SOCIOLOGY 033

Who Rules America?

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SYLLABUS: WHO RULES AMERICA?: POWER STRUCTURE RESEARCH

G. William Domhoff’s Who Rules America?, now in its seventh edition (2014), has been widely used in a range of sociology courses since its initial publication in 1967. One of the key features that has made the book an enduring best seller is its use of empirical data to document its controversial assertions about the centralization of power in the hands of a “corporate community” in the United States. Domhoff builds his complex analysis in stages, bringing empirical data to bear at every step. Inevitably, however, his empirical assessments of each specific point in his general analysis are limited by the space constraints of a short text. While enormous amounts of data are available on many of the topics that Domhoff addresses, he is only able to summarize the most basic data on any given topic. This presents sociology students with a tremendous opportunity: the ability to incorporate empirical research projects that expand upon Domhoff’s analyses in their classes. For example, Tenenbaum and Ross (2007) describe two such projects that they employ in their social stratification classes. First and briefly, building upon Domhoff’s indicators of upper and corporate class membership and his assertion that these people govern American elite universities (as a means of preparing the next generation for power), students are asked to gather background/biographical data (from The Social Register, Who’s Who, and other data sources in the public domain) on the governing board members of an elite university. In a second project, students are asked to research the backgrounds and networking behavior of board members of major corporations. They first use the same empirical indicators of corporate community membership noted above and, then, identify the number of board members that have membership on more than one Fortune 500 board. Both projects reveal the upper class backgrounds and networking behavior of key decision makers in important institutions in our society.

The projects cited above focus on the first “stage” of Domhoff’s analysis: a multifaceted documentation, using publicly available data, of the existence of a corporate community. Once the existence of this elite group is demonstrated, Domhoff moves on to a documentation of the many ways that they exercise power. One of these is the creation and use of a policy planning network. Domhoff argues that the corporate community exercises and maintains power by influencing political policymaking. This influence involves both the use of cultural/ideological tactics (such as the promotion of an anti-regulatory or “small government” philosophy) as well as the production and manipulation of knowingly biased research and expertise (such as the denial campaign against anthropogenic climate change). The process of influencing policy through the promotion of conservative ideologies and the production of knowledge and expertise that is favorable to corporate interests is accomplished through what Domhoff calls the “policy planning network” (PPN). The PPN is comprised of foundations, think tanks, university research institutes, and policy discussion groups. Essentially, corporations create foundations that, in turn, fund the other actors to produce research that justifies policies that are of general interest to the corporate sector (i.e. limited government, anti-regulation, anti-consumer, anti-environment, anti-union, etc.). Since the CEOs of major corporations are the primary funders for such foundations, this network serves as an indirect way for corporate elites to bankroll the dissemination of ideology and the production of knowledge that maintain their position of power. A major current example of this is the numerous foundations created and funded by the industrialists Charles and David Koch. These foundations have been linked in numerous investigative media reports to the funding of research promoting policies ranging from pro-gun legislation to climate change denial.

The PPN is only one of the mechanisms for the exercise of power that Domhoff discusses. He also discusses the importance of campaign finance, especially the corporate funding of political action committees, designed to support the election/reelection of pro-corporate legislators. Another very important topic is “the special interest process”, exemplified by corporate lobbying expenditures, designed to encourage elected officials to support legislation of interest to the corporate community. More recently, given the Supreme Courts “Citizens United” decision, the rise of “super-PACs” and the anonymous flow of corporate money into politics (so-called “dark money”) have become even more pronounced. We will do original “power structure research” on all of these aspects of Domhoff’s argument.

In sum, this seminar will give a very close reading to a classic, but controversial text about a core sociological topic, power. Students will work collaboratively on data analyses designed to test hypotheses drawn from the text. There will be several short writing assignments, with opportunities to revise and resubmit each. This research and writing will facilitate a number of skills: the generation and evaluation of evidence and argument, critical thinking, written and oral communication, quantitative literacy, and teamwork.

COURSE OUTLINE

1. Theoretical Context: Pluralism vs. Elitism – How is power distributed in the US?

2. Domhoff, a close reading. We will spend several classes outlining Domhoff’s argument.

3. Data Analysis: Does a Corporate Community Exist?

Main data source: <http://www2.ucsc.edu/whorulesamerica/power_elite/search.html>

4. Data Analysis: Is There a Policy Planning Network?

Main data source: conservativetransparency.org

5. Data Analysis: Campaign Finance/Political Action Committees.

Main data source: [www.opensecrets.org](http://www.opensecrets.org)

6. Data Analysis: The Special Interest Process/Lobbying, Subsidies, and more.

Main data sources: [www.opensecrets.org](http://www.opensecrets.org) and [www.goodjobsfirst.org/subsidy-tracker](http://www.goodjobsfirst.org/subsidy-tracker)

7. Data Analysis: Post-Citizens United/Super-PACs and Dark Money.

Main data source: [www.opensecrets.org](http://www.opensecrets.org)

8. Data Analysis: Political Appointments/The Revolving Door.

Main data source: [www.opensecrets.org](http://www.opensecrets.org)

Students will work as teams gathering and analyzing data for units 3-8. An emphasis will be placed on quantitative analysis. Sociology is research-based and routinely uses statistics to express knowledge and produce implications for theory. Knowledge of statistics enables students to conduct quantitative research and, therefore, produce knowledge. This course will incorporate an introduction to statistical literacy appropriate for first year students. Emphasis will be placed on basic descriptive statistics: percentages, ratios and rates, tables, and graphs.

Note that prior knowledge of statistics is not required; all of our empirical analyses will be very straightforward. Grades will be based on written assignments that summarize the findings produced by your empirical research in units 3-8. You will have an opportunity to revise each writing assignment based on my comments. In addition, a take-home final exam, due at noon on the first day of final exams, will ask you to assess the implications of the entire semester’s collective research findings for theory? Was Domhoff’s “theory” supported or refuted by the data? Or, were the findings mixed? In other words, did our research findings support elitist theory or pluralist theory or some combination of both theories?

In addition to the Domhoff book, please read the TEACHING POWER section on Domhoff’s website: (<http://www2.ucsc.edu/whorulesamerica/teaching/> ). Here you will find the Tenenbaum and Ross paper mentioned above and a paper by Professor London on “Teaching about corporate power”. A modest number of additional readings will be distributed in class in connection with some of the units listed in the course outline.