



# Course 1: How Social Transformation Occurs

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## 1. Powerholders versus Popular Power

WATCH THE VIDEO HERE: <https://youtu.be/zHCRO10DROE>

We review definitions of oligarchy, plutocracy, democracy and social movement; studies on oligarchy; two models of power, the Power Elite model and the People Power model; how elites maintain the status quo and how popular movements counter the elite's actions.

### Slides:

#### Goals of lecture

After this lecture, you will be able to:

- Define oligarchy, plutocracy, democracy and social movement
- Understand Power Elite and People Power models
- Describe how power holders maintain power
- Describe how people power impacts power holders



#### The United States is an Oligarchy/Plutocracy

**Oligarchy** - a form of power structure in which power rests with a small number of people. They might be distinguished by nobility, wealth, family ties, education or corporate, religious or military control. Families in control may pass their influence from one generation to the next.

**Plutocracy** - a form of society that is ruled or controlled by a function of wealth or higher income.

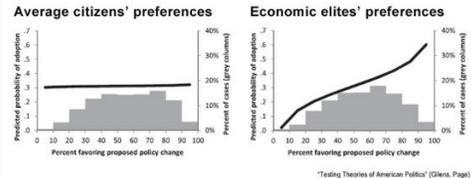


## Social Movements

**Democracy** – literal meaning is people power. A form of governance in which all people have a role in decision-making.

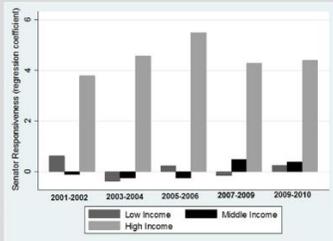
**Social Movements** - collective actions in which the populace is alerted, educated, and mobilized, over years and decades, to challenge the power holders and the whole society to redress social problems or grievances and restore critical social values.

## United States: Democracy or Plutocracy?



Marin Ottens and Benjamin I. Page, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/perspectives-on-politics/article/testing-theories-of-american-politics-what-are-the-groups-and-what-are-their-preferences/92127911189500130404891812289928>

## Senators' Responsiveness to Income Groups



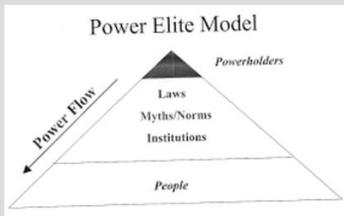
Thomas J. Hayes, <http://blogs.ox.ac.uk/leapblog/2013/10/02/senators-preferences-wealth/>

## Contrasting Models of Power: Powerholders vs People Power

### Power Elite Model

- The elites, through their dominant control of the state, institutions, laws, myths, traditions, and social norms, serve the interests of the elites, often to the disadvantage of the whole society.
- Target is the powerholders.
- People either appeal to leaders through normal channels or replace them.
- Tools are elections, lobbying and courts.

## Power Elite Model

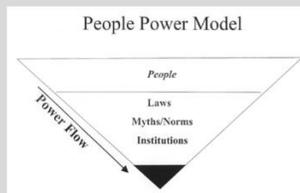


## Contrasting Models of Power: Powerholders vs People Power

### People Power Model

- The powerholders' power is dependent on the cooperation, acquiescence, or support of the mass public, which is withdrawn when beliefs and values are violated, particularly by trusted leaders.
- Target is the grassroots.
- Alert, educate and mobilize the public.
- Tools include traditional and non-traditional methods.

## People Power Model



## What the Power Holders do

The task of the power holders is to maintain the status quo.

- Bureaucratic management
- Crisis management

### **Bureaucratic Management**

**Prevent the issue from becoming public.**

- Control the media.
- Deny it exists.
- Create societal myths.
- Create threats.



### **Crisis Management**

**Minimize the issue, distract or appear to take action.**

- Justification myths
- Create or reawaken demons
- Create trigger events
- Ignore, discredit, disable or repress the opposition
- Appear to be resolving the issue
- Make minor reforms
- Coopt the opposition



### **Official versus Operative Policies**

**Official policies** are the fictitious policies told to the public. They are described in terms of values and principles.

**Operative policies** are the actual policies that are kept hidden from the public because they violate the values and principles.



### **What Social Movements do**

**The task of the social movement is to show it upholds the values and the power holders violate them.**

Movements need to be grounded in the strongly felt and widely held human and cultural values, symbols, sensibilities, and traditions of the general population.



