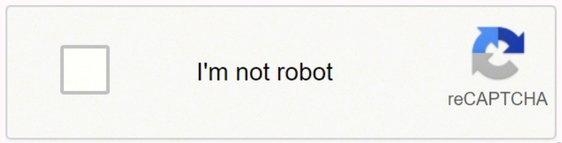

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What is the meaning of power in government

In this article, we explore the definition of power in politics by looking at 6 different quotes from different authors. Politics of power is, for many, the most complex understanding of politics because power itself is intangible — we cannot touch or see it — we can only feel its effects. And yet to say that power does not exist because we cannot touch or see it would clearly be wrong, and so we are left trying to understand it through different conceptualisations. You will find six different definitions of power below. For each of the definition I have given the author's key text for the purposes of exploring their conceptualisation further. Consider if you think each definition is a suitable definition of power, before reading the further detail below each quotation. This will help you both understand the concept of power and revise the topic. There are no right or wrong answers for this, only more or less convincing arguments. Thomas Hobbes – 'power over' 'power simply is no more, but the excess of the power of one above that of another' Hobbes, T. (1969) The Elements of Law, Natural and Politic. Cass, London. A highly intuitive definition of power, this would be akin to the power someone might be able to demonstrate over a nail by hammering it. If your immediate thought was that as the educator on this course I have power over you, the learner, bear in mind that you take this course voluntarily, I have designed the course according to a number of learning objectives and quality assurance processes for which I am accountable and there is also a complaints procedure. Perhaps you still think that I have power over you as a learner, or even that you have power over me, but how might we measure this? Would this imbalance change in a different context, such as if we met each other in the supermarket? Max Weber Power is 'the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his will despite resistances' Weber, M. (1978) Economy and Society. University of California Press, Berkeley. Weber's contribution to the discussion of power is the recognition that it exists only within a relationship: that relationship can be defined in different ways and, therefore, the type of power exhibited depends upon the type of relationship. For example, the relationship that we have as learner and educator is different to the relationship we might have if we met each other in the supermarket, so Weber accounts for a shortcoming in Hobbes' definition. Nevertheless, the definition implies that resistance is always negative. But is it? Robert Dahl – 'intuitive idea' 'A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do' Dahl, R.A. (1957) The Concept of Power. Behavioural Science, 2, 201-215. Another intuitive definition of power from the American political theorist Robert Dahl, this again seems fairly straightforward. However, again, power in this understanding is only repressive, it is not constructive. A second problem with the definition is that it is highly gendered: although some might argue that using the word 'he' in place of 'they' is simply an archaic writing convention, does it not nevertheless belay a focus on men in the public sphere of debate? Hannah Arendt Power is 'the ability not just to act, but to act in concert' Arendt, H. (1970) On Violence. Harvest Books, Orlando and London. Arendt was a Jewish, German political philosopher who wrote a number of prolific works on the Nazi war crime tribunals. She was famous for contrasting violence with power: violence was something you used by yourself to get what you wanted from others, as the Nazi's demonstrated, whereas power is the ability to come together as a group in order to reach shared goals. One problem with this conceptualisation however is that it very specifically locates power in the individual, and we lose the idea of social relationship that we had in Weber. Talcott Parsons Power is a 'mechanism operating to bring about changes… in the process of social interaction' Parsons, T. (1963) On the Concept of Political Power. Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society, 107, 232-262. Parsons was a famous functionalist sociologist who wrote in the 1950s and 60s about the role of the family. His conceptualisation of power clearly emerges from his work, which suggests that the idea of the family emerges as a result of changes in society. Perhaps here, however, we have gone too far in recognising the importance of structure and we have lost an account of agency? Where is the individual in this account? Can the individual ever be powerful? Foucault 'Power as such does not exist' but power 'needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social body' Foucault, M. (1982) The Subject and Power. Critical Inquiry, 8, 777-795. By far away the most complicated conceptualisation of power, Foucault understands power to be implicated in every thought and action that takes place, whether this be human action or otherwise. Everything is powerful to the extent that everything has an affect on everything else, no matter how imperceptible this effect might be. The task of political analysis then is to highlight and understand the different ways in which different actions can affect other individuals, groups and their actions. This shows grade level based on the word's