

POLITICAL SOCIOLOGY

(Hilary 2024)

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4. Political elites

<http://users.ox.ac.uk/~sfos0060/PoliticalSociology.shtml>

Introduction

How is power distributed in democracy?

- Median voter: parties converge at the centre of preference distribution (Downs 1957)
 - Pluralism: different coalitions of interest groups and voters prevail on different issues; 'dispersed inequalities' (Dahl 1961)
 - **Power elite**: power wielded by corporate owners/managers overlapping with 'upper class' (Mills 1958; Domhoff 1978)
1. What is the 'political elite'?
 2. Does this elite exercise power?
 3. How can it exercise power?

'Power elite' (Domhoff)

½-1% of population

1. Social life

- schools e.g. Eton, universities
- clubs e.g. Whites (Bond 2012)
- kinship, marriage

2. Economic control

- managers, also non-executive directors (Bond 2007)
- interlocking directorships integrate all major companies



—overlapping networks overcome problem of collective action

3. Public face

- formal organizations (e.g. chambers of commerce, CBI)
- think tanks (e.g. Institute of Economic Affairs, Adam Smith Institute, TaxPayers' Alliance)
- media (e.g. *Financial Times*; Murdoch empire)
- non-profit organizations

Conceptions of power over (Lukes 1974)

1. Occupying formal leadership positions
2. Prevailing over others in political conflict

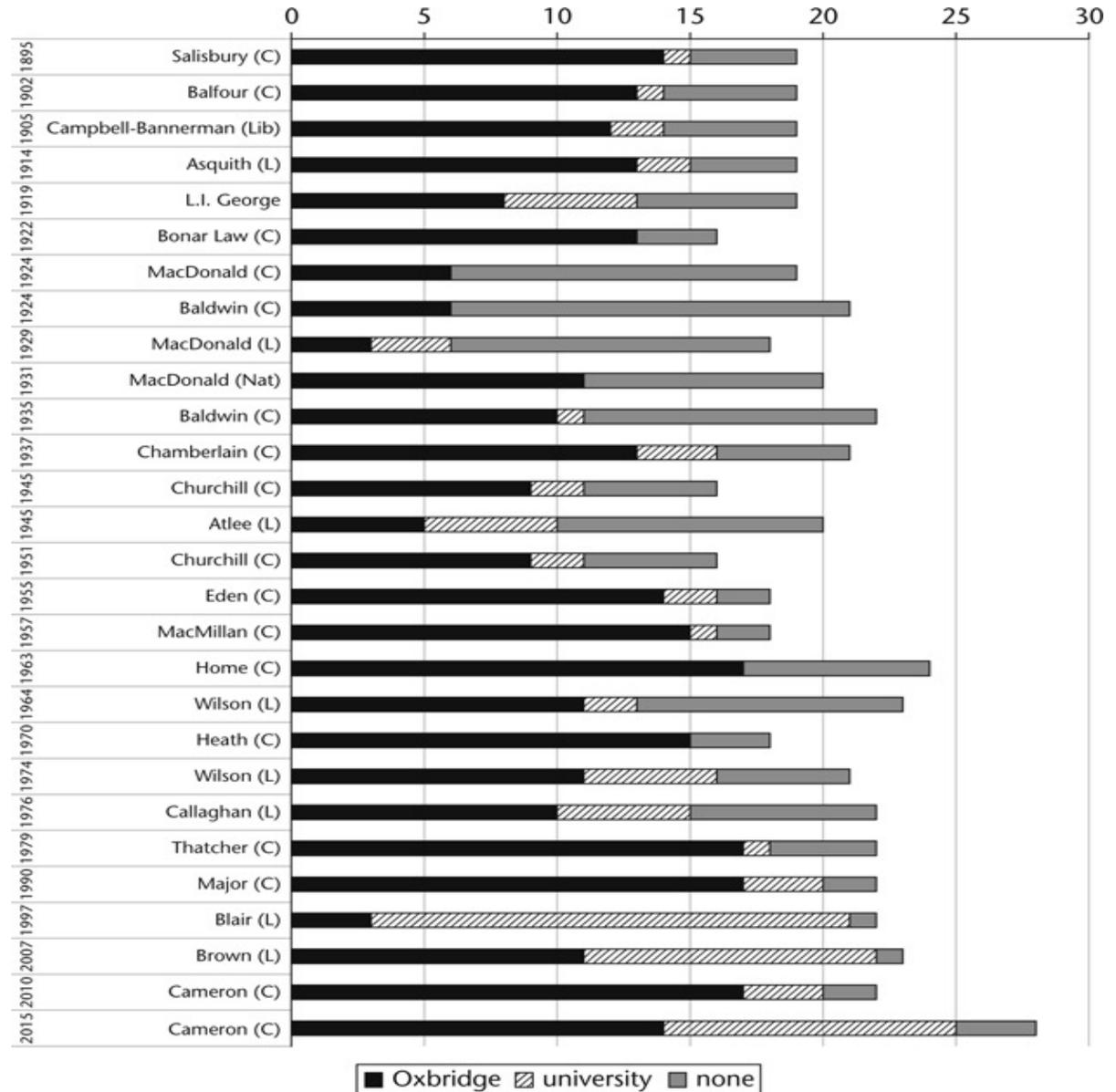
Weber: power is ‘the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance’

