

Photogenic Power: A Brief Analysis of Iconic Depictions of Political Power

Nitan Shanas

In his much acclaimed-yet-controversial text, political theorist Steven Lukes introduces a three-dimensional model of power. The first part of the model, hypothesized by Robert Dahl and monikered “decision-making power,” emphasizes direct and public exertion of power whereby one pressures another to engage in an act they would not have done otherwise. Baratz and Bachrach supplemented Dahl’s early theory with the second dimension—“non-decision-making power”—which constitutes the ability to redirect the agenda or conversation of public discourse; this dimension of power often takes place behind closed doors. The third face of Lukes’s model, that of “ideological power,” encompasses the ability to alter societal thoughts and desires, in some cases, even convincing people to yearn for things that may be against their own personal interests. Below and throughout the remainder of this paper, I will analyze two preeminent photographs in recent political history using Lukes’s three-dimensional model of power and other related theories.

Discontent and determination roamed through the air of the U.S. Capitol basement. Her face, marked by stern fortitude, pointed directly towards her “esteemed colleague,” a phrase often used by American politicians to address their political foes. Her arm, located on the wall above her legislative counterpart, was strategically placed so as to assert domination. Her unrelaxed body echoed a sense of austerity reverberating every which way. Meanwhile, distress emanated from the other senator as the two women stood at most six inches apart. The year was 2018 and the two women involved were Dianne Feinstein (D-CA), a ranking member of the Senate Judiciary Committee, and Lisa Murkowski (R-AK), one of a short list of undecided Republican senators tasked

with confirming or opposing Judge Kavanaugh as the next Supreme Court Justice. Kavanaugh, President Trump's appointee, was facing public criticism over mounting evidence of potential sexual assault misconduct dating back to his collegiate life. Kavanaugh's senate confirmation hearings took place amid the #MeToo movement zenith. Women were emboldened to make a difference and to stand up against patriarchal toxicity; this was a time when Senator Murkowski as a woman could champion the wave of female empowerment that flowed across America.



The above picture clearly illustrates Feinstein's attempt to coerce Murkowski to oppose Kavanaugh's confirmation. Her efforts were futile retrospectively, but the attempt to exert power was nonetheless present. More importantly, this contentious exchange transpired publicly. Feinstein is a seasoned politician; she is expertly attuned to her surroundings and to the ubiquity of the press. She knows that her interaction will be filmed and soon thereafter circulated through the media. Feinstein's actions most resemble the first face of power, "decision-making," which comprises outward exposure. However, Robert Dahl's theory, as in the other two theories subsumed under Lukes's dimensions of power, assumes that one party successfully pressures another into behaving in a manner that is incongruent with its real

interests. Since Feinstein fails at persuading Murkowski to change her vote, I posit that the Democrat from California perhaps never had tangible power to fulfil her motive.

The real and symbolic importance of the Feinstein-Murkowski exchange unsurprisingly gained mass notoriety. Senatorial arguments are always spectacles for political nerds, like myself, but Murkowski's cognitive dissonance between her two identities (one as a woman and the other as an elected official representing her party) was especially captivating for the public eye. Contrary to popular beliefs, it was in fact Senator Murkowski who possessed more political power. Mathematically, each senator has an equal voice in the legislative process (one out of a hundred). Realistically, however, the tight majority-minority ratio and party polarization grant the most power to the fewest number of senators: those who are willing to vote against party lines. Lisa Murkowski's authority may not have fallen under Lukes's guidelines, but she most certainly edged Feinstein in terms of political clout.



The second photograph features the senate floor engulfed by a mob of photographers. The scene resembled a Black Friday store opening, except the customers had already

obtained cameras and the prized possession was capturing one of the most influential individuals of the tech era. Ironically, the focal point was the very same person credited with establishing a platform that made intently observing civilians more feasible. In April 2018, Mark Zuckerberg begrudgingly testified before the U.S. senate about his corporate ties with Cambridge Analytica, a now-defunct British political consulting firm which immorally mined and shared personal Facebook user data. News of Cambridge Analytica's involvement during the 2016 presidential elections engendered widespread fear and distrust in the U.S. The federal government had simply not done enough to prevent misinformation campaigns and 1984 George Orwell-esque civil surveillance. Legislative ethics once again lagged behind technological innovation as elected officials chose to rely on tech giants and corporate social responsibility to secure our democracy.

The Zuckerberg picture captivates us twofold: first in the strict optic sense and a second time in its political implications. A trove of cameras signifies that a prominent figure is in sight. Whereas famous persons are at times able to avoid paparazzi, Zuckerberg cannot—in this circumstance—evade being filmed. He is bound to his seat regardless of his massive fiscal power or social capital. The testimony took place publicly and mass media's first amendment rights ensured that a multitude of agencies could report on the event. Zuckerberg could not circumvent facing public ire and potentially bearing the blame for our national security limitations. In the process, the Facebook CEO was impelled to testify on Capitol Hill only to be grilled vehemently with myriad inquiries. Zuckerberg's displeasure in speaking in front of the senate coupled with the senate's capacity to shift personal culpability superbly exemplifies decision-making power as hypothesized by Dahl.

The Zuckerberg imagery evinces significant symbolism about our current political climate. Still, it conceals several underlying themes pertinent to the broader discussion of political power in present-day America. Excluding Cambridge Analytica, the real threat to our democracy stemmed from the Russian government which had spread misinformation and damaging details about Hilary Clinton in order to interfere with the 2016 U.S. presidential election. The Kremlin's capacity to alter civilian perceptions and desires in favor of Donald Trump's candidacy precisely meets the criteria for Lukes's "ideological power." A second theory of power not explicitly shown in the Zuckerberg photograph is that of panopticism. Michel Foucault's panopticism invokes a sense of ubiquitous power which Lukes characterizes as very radical; it refers to perpetual internal surveillance caused by the fear of being watched by an external body. We know that our google search history, our social media posts, and our private mobile content all move into the hands of entities such as Cambridge Analytica. While some have readily ignored this issue, others have changed their cellular and internet usage to avert being watched. The power of Facebook and other enterprises engaging in data mining is pervasive—not only in as much as widespread presence of internet, but in the sort of panoptical surveillance experienced by those fearful of technological scrutiny.

The foregoing analysis of the pair of photographs highlights two separate storylines portraying parts of Lukes's theory. Each paints a different picture of political power yet simultaneously maintains similar features. Most noticeably, the two examples both took place in the senate chamber. Modern-day senators have immense influence upon the state and welfare of our country. They have the capacity to thwart or to support executive actions such as judicial appointees. They also have the power to influence public opinion on a number of issues and the capability to stall efforts put forth

by the House of Representatives. If these photos are to shape our understanding of the U.S. political system, one might conclude that the upper house has the upper hand in political decisions—above and beyond any other facet of our government. Surely our constitutional construct is far more complex than that. Nonetheless and given this immense power, it is perhaps unsurprising that both photos—which involved senatorial plots—have permeated through channels of mass media.

Works Cited

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