complexity.This shows grade level based on the word's complexity.noun (used with a singular or plural verb)political action characterized by the exercise or pursuit of power as a means of coercion.international diplomacy based on the use or threatened use of military or economic power.QUIZ YOURSELF ON "ITS" VS. "IT'S"!Apostrophes can be tricky; prove you know the difference between "it's" and "its" in this crafty quiz!On the farm, the feed for chicks is significantly different from the roosters'; _____ not even comparable.TAKE THE QUIZ TO FIND OUT First recorded in 1935–40power of the purse, power pack, power plant, power play, power point, power politics, power press, Powers, power saw, power series, power setDictionary.com Unabridged Based on the Random House Unabridged Dictionary, © Random House, Inc. 2022(functioning as singular) (in international affairs) the threat or use of force as an instrument of national policyCollins English Dictionary - Complete & Unabridged 2012 Digital Edition © William Collins Sons & Co. Ltd. 1979, 1986 © HarperCollins Publishers 1998, 2000, 2003, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2009, 2012WORD OF THE DAYrebecnoun | [ree-bek]SEE DEFINITIONFEEDBACK© 2022 Dictionary.com, LLC In this section, we will discuss the government and the political system in terms of their impact on individuals and larger social systems. In order to help us understand and discuss our political system, we must first define government. Government is a political institution with formal methods of acquiring and exercising power and authority. This political institution encompasses all the means and processes by which a society maintains order. The two underlying elements of a government are power and authority—as sociologists, let's examine them both separately, and then consider how they may be interrelated. Power is an entity's or individual's ability to control or direct others, while authority is influence that is predicated on perceived legitimacy. Consequently, power is necessary for authority, but it is possible to have power without authority. In other words, power is necessary but not sufficient for authority. As you'll learn in this section, Max Weber studied power and authority, differentiating between the two concepts and formulating a system for classifying types of authority. Learning Outcomes Explain political power and authority Identify and describe the three types of authority outlined by Max Weber Despite the differences between government systems in the Middle East and the United States, their governments play the same fundamental role: in some fashion, they exert control over the people they govern. The nature of that control—what we will define as power and authority—is an important feature of society. Sociologists have a distinctive approach to studying governmental power and authority that differs from the perspective of political scientists. For the most part, political scientists focus on studying how power is distributed in different types of political systems. They would observe, for example, that the United States' political system is divided into three distinct branches (legislative, executive, and judicial), and they would explore how public opinion affects political parties, elections, and the political process in general. Sociologists, however, tend to be more interested in the influences of governmental power on society and in how social conflicts arise from the distribution of power. Sociologists also examine how the use of power affects local, state, national, and global agendas, which in turn affect people differently based on status, class, and socioeconomic standing. What Is Power? Figure 1. Nazi leader Adolf Hitler was one of the most powerful and destructive dictators in modern history. He is pictured here with fascist Benito Mussolini of Italy. (Photo courtesy of U.S. National Archives and Records Administration) For centuries, philosophers, politicians, and social scientists have explored and commented on the nature of power. Pittacus (c. 640–568 B.C.E.) opined, "The measure of a man is what he does with power," and Lord Acton perhaps more famously asserted, "Power tends to corrupt; absolute power corrupts absolutely" (1887). Indeed, the concept of power can have decidedly negative connotations, and the term itself is difficult to define. Many scholars adopt the definition developed by German sociologist Max Weber, who said that power is the ability to exercise one's will over others (Weber 1922). Power affects more than personal relationships; it shapes larger dynamics like social groups, professional organizations, and governments. Similarly, a government's power is not necessarily limited to control of its own citizens. A dominant nation, for instance, will often use its clout to influence or support other governments or to seize control of other nation states. Efforts by the U.S. government to wield power in other countries have included joining with other nations to form the Allied forces during World War II, entering Iraq in 2002 to topple Saddam Hussein's regime, and imposing sanctions on the government of North Korea in the hopes of constraining its development of nuclear weapons. Figure 2. Young people and students were among the most ardent supporters of democratic reform in the recent Arab Spring. Social media also played an important role in rallying grassroots support. (Photo courtesy of