3. Preventing others from creating political conflict
 - via threats or agenda-setting
 4. Manipulating others to take your interests for their own
- ... increasing methodological difficulty!

I. Occupying

- Median for OECD countries:
 - 3% of national legislators are from working-class (incl. clerical)
 - 56% of labour force (Carnes & Lupu 2023)

British cabinets, 1885–2015
(Bovens and Wille 2017)



2. Prevailing

Case histories of policy-making

- e.g. urban redevelopment in New Haven, Connecticut, 1950s
 - Dahl (1961): impetus comes from populist mayor, and business plays minor role
 - Domhoff (1978): policy initiated by businesses (interlocks centred on New Haven First National Bank) and Yale, favouring both



Quantitative comparison of voters' attitudes with policy change

- 3,000 policy proposals across 40 years in Europe: distribution of opinion by income; did policy change within 5 years? (Persson & Sundell 2023)
 - 54% of policies favoured by lowest quintile were enacted
 - 57% of highest quintile!
- 2,000 policies over 20 years in U.S. (Branham et al. 2017 after Gilens & Page 2014)
 - where majority of rich (90th %ile) and of middle (median) conflict
 - middle prevail 43%
 - rich prevail 53%—not always conservative

Q. Does this challenge the idea of a power elite?

- Opinion surveys cannot identify the power elite
 - the wealthiest 1% are far more right-wing on economic policy, and even the wealthiest 0.1% more so (Page et al. 2013)
- Issues prevented ...

3. Preventing

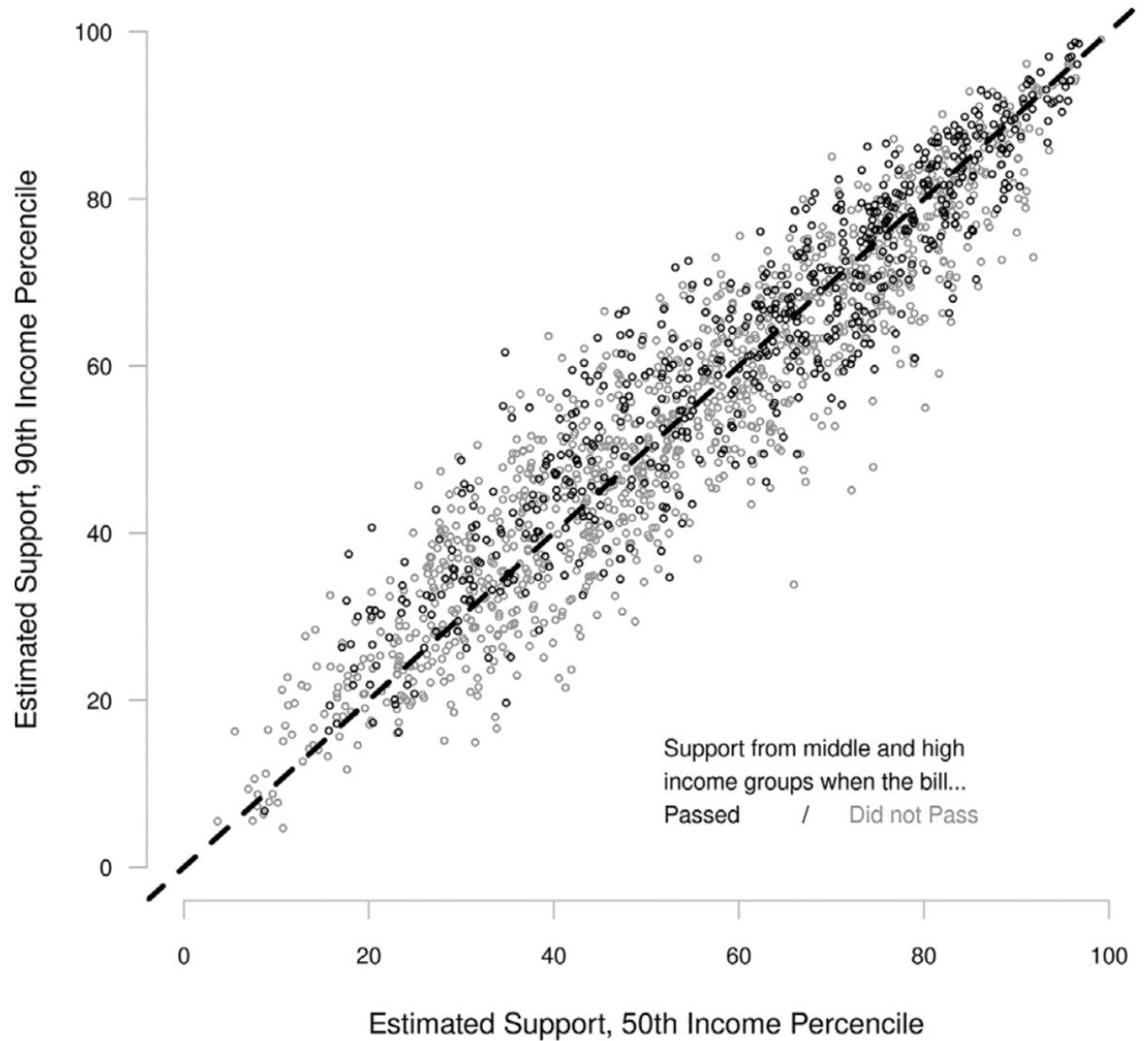
Policies adopted without overt conflict:

