

R O B E R T A . D A H L

- foreword by douglas w. rae
- new preface by the author

# Gw<sup>who</sup> GOVERNs?

second edition

democracy and power in an american city

"A book that no one interested in politics can afford to ignore." —*Commentary*

# WHO GOVERNS?

Democracy and Power in an American City  
Second Edition



ROBERT A. DAHL  
Foreword by Douglas W. Rae  
New Preface by the author

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**WHO GOVERNS?**

# Foreword to the Second Edition

DOUGLAS RAE

Robert Dahl is the most celebrated political scientist of the twentieth century. Such distinction cannot be built on any single piece of scholarship, however brilliant, and Dahl's reputation rests on scores of publications spanning six decades. His subject matter has ranged from the U.S. Congress to city politics, from democratic theory to the control of nuclear weapons, from constitutionalism to participation in the workplace. Asked to pick Dahl's single greatest work, many would select *Preface to Democratic Theory* (1956) for its penetrating logic and elegant construction of the way ideals of popular control can (and cannot) be approximated in the actual working of large polities. Others might choose his later work on participatory democracy, still others his early tour de force (written with C. E. Lindblom), *Politics, Economics and Welfare* (1953). Many, today, are greatly impressed with his *How Democratic Is the American Constitution?* (2002). My pick, however, is the book you hold in your hands, *Who Governs? Democracy and Power in an American City* (1961).

In 1929, R. Staughton Lynd published a celebrated study of Muncie, Indiana, under the title *Middletown*. In this alluring work, Lynd created a prevailing genre of urban interpretation—a genre stressing the dominant role played in local life by economic and social elites (often, reportedly, joined by family ties, club memberships, and the like to form cohesive upper-class groupings). Overshadowing and often manipulating the nominally democratic working of municipal government by means of (often vaguely described) structures, these unelected archons seemed to reduce ordinary politics to a shallow imitation of democracy. Work of the same general sort—popularizing the term *power structure*—spread across the national landscape, with particularly notable instances falling on Atlanta, Baton Rouge, Ypsilanti, and Seattle (the classic critical survey is provided by Dahl's gifted student, Nelson Polsby, in *Community Power and Political Theory* [1963]). These works varied in many respects but held firm in two particulars. First, they conceived local power structures as rather static affairs, not as moving parts of historical change. Second, they rested on little or no evidence about just how and when elite members controlled or manipulated *actual decisions* in and near city hall. In many instances, the *reputation* for being powerful was taken as equivalent for the fact of controlling actual outcomes—an equation that is at best a first approximation. Despite the obvious difficulties

facing work that took little account of historical change and neglected vital details of empirical verification, this genre held something like canonical status in the late 1950s when Dahl and his students began to examine the one city most accessible to their direct observation from Yale's front porch: New Haven, Connecticut.

Dahl opens with a remarkable historical analysis running from the city's incorporation within the newly minted U.S. political system in 1784 to the middle of the twentieth century. Charting a complex series of changes—from the powerful “standing order” left over from the Puritan colony to a business elite not wholly different from the one Lynd described in Muncie, and then to a system in which voting power, often held by immigrant groups, came to rival economic and social distinction, Dahl established that this last transformation had altered the very nature of power and control: “Within a century a political system dominated by one cohesive set of leaders had given way to a system dominated by many different sets of leaders, each having access to different combinations of political resources. It was, in short, a pluralist system” (p. 86). What had been static for others was dynamic for Dahl; what had been relatively simple for others had become complex for Dahl. This analysis, covering fewer than a hundred pages, is in itself among the classic works of political science.