cjb22/flickr) Endeavors to gain power and influence do not necessarily lead to violence, exploitation, or abuse. Leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Mohandas Gandhi, for example, commanded powerful movements that effected positive change without military force. Both men organized nonviolent protests to combat corruption and injustice and succeeded in inspiring far-reaching reforms. They relied on a variety of nonviolent protest strategies such as rallies, sit-ins, marches, petitions, and boycotts. Modern technology has made such forms of nonviolent reform easier to implement. Today, protesters can use cell phones and the Internet to disseminate information and plans to masses of protesters in a rapid and efficient manner. In the Arab Spring uprisings, for example, Twitter feeds and other social media helped protesters coordinate their movements, share ideas, and bolster morale, as well as gain global support for their causes. Social media was also important in getting accurate accounts of the demonstrations out to the world, in contrast to many earlier situations in which government control of the media censored news reports. Notice that in these examples, the users of power were the citizens rather than the governments. They found they had power because they were able to exercise their will over their own leaders. Thus, government power does not necessarily equate to absolute power. Types of Authority The protesters in Tunisia and the civil rights protesters of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s day had influence beyond their position in a government. Their influence came, in part, from their ability to advocate for what many people held as important values. Government leaders might have this kind of influence as well, but they also have the advantage of wielding the power associated with their official positions and considerable state resources. As this example indicates, there is more than one type of power in a community. Authority refers to accepted power—that is, power that people agree to follow according to specific procedures. People listen to authority figures because they feel that these individuals are worthy of respect, or because they are in a position that inherently carries a degree of respect. Generally speaking, people perceive the objectives and demands of an authority figure as reasonable, legitimate, beneficial, or true. A citizen's interaction with a police officer is a good example of how people react to and interact with authority in everyday life. For instance, a person who sees the flashing red and blue lights of a police car in their rearview mirror usually pulls to the side of the road without hesitation. Such a driver most likely assumes that the police officer behind them serves as a legitimate source of authority and has the right to pull them over. As part of their official duties, the police officer then has the power to issue a speeding ticket if the driver was driving too fast. If the same officer, however, were to command the driver to follow them home and mow their lawn, the driver would likely protest that the officer does not have the authority to make such a request. We are generally aware of what authority figures have power to request, and are also aware when authority figures overstep their position. Not all authority figures are police officers, elected officials or government authorities. Besides formal offices, authority can arise from tradition and personal qualities. Max Weber, one of the key figures in sociology, realized this when he examined individual action as it relates to authority, as well as large-scale structures of authority and how they relate to a society's economy. Based on this work, Weber developed a classification system for authority. His three types of authority are traditional authority, charismatic authority, and legal-rational authority (Weber 1922). Table 1. Max Weber identified and explained three distinct types of authority. Weber's Three Types of Authority Traditional Charismatic Legal-Rational Source of Power Legitimized by long-standing custom Based on a leader's personal qualities Authority resides in the office, not the person Leadership Style Historic personality Dynamic personality Bureaucratic officials Example Patriarchy (traditional positions of authority), royal families with no political power but social influence Napoleon, Jesus Christ, Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King, Jr. U.S. presidency and Congress, Modern British Parliament According to Weber, the power of traditional authority is accepted because that has traditionally been the case; its legitimacy exists because it has been accepted for a long time. Britain's Queen Elizabeth, for instance, occupies a position that she inherited based on the traditional rules of succession for the monarchy. People adhere to traditional authority because they are invested in the past and feel obligated to perpetuate it. In this type of authority, a ruler typically has no real force to carry out their will, and their position depends primarily on a group's respect. A more specific form of traditional authority is patrimonialism, which is traditional domination facilitated by an administration and military that are purely personal instruments of the master (Eisenberg 1998). In this form of authority, all officials are personal favorites appointed by the ruler. These officials have no