- intellectual property rights
 - U.S. Sonny Bono Copyright Term Extension Act 1998, adding 20 years to copyright, passed by voice vote
 - U.K. Digital Economy Act 2010, passed in “wash up” period, less scrutiny

Policies *not* adapted to change—“drift” (Hacker & Pierson 2010):

- U.K. non-dom status
- U.K. & U.S. income of hedge-fund managers taxed at much lower rate
- English council tax bands valued by 1991 prices

Policy Support for People with Middle and High Incomes, 1,779 Issues



Considerable agreement
between rich and middle in
U.S.! (Branham et al. 2017)

4. Manipulating

- How do you determine objective interests?
- Material benefits?
 - poor oppose inheritance tax, rich support minimum wage!
- Misinformation:
 - e.g. U.S. support for Iraq War ex post (Kull et al. 2003)
 - support largely explained by misperceptions:
23% (0) to 86% (3)
 - misperceptions explained by partisanship and by news source, esp. Fox News

Direct mechanisms

- Politicians need resources to win office; these come from economic elite—*but also* trade unions
 - U.S. Congressmen are more likely to meet with people described as ‘donors’ rather ‘constituents’ (Kalla & Broockman 2016)
- Politicians and officials can earn in office or afterwards
 - Conservative MPs who hold outside job ask 60% more parliamentary questions, most on behalf of their client (Weschle 2022)
 - winning election as Conservative MP (1950–70) doubles wealth at death, presumably due to directorships and consultancies (Eggers & Hainmueller 2009)
 - former U.S. Senate staffers as lobbyists earn \$177k (1/4) less when their Senator leaves office (Vidal, Draca, & Fons-Rosen 2010)

Indirect mechanisms: shaping opinion

I. Shape public opinion

- corporate media ownership (Murdoch)
- buying expert judgment—at least increasing uncertainty
 - smoking gun for tobacco (Proctor 2011)
 - ‘Doubt is our product, since it is the best means of competing with the body of fact that exists in the minds of the general public’ (VP of Marketing, British American Tobacco, 1969)
 - scientists and economists on climate change
 - Lord Giddens: ‘As one-party states go, Libya is not especially repressive. Gadafy seems genuinely popular’ (*Guardian*, 9 March 2007); Libya paid Monitor Group US\$2m

Indirect mechanisms: capitalist veto

‘capitalists, in their collective role as investors, have a veto over state policies in that their failure to invest at adequate levels can create major political problems for the state managers’ (Block 1977)

- Disinvestment after 2008: ‘capital strikes as a corporate political strategy’ (Young et al. 2018)
- Bank bailouts—U.K. banks take \$14b, U.S. give \$8-10b despite revolving door and financing, because HSBC has structural power (Culpepper & Reinke 2014)

Summary

- Four levels of power:
occupying; prevailing; preventing; manipulating
- 'Power elite': overlapping social and economic networks, $\leq 1\%$
- Elite exercises disproportionate power;
extent varies with issue, over time, across countries
- Various mechanisms, from direct to indirect

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