As Dahl conducted his careful field research about the then-present city, Democrat Richard C. Lee had recently defeated New Haven's last-ever Republican mayor, William Celentano, in the election of 1953. Dahl based his work on detailed interviews and participant observation of actual decisions taken on such topics as political nominations, urban renewal (an immense program under Lee), and public education. He discovered that the social and economic notables were by and large unimportant in determining the outcomes to these decisions. In matters narrowly political, ward-level practitioners, and minor elected officials, were predominant. In the details of urban renewal, staffers (many of whom were remarkably gifted professionals) often played pivotal roles. (Dahl's student Raymond Wolfinger provides the most detailed and sophisticated narrative of Lee-era policy-making in *Politics of Progress* [1971].) Indeed, Lee very nearly *invented* a business elite by forming his Citizen's Action Commission—an organization whose function was to sell redevelopment plans developed by city staffers to the public and to the business community.

There are many nuances and variations in the warp of power as Dahl traces it, but it never in any instance resembles the static hierarchy described in the conventional wisdom that preceded *Who Governs?* Dahl is never dogmatic, and he never imagines that the world stands still to accommodate either the democratic ideal or his own pluralist theory of city politics. Fittingly, the book's last paragraph reads: “Neither the prevailing consensus, the

creed, nor even the political system itself are immutable products of democratic ideas, beliefs, and institutions inherited from the past. For better or worse, they are always open, in some measure, to alteration through those complex processes of symbiosis and change that constitute the relations of leaders and citizens in a pluralistic democracy" (p. 325). And, as later works of research have suggested, subsequent decades have brought ceaseless change, some of it for better, some of it for worse. All of it is enlivened and made intelligible by a fresh reading of this new edition of Dahl's liveliest and most remarkable book.

## Preface to the Second Edition

As I reflect on *Who Governs?* more than four decades after its publication I'm reminded again of my lengthy and continuing interest in power and influence—not as a participant, I hasten to add, but as an observer of these phenomena. As an observer, I've long been dismayed by a seemingly irresistible tendency to oversimplify relations of power and influence. Yet political life, I believe, is among the most complex phenomena we struggle to understand. One reason for its complexity—though by no means the only reason—lies in the relations that are at the very center of politics: power and influence.

For several years before undertaking my study of New Haven, I had brooded over the problems of observing, analyzing, and describing power. I was both dismayed and challenged by the simplistic language we are prone to use for discussing “power,” as well as the difficulties in the way of observing it, the impossibility of testing our conjectures by experimentation, the enormous variety of forms that political life can take, and many other daunting problems.

Among other things, the absence of satisfactory ways of *measuring* power and influence, and thus describing them accurately, presents a huge challenge. Although we can readily measure the relative income or wealth of different persons, for example, how can we measure their relative power or influence? How much power of what persons over what other persons? Power over what particular subjects or issues? And so on . . .

As I mentioned in the original preface, during the year before I began the study of New Haven, I had spent much of my time concentrating on these and related questions. The most relevant outcome of my reflections was undertaking the research for *Who Governs?*

As its readers soon discover, I focused much of my inquiry, though by no means all, on interviews conducted by myself and my superb young associates with people who had actually participated in different types of important decisions. That approach, let me hasten to add, has its limitations. Among others, we cannot, alas, directly interview persons who are no longer living, including some who may have participated in earlier decisions that helped to set the options available for later decision-makers. Despite its limits, however, I think the approach was a fruitful one.



Changes in New Haven and perhaps in my own views about how to search for answers to the question of "who governs?" would result today, I imagine, in a different book. But I hope that the description and analysis I made half a century ago still has relevance today.

## Preface

The book that follows is an attempt to throw new light on an ancient question by examining a single American city in New England.

The study began in 1955 on the opposite edge of the United States, where, during a year of reading and reflecting at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences in Palo Alto, California, I found myself returning incessantly to the central question of this book and, with the patient help of colleagues at the Center, to a quest for solutions to stubborn problems of concept, theory, and method. The actual research began in 1957 and ended in the summer of 1959, after which I resisted the temptation, except for a few cases, to describe more recent events—none of which, I believe, would significantly modify the hypotheses and interpretations set out in the book as it now stands.