### **What Social Movements do**

- Keep the issue in the spotlight
- Counter the myths
- Eliminate the threats
- Organize and mobilize people
- Refuse to compromise too soon
- Support grassroots action
- Avoid focus on electoral, partisan politics
- Reject co-option



## **Relevant sections from Bill Moyer's "Movement Action Plan"**

### **SOCIAL MOVEMENTS**

Social movements are collective actions in which the populace is alerted, educated, and mobilized, over years and decades, to challenge the powerholders and the whole society to redress social problems or grievances and restore critical social values. By involving the populace directly in the political process, social movements also foster the concept of government of, by, and for the people. The power of movements is directly proportional to the forcefulness with which the grassroots exert their discontent and demand change. The central issue of social movements, therefore, is the struggle between the movement and the powerholders to win the hearts (sympathies), minds (public opinion), and active support of the great majority of the populace, which ultimately holds the power

to either preserve the status quo or create change.

There needs to be a revival of democracy through "people power". The increasingly centralized power of the state and other social institutions, combined with the new use of the mass media to carry out the political process, has all but eliminated effective citizen participation in the decision-making process. Centralized powerholders now make decisions in the interests of a small minority, while simultaneously undermining the common good and aggravating critical social problems.

But people are powerful. Power ultimately resides with the populace. History is full of examples of an inspired citizenry involved in social movements that achieve social and political changes—even topple tyrannical governments. Powerholders know this. They know that their power depends on the support or acquiescence of the mass population.

Nonviolent social movements are a powerful means for preserving democracy and making societies address critical social problems. They enable citizens to challenge the prevailing centers of power and become active in society's decision-making process, especially at times when the normal channels for their political participation are ineffective. Social movements mobilize citizens and public opinion to challenge powerholders and the whole society to adhere to universal values and sensibilities and redress social problems. At their best, they create an empowered citizenry, shifting the locus of social and political power from central elites and institutions to new grassroots networks and groups.

## **TWO VIEWS OF POWER**

Many activists simultaneously hold two contrasting models of power—power elite and people power. Each of these views, however, leads to opposite movement strategies and target constituencies.

The Power Elite Model holds that society is organized in the form of a hierarchical pyramid, with powerful elites at the top and the relatively powerless mass populace at the bottom. The elites, through their dominant control of the state, institutions, laws, myths, traditions, and social norms, serve the interests of the elites, often to the disadvantage of the whole society. Power flows from the top

to bottom.

Since people are powerless, social change can be achieved only by appealing to the elites at the top to change their policies through normal channels and institutions, such as the electoral process, lobbying Congress, and use of the courts. The target constituency is the powerholders, and the method is persuasion, either convincing existing powerholders to change their view or to elect new powerholders. The chief opposition organizations are professional opposition organizations (POOs), which have national offices and staff in Washington, D.C., with regional offices around the country.

The People Power Model holds that power ultimately resides in the mass populace. Even in societies with strong power elites, such as the United States or Marcos-led Philippines, the powerholders' power is dependent on the cooperation, acquiescence, or support of the mass public. This model is represented by an inverse triangle, with the people at the top and the power elite at the bottom.

People power is the model used by social movements. The movement's strategy is not only to use normal channels in an effort to persuade powerholders such as President Reagan to change their minds, but also to alert, educate, and mobilize a discontented, impassioned, and determined grassroots population using nonviolent means beyond the normal parliamentary methods institutions.

### **THE MOVEMENT'S SOURCE OF POWER**

The source of power of social movements lies in two human qualities:

- A strong sense of right and wrong. People have deeply felt beliefs and values, and they react with extreme passion and determination when they realize that these values are violated.
- We understand the world and reality, in large part, through symbolism.

Social movements derive their power from an upset, impassioned, and motivated populace set into motion. This happens when people recognize that their strongly felt beliefs, values, and interests are unjustly violated, and the population is provided with hope that change can happen and a means for them to act. People are specially aroused to action when trusted public leaders, such as the President or Congresspeople, violate the public's trust to carry out their duties of office in

an honest and lawful manner.

## **SOCIAL MOVEMENTS VS. POWERHOLDERS**

The process of achieving social change through social movements is the struggle between the movement and powerholders of the hearts, minds, and support (or acquiescence) of the general public. The powerholders advocate policies that are to the advantage of society's elites, but often to the disadvantage of the majority population and in violation of its strongly held values. Before movements begin, however, the populace is usually unaware of the problem and the violation of their values, but they would be very upset and easily spurred to action if they knew.

