CHAPTER NINE

Who Wins, Who Loses: Pluralism Versus Elitism

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

This chapter examines two competing approaches—pluralism and the power elite school—in order to answer the basic questions “Who’s running the game of politics,” “Who wins, who loses,” and “Who plays and who doesn’t play?” Pluralism’s key concepts—fragmentation of power, bargaining, compromise, consensus—are covered along with appropriate examples. Criticisms of pluralism include the question: “What good are the rules of the game to the majority of people who never get a chance to play?” as well as the thought that an abundance of pluralism, with too many groups, may be a more accurate explanation for present-day political paralysis.

Similarly, the power elite approach is explained, with stress placed upon the “ruling class” and the C. Wright Mills model of a unified group of leaders drawn from the corporate, military, and political arenas. Critics of the power elite cite a lack of unity within and among elites and the over-reliance on a conspiracy theory.

The “debate” between pluralist and elite supporters questions how competitive and representative the elites are. The chapter closes with a discussion of recent modifications in the two theories such as plural elitism (politics divided into different policy arenas with elite domination within each arena) and a call for greater participation in political life by the nation’s citizens.
LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading chapter 9, the student should be able to:

1. Explain and summarize the basic assumptions of pluralism as well as the criticisms directed at the approach.

2. Explain and summarize the basic assumptions of the power elite model as well as the criticisms directed at the approach.

3. Understand the application of these theoretical approaches and examples of both.

4. Explain modifications to pluralism and the power elite approaches, such as plural elitism.

5. Appreciate the importance of an active, politically concerned citizenry.

OUTLINE

I. Pluralism

A. Pluralism Is a Group Theory of Democracy. People participate in politics by their membership in groups, and these groups, through competition and compromise, create public policy.

B. There are four key concepts in the pluralist argument:

1. Fragmentation of power. No one group is dominant, therefore all must bargain. Power is divided, though not equally.

2. Bargaining. The government acts as a referee in this process. The government will make sure the “rules of the
game” are followed and can intervene to help weaker groups.

3. **Compromise.** The inevitable result of the competition among relatively equal rivals is a series of compromises. Accommodation is made easier by the fact that most individuals are members of many groups.

4. **Consensus.** Underlying the entire process is a basic agreement on the general political ideals and goals of society. Agreement on rules and results is the “cement that holds society together.” Specific examples include agreeing on the importance of civil liberties and the goal of equality of opportunity.

C. **Examples of Pluralism.** When major environmental groups decide a new law regulating air pollution is needed, they raise funds from their members and seek compromises from chemical companies. The press weighs in, public opinion is heard, as is the EPA in hearings before Congressional committees. The resulting legislation reflects the relative power of the groups. Similarly, Robert Dahl’s book *Who Governs?* concluded that there was no single elite that made important decisions in all areas of New Haven politics, but rather several different groups.

D. **Criticisms of Pluralist Theory.** Many feel that consensus on democratic ideals masks the real inequity of economic and social distribution of benefits, that the majority of people have no part in the political game, and that powerful elites prevent issues from ever reaching the public. Other critics point to the political inflation of too many groups choking government with too many demands (hyperpluralism).

II. **Elite**

The decision-making positions in America are occupied by members of a unified and non-representative elite who look after their own interests. This power elite encourages powerlessness below. They
are an elite of economic, political, and military leaders who are unresponsive to others.

A. **How the Power Elite Rules.** Power is centered in institutions. Therefore, key leadership positions in these institutions are reserved for the elite. These positions are open only to the ruling class of the nation. This class controls the economy and preserves the economic status quo. Decisions are the result not of consensus, but of conflict between the haves and have-nots and reflect the domination of the former. Society is held together by force and control, with elite domination of the majority a given.

B. **Examples of the Power Elite.** In C. Wright Mills’s *The Power Elite*, the classic statement of the theory, the movement of leaders between the three dominant areas--business, the military, and government--is described. The Council on Foreign Relations is pointed to as an elite Establishment institution controlling key foreign policy jobs and issues among its members. William Greider’s *Who Will Tell the People* is a 1992 study of Washington politics, where a “policymaking elite working with wealthy economic interests dominate the creating and implementing of law.” In short, “no one” speaks for the people.

