

**Political power is closely linked to socio – economic power. Discuss.**

**Plan:**

- v Well, there are arguably many definitions of power. Pluralist definition of power is decision making and elitist definition of power is setting the agenda. Explore these terms in depth.
- v Social power is very broad and can be defined in many ways in terms of race (ethnic minorities don't have political power, perhaps? Look at the figures in UK and US legislatures to help strengthen this argument.
- v Pressure Groups and PACS (obviously!) Their heightened importance during campaigns in the US and UK.
- v Rupert Murdoch has a lot of power (!) Sky news, Fox, a monopoly, perhaps? A debatable subject. Bernie Ecclestone and the F1 scandal. Exploration needed here.
- v Cash for questions – its imperative this idea is explored in my answer. Does money equate to influence?
- v Corporate power with groups such as the CBI –corporativism?

**Introduction: the many 'faces' of political power.** *'large scale organisations give their officers a near monopoly of power.'* Robert Michels.

At the heart of this question is 'political power' an idea open to different interpretations and it is therefore imperative to explore these overlapping definitions. It is safe to say that the general understanding is that politics of the US and UK governments is about the 'exercise' of power. There are generally two 'faces' of power; decision making (pluralist view) and agenda setting (elitist view). Power is having the 'right' as well as the 'ability' to govern, and in a sense, having a sort of legitimate authority. Power does not necessarily have to mean 'absolute power' and control, a common misconception amongst the general population. Political power in this context is having the ability to influence government policy, and there are various institutions such as pressure groups and PACS which have this arguably 'exclusive' power. People with money, a high level of education and a high status are said to have social power which can also be defined in terms of race and gender. More often than not, it is these people or groups who can successfully influence government, and the relationship that begins arguably creates an imbalance of power, a democratic deficit to a certain extent. Political power is indeed closely linked to socio-economic power, to a certain extent as societal power is not always translated into political power as we shall see.

**An exploration of political power and socio economic power:** *'we live in a world where power is very unbalanced.'* Dr John Atlee.

Power, as mentioned above, has many interpretations each with its own ideological leaning. The pluralists define power as making decisions, whilst the elitists identify power as setting the agenda. Having the right to do something is inherent to the idea of political power. Power is therefore having the legitimate 'right' and 'authority,' two ideas which are intrinsically linked. This type of power can be gained in a variety of ways; as a result of 'alliances of convenience;' a system of exchange between organisations; and in rare circumstances, corruption. Firstly, alliances are especially common in UK and US politics and this usually happens with particular pressure groups whose ideals are compatible with governmental plans. Political power can also be an exchange between government and organisations resulting in a mutually beneficial long term relationship. And, finally political power can be achieved through corruption, a darker side in US and UK politics, where allegations of corruption especially in the UK have increased more recently with the MP 'expense rows.'

Social power, on the other hand, is a common element which every individual possesses but the difference lays in the individual's effectiveness and success in terms of influence to further one's own desires or goals. This type of power can be defined variously in terms of race, gender, professional expertise, wealth and social position, and arguably it is powerful pressure groups and few prominent individuals who translate this social power into political power as we shall now see.

**The power of pressure groups and their influence in political power:** *'power imbalances are at the root of most social problems.'* Dr John Atlee.

Pressure groups are organisations united by a particular cause where its members seek to raise awareness whilst at the same time, seek to influence government. Wyn Grant's 'insider/outsider' distinction is particularly relevant in supporting the idea that political power is indeed linked to socio-economic power. Insider access means having direct *and* regular access to governmental departments, arguably cooperating with the 'rules of the game.' The UK's centralised system of government (different to the decentralised US government) enables insider pressure groups to enjoy favourable advantages such as direct access to White Hall, where detailed policy is drawn up. It is safe to say that it is often pressure groups with strong societal power (and policy credibility) are the ones whose authority is enhanced as they have access to decision makers. A mutually beneficial relationship is sometimes the result.

