*. Cambridge (MA): The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Weber, M. (1978). *Economy and Society*. Berkeley: University of California Press.