C. **Criticisms of the Elite View.** Although it is true that the number of persons in positions of power is limited, their unity is exaggerated, and the elites do compete among themselves (examples are conflicts over taxes, the environment, the election); democracy consists of people choosing between them through the vote. Some say the elite are better suited to positions of leadership than are the masses. Often these views veer into conspiracy theories that do not analyze politics, but only assert secret cover-ups that encourage apathy and cynicism, as well as fundraising by demagogues.
III. The Debate/Newer Views

Both approaches agree that only a small number of people participate directly in politics, and therefore the real question is how competitive and representative these elites are. The book’s case studies show how difficult it is to fit all “real” politics into one theory or the other. Recent modifications have discussed a plural elitism. This modification stresses that politics is divided into different policy arenas. Different political conflicts are understood by different approaches: for example, small-town politics may be best studied using a pluralist approach, and foreign policy through the elitist model. These models also reflect differing political ideals. Pluralism seeks to maintain the existing political structure, while power elite theorists maintain that basic changes are needed for the United States to become a true democracy.

IV. Conclusion

We do not have to be non-participants in the political game. People (including our students) can affect the outcome of politics but they must, at the least, decide to join the game. Political conflict is not like a football game.

KEY CHAPTER TERMS AND IDENTIFICATIONS

Pluralism as a “group theory of democracy”
fragmentation of power
a “series of compromises” through bargaining consensus
Sierra Club
Environmental Defense Fund
Robert Dahl’s *Who Governs?* and *Democracy and Its Critics*
“pluralism masks elite domination”
hyperpluralism
power comes from institutions
the “ruling class”
The Council on Foreign Relations
Foreign Affairs
Old Boy Network
C. Wright Mills’ *The Power Elite*
William Greider’s *Who Will Tell the People*
“the military-industrial complex”
a “conspiracy theory”
elites--how competitive and representative?
plural elitism
political conflict “is not like a football game”

TEACHING SUGGESTIONS

1. Discuss with the class the following question: Are political elites more committed to democratic values than the mass public? Cite examples from recent events that support or refute this conclusion.

2. Another point to discuss: If the “military-industrial complex” does in fact exist, how can one fight it? Is it possible to organize effective opposition to new weapon systems and national defense spending? Have recent changes in defense policies, with the end of the Cold War, undermined the argument for the MIC? Also, was the plan by President George W. Bush to reinvigorate the military in 2001 an illustration of the MIC at work—why or why not?

3. Discuss some conspiracy theories that are widely circulated. Do they play a political function for certain political leaders? Who circulates them? Why are the followers of these leaders, and others, so willing to accept them as credible?
SUGGESTED RESEARCH ASSIGNMENTS

1. Have one student read *Who Will Tell the People* by William Greider. Have him or her prepare a short, analytical book report and distribute copies of that report to the class. The student will then be responsible for defending the book’s approach to the rest of the class.

2. Follow the same procedure as described above, except that this time another student will report on Dahl’s *Who Governs*? It might be interesting to have the two students cross-examine each other if classroom Q and A is insufficient.

MULTIPLE-CHOICE QUESTIONS

1. In pluralism, people get power through
   a. voting.
   b. joining the military-industrial complex.
   c. becoming a member of various groups.
   d. joining a revolutionary party.

2. Pluralism is a _____ theory of democracy.
   a. conspiratorial
   b. vague
   c. group
   d. participatory

3. In pluralist theory, the government acts as a(n)
   a. protector of the wealthy.
   b. referee.
   c. interest group.
   d. none of the above
4. The following people are all members of the Council on Foreign Relations
   a. bankers
   b. lawyers
   c. academics
   d. all of the above

5. The Council on Foreign Relations publishes which “must read” journal?
   a. The Economist
   b. Foreign Policy
   c. Pluralism Today
   d. Foreign Affairs

6. The Power Elite theory of American government is
   a. a theory of the political left.
   b. a theory of the political right.
   c. held by both the left and right.
   d. held only by political scientists in colleges.

7. Supporters of power elite theory view politics as
   a. a conflict between those with power and those without it.
   b. being a process based on coercion.
   c. a process under the domination of a ruling class.
   d. all of the above

8. Consensus is best described as
   a. the result of political compromises.
   b. common sense.
   c. a broad public agreement on basic political questions.
   d. the people of a country voting frequently.
9. Power elite theorists see the ruling elite as
   a. unrepresentative.
   b. unified.
   c. encouraging powerlessness in non-elites.
   d. all of the above

10. According to Robert Dahl in *Who Governs?*
    a. a power elite is a crucial engine for social change.
    b. pluralism conceals elite manipulation.
    c. pluralism allows a charismatic leader to corrupt democracy.
    d. different groups influenced decisions in different policy arenas.