The community I chose to study was New Haven, Connecticut, and I chose it for the most part because it lay conveniently at hand. But there are other good reasons for the choice. Though no city can claim to represent cities in general, and though certainly none can claim to display the full range of characteristics found in a national political system, New Haven is in many respects typical of other cities in the United States. (A comparison of New Haven with other American urban areas is found in Appendix A.) And three respects in which it is atypical are advantageous to my purposes. Because only a handful of cities in the United States have an equally long history, New Haven furnishes the advantages of historical perspective. Because, unlike most American cities, it has had a highly competitive two-party system for over a century, it offers analogies with national politics that few other cities could provide. And because, during the last decade, it has undertaken a dramatic effort to rescue itself from creeping decay, in the course of which the political system itself has altered, it provides an opportunity to examine factors making for stability and change.

If the disadvantages and limitations of studying one city are self-evident, the overwhelming and, I hope, compensating advantage is that the enterprise is reduced to manageable proportions. Many problems that are almost unyielding over a larger area can be relatively easily disposed of on this smaller canvas. It is not, perhaps, wholly accidental

that the two political theorists who did the most to develop a descriptive political science were Aristotle and Machiavelli, who, though separated by eighteen centuries, both witnessed politics on the smaller, more human scale of the city-state. Nonetheless, I had better make clear at once that explanations presented in this study are tested only against the evidence furnished in the political system of New Haven.

This book is one of three closely related volumes about New Haven to be published by the Yale University Press. The other two have been written by associates who worked with me in gathering and analyzing the data on New Haven. In *Community Power and Political Theory*, Dr. Nelson Polsby examines the "stratification theory" developed in studies of other communities, where a socioeconomic elite seemed to dominate political life. He tests this theory against the data for New Haven, finds it irrelevant, and states the need for a new pluralist theory of community power. In the third volume, *The Politics of Progress*, Dr. Raymond Wolfinger investigates various theories of political leadership in the light of a detailed examination of the activities of political leaders in New Haven, particularly the mayor, in several major decisions.

The volumes by Dr. Polsby and Dr. Wolfinger complement this one in a number of ways, and questions a reader might expect to find dealt with here will sometimes be found instead in the other two.

The data about New Haven used in this book were gained from a variety of sources and by a number of different methods. These are discussed in some detail in Appendix B, but a brief word may be helpful here. Probably the single most useful source of information about New Haven's political life in recent years was a set of lengthy interviews during 1957 and 1958 with nearly fifty persons who had participated actively in one or more important decisions on matters of urban redevelopment, public education, or nominations for local office. In addition, Dr. Wolfinger spent a year in two highly strategic locations in City Hall and provided invaluable background information; some of this was confidential, and though it does not appear in these pages directly, it nonetheless provided me with heightened confidence in the reliability of the evidence contained in the interviews. Three different sample surveys were made under my supervision; one covered several hundred "subleaders," the other two were of registered voters. Moreover, in 1958, graduate students in my seminar at Yale carried out detailed investigations of the events leading up to a proposal for a new charter and its defeat in a referendum; their papers (listed in Appendix B) were a mine of information, both qualitatively and quantitatively.

In order to gain the kind of reliable historical perspective that a method depending solely on interviews could not provide, I have made use of a variety of historical materials, including not only standard his-

torical works but U. S. Census and other documents and records which provided unique and valuable information.

I have written this book with three audiences constantly in mind—my fellow scholars, my fellow citizens of the greater New Haven area, and inquiring readers who, though in neither of these two groups, may hope that by reading a book about the politics of one particular city they may gain a greater understanding of their own communities, American politics, or even democracy itself.

I am painfully aware of the fact that the interests, background information, and, alas, even the specialized vocabularies of these three audiences are not always the same, and no doubt at times I have paid attention to one audience at the expense of the others. In these cases, I hope that the patience and tolerance of the reader will enable him to gain his objectives where I may have failed in mine.