## **THE POWERHOLDER STRATEGY**

The powerholders maintain their power and the status quo by hiding the moral violations of social conditions and by their policies through the following strategies:

- The first line of defense is through a strategy of "bureaucratic management" to prevent the issue from becoming a public issue. This is achieved by (1) "internalized obedience," keeping the problem out of the public's view of the world and thereby out of people's consciousness; (2) keeping issues out of the public spotlight and off the society's agenda; and (3) keeping the issue off of society's political agenda of hotly contested issues.
- Some of the means used by the powerholders to achieve this strategy are the following:(1) maintain hegemony of information available to the public through the media; (2) deny that the problem exists (e.g., "no arms have been sent to Iran"); (3) create "societal myths" which define the problem for the public exactly the opposite of reality, such as calling the contras "freedom fighters" or saying that the Marcos Duvallier governments were part of the "free world"; and (4) create the threat of demons, such as Communism and terrorism, to install fear in the general population so that they will unquestioningly support whatever policies the powerholders take.
- After a policy becomes a public issue, the powerholders are forced to switch to a "crisis management" strategy by doing the following:(1) vindicate unjust policies through "justification myths", which explain that their policies are needed to overcome a bigger evil (e.g., "we need to support President Marcos, a minor dictator, to prevent the worse evil of

- the Communist takeover in the Philippines"); (2) re-emphasize old demons or create new ones; (3) create trigger events to justify a new policy and to get public consent, such as when the American Government got the support of the American people for escalating the Vietnam War by proclaiming that American ships were attacked in the Gulf of Tonkin; (4) overcome public opposition by first ignoring then discrediting, destabilizing, and if necessary, repressing the movement; (5) appearing to be involved in a resolution process through promises, new rhetoric, appointing studies and commissions, and negotiations, as in the Geneva nuclear arms reduction meetings; (6) make minor changes through reforms, compromises, and cooptation of opponents; and (7) coopt the opposition.
- The chief means by which the powerholders maintain unjust policies and keep them hidden from the public is by having a two-track system of "official" vs. "operative" doctrines and policies. (These are Noam Chomsky's terms.) Official policies are fictitious policies which are given to the general public. They are explained in high-sounding moral terms, such as democracy and freedom. Operative policies, on the other hand, are the government's actual policies, which are kept hidden from the public because they violate widely held values and therefore would upset most citizens.

### **THE MOVEMENT'S STRATEGY**

The movement's aim is to educate and win over an increasingly larger majority of the public, and to mobilize the majority public into an effective force that brings about social change. To achieve this, movements need to be grounded in the strongly felt and widely held human and cultural values, symbols, sensibilities, and traditions of the general population, such as freedom, democracy, justice, and human rights (but not those cultural values with which we disagree, such as the Monroe Doctrine's proclamation that the U.S. has the right to dominate Latin America). Only by showing the Public that the movement upholds these values, and that the powerholders violate them, can the population be won over and stirred to the level of passion required for them to act. In contrast, movement activities and attitudes that violate the society's values and sensibilities, including acts of violence and rebellious machismo posturing, have the opposite effect; they turn both the public and many other activists against the movement.

The movement's strategy, mirroring that of the powerholders, needs to accomplish the following:

- Publicly show that the social conditions and powerholder policies violate values, traditions, and self-interests of the general public. This includes publicly revealing the difference between official and operative policies and doctrines.
- Keep the issue and moral violations in the public spotlight and on society' agenda of hotly contested issues.
- Keep the issue and powerholders' policies on society's political agenda, such as having aid to the contras voted on in Congress rather than carried out secretly by the CIA.
- Counter the powerholders' social myths, justifications, and denials that the problem exists.
- Counter the powerholders' demonology. For example, the thousands of American "citizen diplomats" who visit Russia counter the Reagan demonology that the Soviets are monsters and an "evil empire" by revealing that the Russians are people like us.
- Involve increasingly larger portions of the public in programs that challenge the powerholders' policies and promote alternative visions and programs.
- Don't compromise too much too soon.
- After a large majority of public opinion is won, have an "endgame" strategy that mobilizes the populace and institutions to create change, despite the determined opposition of the central powerholders.
- Finally the movement's organizations and leadership, especially at the national and regional levels, should serve, nurture, and empower the grassroots activists and promote participatory democracy within the movement.

### **Suggested reading:**

[Testing Theories of American Politics: Elites, Interest Groups and Average Citizens](#)  
by Martin Gilens and Benjamin I. Page, 2014.

[Senators of Both Parties respond to the Preferences of the Wealthy, and ignore those of the Poorest](#), by Thomas J. Hayes, 2013.

[Why Competition in the Politics Industry is failing America](#) by Katherine M. Gehl and Michael E. Porter, 2017.

[How did Corporate Power get a Stranglehold?](#) (The Powell Memo), 2011.

[Lifting the Veil of Mirage Democracy in the United States](#) by Kevin Zeese and Margaret Flowers, 2013.

[Fighting for a Legitimate Democracy by and for the People](#) by Kevin Zeese and Margaret Flowers, 2014.