11. In the pluralist model, the “bargaining results in a series of
    compromises that become _____”
    a. another series of compromises.
    b. the basis of a new political consensus.
    c. public policy or other political decisions.
    d. none of the above

12. According to Robert Dahl’s study, the best description of the key
decision makers in New Haven was that they
   a. were a unified, homogeneous elite.
   b. were basically the citizenry of the city.
   c. were members of the city council.
   d. none of the above

13. “In the United States the political stratum does not constitute a
    homogeneous class with well-defined class interests.” This assertion
    is associated with the _____ approach.
    a. pluralist
    b. power elite
    c. plural elitism
    d. hyperpluralism
14. In the power elite approach, power comes mainly from
   a. individuals.
   b. institutions.
   c. the mass public.
   d. none of the above

15. Which of the following does not describe hyperpluralism?
   a. a stable political system
   b. a critique of pluralism
   c. too many competing groups
   d. a government paralyzed by too many demands

16. Which of the following is a criticism of pluralist theory?
   a. It confuses equal opportunity with equality
   b. It ignores non-participants
   c. It stresses procedures rather than results
   d. All of the above

17. The AIDS epidemic that broke out in the 1980s is cited by
   a. conspiracy theorists as an example of a secret act of revenge.
   b. critics of pluralism who feel it was a failure of democracy.
   c. critics of power elite theory, to demonstrate how some elites check others.
   d. all of the above

18. In the debate between the two approaches, the central disagreement concerns
   a. whether elites exist.
   b. whether the elites are representative and competitive.
   c. whether people directly participate in the political game.
   d. none of the above
19. In both pluralism and elitism, government actions are produced by
   a. forces generally external to the government.
   b. the result of irrational, corrupt forces.
   c. the consensus of society.
   d. the manipulation of a unified elite.

20. Politics is compared to the “original primitive game of football”
    because
   a. there are few rules of behavior and conduct attached to politics
   b. the football audience (the public) is free to join in the game.
   c. increasingly, the “game” of politics is scarred by violence
      directed at elected officials.
   d. all of the above are true

21. In the chapter example, environmentalists’ proposed changes in air
    pollution laws resulted in
   a. a veto by the hidden “power elite” in America.
   b. debate, challenge, and cooperation by a number of concerned
      groups.
   c. minimum debate and dismissal by Congress.
   d. none of the above

22. Under pluralism, a member of two interest groups competing over an
    issue--like health care or the environment--would likely
   a. resign his or her membership from both groups.
   b. decide to remain neutral on the issue.
   c. try to have both groups reach a compromise.
   d. none of the above

23. In the previous case study of the decline and fall of racial
    segregation, its resolution seemed to be most accurately reflected in
   a. the approach of pluralism.
   b. the approach of the power elite.
   c. the new approach of plural elitism.
   d. the approach of hyperpluralism.
24. The author feels that a greater degree of political participation by Americans would mean that
   a. traditional family values could be reinstated.
   b. changes could occur in how the political game is played and its outcome.
   c. little has changed in the political game.
   d. none of the above

25. Plural elitism means that
   a. politics is divided into different policy arenas.
   b. special interest elites dominate in specific arenas.
   c. the general public doesn’t clearly see its interest.
   d. all of the above

TRUE-FALSE QUESTIONS

1. Bargaining and group membership are essential elements of pluralist theory.

2. Fragmentation of power ensures that power is divided equally.

3. According to critics of pluralism, powerful elites may prevent important issues from reaching the public arena for a decision.

4. Most Americans are participants in the game of politics.

5. Plural elitism suggests that the majority of people can effectively participate in politics.

6. Conspiracy theorists generally reject the view that government is a reflection of group compromises.

7. Power elite supporters argue that members of the Council on Foreign Relations do not represent the varied interests in American society.
8. Pluralists and elitists are both asking not only what is but what should be.

9. The fundamental issue in the pluralist-elite debate is whether a small number of people dominate the political game.

10. The earlier case study dealing with the failure of the balanced budget amendment clearly reflects the power elite approach.

ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. How would pluralists argue that a presidential election reflects their approach? Give examples from the recent campaign and election.

2. How would the power elite approach argue that this same election reinforces their view of American politics? Give specific examples.

3. In the town or city your are from, or the community you now live in, which approach, or mixture of approaches, best explains the political decisions you are familiar with? Support your answer with details and examples.

4. Now that you have finished reading the text, speculate on how more Americans can become participants in the political system. Among your own fellow students, what techniques could be used to promote interest about political issues and personalities?

5. Take any two case studies from the text and apply the pluralist approach to one, and the power elite approach to the other. Which makes the most sense of the material covered?