Robert A. Dahl

New Haven, Connecticut  
May 1, 1961

## Acknowledgments

My heaviest debt is to two persons who began with me on this study as research assistants and ended as close friends and associates, as well as authors of two companion volumes, Nelson Polsby and Raymond Wolfinger.

At a time when I was too busy to provide more than the most general guidance, William Flanigan assumed virtually complete charge of the preparation, execution, and tabulation of the survey conducted in the summer of 1959, and with unfailing geniality, insight, and responsibility helped me in countless ways with the analysis until the very day this book went to press.

For help on the history of New Haven, I have leaned heavily on my friend and colleague, Professor Rollin Osterweis of the Department of History at Yale, whose encyclopedic fund of information about New Haven's past is only partly recorded in his invaluable book on the history of the city.

The research and papers of graduate students in the Department of Political Science at Yale have been of help in a variety of ways; I should like to record my special obligation to Rufus Browning, William Foltz, James Guyot, Richard Merritt, Leroy Rieselbach, Bruce Russett, and James Toscano.

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I should like to express my deep appreciation to Marian Neal Ash and Anne Firth Murray of the Yale University Press on behalf not only of myself but also the ultimate beneficiaries of their efforts, my readers. Their sensitive and intelligent contributions on matters of clarity, organization, and style were all the more persuasive because of the disarming graciousness with which they were offered.

A fellowship at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences gave me time to work out the first outlines of the research and analysis required for this work, and a year as the Ford Research Professor in the Department of Political Science at Yale provided me with both the time and the additional research funds needed to launch and carry out most of the actual research in New Haven. Additional financial assistance, without which the research and writing could not have been completed, was received from the Social Science Research Council, the Ford Foundation, and the American Philosophical Society.

Finally, I acknowledge my deep obligation to all the citizens of New Haven who permitted themselves to be interviewed. Much of the substance and validity of this study was dependent on their cooperation and willingness to share information and opinion. For many reasons, men and women who furnished me with invaluable information must go nameless here, but to all who read these pages and recognize their contributions, and those who do not, I should like to express my thanks.

R. A. D.

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## 1. The Nature of the Problem

In a political system where nearly every adult may vote but where knowledge, wealth, social position, access to officials, and other resources are unequally distributed, who actually governs?

The question has been asked, I imagine, wherever popular government has developed and intelligent citizens have reached the stage of critical self-consciousness concerning their society. It must have been put many times in Athens even before it was posed by Plato and Aristotle.

The question is peculiarly relevant to the United States and to Americans. In the first place, Americans espouse democratic beliefs with a fervency and a unanimity that have been a regular source of astonishment to foreign observers from Tocqueville and Bryce to Myrdal and Brogan. Not long ago, two American political scientists reported that 96 per cent or more of several hundred registered voters interviewed in two widely separated American cities agreed that: "Democracy is the best form of government" and "Every citizen should have an equal chance to influence government policy," and subscribed to other propositions equally basic to the democratic credo.<sup>1</sup> What, if anything, do these beliefs actually mean in the face of extensive inequalities in the resources different citizens can use to influence one another?

These beliefs in democracy and equality first gained wide acceptance as a part of what Myrdal later called the "American Creed" during a period when the problem of inequality was (if we can disregard for the moment the question of slavery) much less important than it is today. Indeed, the problem uppermost in the minds of the men at the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia in 1787 could probably have been stated quite the other way around. To men concerned with what was then a unique task of adapting republican institutions to a whole nation, the very *equality* in resources of power that American society and geography tended to generate seemed to endanger political stability and liberty. In a society of equals, what checks would there be against an impetuous, unenlightened, or unscrupulous majority? A half century later, this was also the way an amazing and gifted observer, Alexis de Tocqueville,

1. James W. Prothro and Charles M. Grigg, "Fundamental Principles of Democracy: Bases of Agreement and Disagreement," *Journal of Politics*, 22 (1960), 276-94.