rights, and their privileges can be increased or withdrawn based on the caprices of the leader. The political organization of ancient Egypt typified such a system: when the royal household decreed that a pyramid be built, every Egyptian was forced to work toward its construction. Traditional authority can be intertwined with race, class, and gender. In most societies, for instance, men are more likely to be privileged than women and thus are more likely to hold roles of authority. It is not uncommon for a man to be the automatic leader of a family unit; in some countries, however, it is the woman who is the presumptive leader. Regardless, most contexts provide a traditional structure of authority, even among the household unit. Similarly, members of dominant racial groups or upper-class families win respect more readily. In the United States, the Kennedy family, which has produced many prominent politicians, exemplifies this model. Followers accept the power of charismatic authority because they are drawn to the leader's personal qualities. The appeal of a charismatic leader can be extraordinary, and can inspire followers to make unusual sacrifices or to persevere in the midst of great hardship and persecution. Charismatic leaders usually emerge in times of crisis and offer innovative or radical solutions. They may even offer a vision of a new world order. Despite the catastrophic consequences of events, Hitler's rise to power in the post-World War I economic depression of Germany is an example. Charismatic leaders tend to hold power for short periods of time, and according to Weber, they are just as likely to be tyrannical as they are heroic. Diverse male leaders such as Hitler, Napoleon, Jesus Christ, César Chávez, Malcolm X, and Winston Churchill are all considered charismatic leaders. Some of them held formal positions of power, but many did not. Because so few women have held dynamic positions of leadership throughout history, the list of charismatic female leaders is comparatively short. Many historians consider figures such as Joan of Arc, Margaret Thatcher, and Mother Teresa to be charismatic leaders. Michelle Obama, who no longer holds a formal position of authority (and some might even argue that being First Lady itself does not translate into authority), is a current example of a charismatic leader. Greta Thunberg, a teenager from Sweden, has been making waves around the world, giving powerful and moving speeches about climate change. What started out as a protest led to speeches at forums such as the UN and the World Economic Forum. While she holds no formal position of authority, she is influencing change through being a leader that others can relate to, to the point of now hundreds of thousands of kids calling for radical changes in climate change policy. According to Weber, power made legitimate by laws, written rules, and regulations is termed rational-legal authority. In this type of authority, power is vested in a particular rationale, system, or ideology and not necessarily in the person who implements the specifics of that doctrine. With rational-legal authority, the power to influence does not fall on individuals themselves, but instead falls on specific, structured, bureaucratic offices, and individuals holding specific positions have the authority to act in the name of such positions. A nation that follows a constitution applies this type of authority. On a smaller scale, you might encounter rational-legal authority in the workplace via the standards set forth in the employee handbook, which provides the employee with a different type of authority than that of the boss. Of course, ideals are seldom replicated in the real world. Few governments or leaders can be neatly categorized. Some leaders, like Mohandas Gandhi for instance, can be considered charismatic and legal-rational authority figures. Similarly, a leader or government can start out exemplifying one type of authority and gradually evolve or change into another type. This is not unusual—charismatic leaders often enter rational-legal authority institutions and it is their charisma that facilitates their election. Similarly, an individual in a rational-legal authority position gains exposure, which may allow them to be charismatic leaders following their exit from formal authority positions. Explain why leaders as divergent as Hitler and Jesus Christ are both categorized as charismatic authorities. Why do people accept traditional authority figures even though these types of leaders have limited means of enforcing their power? Charismatic leaders are among the most fascinating figures in history. Select a charismatic leader about whom you wish to learn more and conduct online research to find out about this individual. Then write a paragraph describing the personal qualities that led to this person's influence, considering the society in which he or she emerged. authority: power that people accept because it comes from a source that is perceived as legitimate charismatic authority: power legitimized on the basis of a leader's exceptional personal qualities patrimonialism: a type of authority wherein military and administrative factions enforce the power of the master rational-legal authority: power that is legitimized by rules, regulations, and laws traditional authority: power legitimized on the basis of long-standing customs

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