In the UK, some MP's are paid retainers (working in the service of certain pressure groups) representing their causes/ cases. In the US, a different type of pressure group, Political Action Committees (PACs) enhance their power of influence through financial means. PACs are pressure groups which raise money for their preferred candidates during elections. Since 1988, the American Federation of State, County & Municipal Employees have solidly contributed \$39,947,843 to the Democrats. Another example of a mutually beneficial relationship is found between former Republican president George W. Bush and the National Rifle Association (N.R.A). In 2004, the National Rifle Association (NRA) helped fund Bush's re election campaign and in return Bush would promise not to intervene with gun control laws. Furthermore, Evangelical PACs contributed immensely to Mitt Romney's presidential election campaign in 2007/8, a candidate who they felt was committed to 'winning the War on Terror.' [Please see bibliography] This therefore, buttresses the argument that political power is indeed linked to socio-economic power. Although the argument that money equals power may be a slight exaggeration, I feel that it does make things a lot easier.

**The special relationship between political power and socio-economic power:** *'A fine is a tax for doing something wrong. A tax is a fine for doing something right. Author Unknown.*

There have been some cases where societal power has translated into political power. Such is the case with the billionaire media mogul, Rupert Murdoch. He is the chairman of News Corps (BSkyB, FOX, The Times, The Sun and The News of the World), a person who is thought to have too much power and too much influence on US and UK politics and culture. The fact that his media stations have an arguably right wing, conservative bias could be interpreted as political power as the stations are subconsciously influencing the public. After all, politics can be seen as the power of influence. Bernie Ecclestone, the billionaire who made F1, is another example of socio – economic power translating into political power. In 1996, Ecclestone made a donation of £1 million to the Labour Party who were in opposition, and it became public just after the Labour government made a U turn on imposing restraints on tobacco advertising in the F1. The allegations were later dismissed by the Labour party as 'rehashed old stuff.' One of the biggest political scandals in the UK, 'Cash for Questions' is also another example which supports the view that political power is closely linked to socio economic power. This involved politicians accepting money and bribes from Mohammed Al Fayed and in return parliamentary questions would be tabled. This scandal led to the creation of the Nolan Committee, a non departmental public body which established the seven principles of public life, which were selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, honesty, openness and leadership. Jamie Oliver and his school dinner campaign is a more recent example which supports the idea that political power is closely linked with socio economic power. His campaign prompted change to the school meals served in schools. However, it is important to stress that this is a rare example as socially prominent figures do not always translate their social power into political power. I feel that only certain types of power are influential; corporate power is arguably more influential than the power of an individual. Lack of societal power can sometimes result in lack of political power as we shall now see.

**Lack of societal power can mean lack of political power:** *'A democracy is nothing more than mob rule, where fifty-one percent of the people may take away the rights of the other forty-nine'. Thomas Jefferson.*

It is often said that the weaker sections of society (women, lower class, people with disabilities and ethnic minorities) are politically weak. With regards to ethnicity, in the 2001 census ethnic minorities made up 8% of the general population in the UK and one fourth of the population in the

US. It is safe to say that ethnic minorities in the UK (more so) and US are generally under represented in politics. There are only 15 ethnic minority MP's in the UK and 79 Congressmen from an ethnic minority. The fact that out of 535 Congressmen and Congresswomen, only 79 (!) and 15 (!)MP's in the UK are ethnic minorities clearly highlights that the lack societal power *and* political power. Although it should be noted that the number of ethnic minorities in Congress has risen arguably because of the so-called 'Obama Effect.' It is often thought that political power and societal power is almost always concentrated in the hands of white, middle class and highly educated people and the figures support this argument to some extent. The British Labour politician, Trevor Philips who was appointed the Head of the Commission for Equality and Human Rights concluded that 'the parties and the unions and the think-tanks are all very happy to sign up to the general idea of advancing the cause of minorities but in practice they would like somebody else to do the business. It's institutional racism.' [Ethnic minorities in Politics, Government and Public Life] Philips also stated in *The Times* that 'brilliant as he is, Barack Obama would not have got into Downing Street.' The extremity of his remarks stresses that lack of societal power can sometimes lead to lack of political power.

**Attempts to solve this political bias towards white, middle class males:** *'A mono-ethnic party cannot represent a multi-ethnic country.'* David Cameron.

There have been attempts in the UK and US to encourage political participation which will in turn lead to political power among the ethnic minorities. This has been achieved in the US through geographical distortion and Majority- minority districts are an example of this. It is when 'states draw congressional district boundaries to create districts that are likely to return an ethnic minority.' [A.J. Bennett] as the number of MMDs increased, the number of ethnic minorities also went up. The UK also attempted to target ethnic minority underrepresentation in 2005 through an 'all black shortlist' for the Brent South seat, a safe London seat. This was met with widespread approval, especially from the pressure group, Operation Black Vote, who said the decision was 'great news.' Similarly, the conservative party are pushing a programme for 'positive action.' This would include internship programmes for ethnic minorities, as well as recruiting road shows. This would encourage 'the resemblance model of representation' which is when a government 'resembles' or reflects society not just in terms of race, but also in terms of social class , age, gender and religion.

**Political power and the CBI:** *'who says organisation, says oligarchy.'* Robert Michels

It can also be said that pressure group involvement may result in corporatism. The Confederation of British Industry (CBI) is an example of an organisation (not a pressure group in the traditional sense) which represents big businesses. The increasingly close relationship during the Blair years (arguably a stark contrast to Margaret Thatcher where the relationship was tense) between this peak organisation, resulted in the 'poaching' of key business figures who then headed task forces. And, in return there would be a generous donation. This 'special' relationship could suggest that socio economic power is indeed linked to political power, thus enabling such organisations to further their own special interests. This relationship is said to result in a sort of corporatist government and this is when social and interest groups with government during the policy making process thus promoting a coordinated government. This furthers the idea that political power is indeed linked to socio economic power and this is particularly relevant during the 1970's when a lot of economic policies were the result of 'negotiations.' A system of bias in favour of some interests is the result.

### **Conclusion:**

'Is political power is closely linked to socio – economic power?' The wording of the question title seems to suggest that it is indeed linked to socio-economic power, but at the same time, it can be misleading. In some cases powerful groups in society have managed to gain political power through various means such as exploiting their societal position through mutual exchanges etc. Such is the case with pressure groups, PACs, wealthy individuals who exploit their positions, building a 'mutually beneficial relationship' with those in government. However, it is important to stress that societal power does not necessarily link into political power. There have been attempts made by governments in the US and UK to encourage underrepresented groups who often have weaker societal power, through various means which have generally been successful. Majority/Minority Districts and elements of 'positive discrimination' have strengthened the political power of such underrepresented

groups. Although more attempts to improve underrepresentation in terms of gender, age and people with disabilities, could be made. Therefore, I conclude that political power is indeed linked to socio economic power, but it is a contingent relationship which is subject to things like the current political climate.

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Self Assessment Sheet

1. How many marks out of 10 would you give yourself for answering the question/issues within the essay title? **9, I have tried to look at the issues involved in the question.**
2. How many marks out of 10 would you give yourself for your essay/answer structure? **9 I have tried to use sub headings.**
3. How many marks out of 10 would you give yourself for the depth of content in your essay (note that content derives from your reading and research. A thin essay will generally obtain low marks )? **Explain why. 9 I have tried to explore the issues/arguments involved within the question.**
4. How many marks out of 10 would you give yourself for the analysis shown in your essay? **9 I have tried to be more analytical by weighing the argument**
5. What grade (A-E) would you give for your answer to the essay/assignment? **A +**
6. Look back to the feedback written on your LAST 'Homework Report Form'.  
Does this homework tackle the 'Areas to be improved ...'? **YES / NO**  
Explain how (why): **I was told to show more evaluation and analysis to gain top marks.**