

Political Science as a Social Science of Power, Authority, and Legitimacy

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Abstract

Political science is often understood narrowly as the study of the state and formal institutions, yet political practices also occur within social relations that shape power, authority, and legitimacy outside the state arena. This article aims to reformulate political science's position as a social science by mapping the main objects of study, comparing four analytical approaches, and emphasizing the importance of empirical rigor in political explanation. This article was written using a qualitative design based on literature studies, with data sources consisting of relevant books and scientific articles. The author then applies thematic-conceptual analysis through repeated readings, coding key concepts, and compiling thematic syntheses. The results of the study indicate that political science within the social science framework sees four approaches: institutionalism, which highlights the role of rules and incentives; the behavioral/rational approach, which emphasizes actor choices and strategies; political economy/structuralism, which places material inequality as a determinant of power configurations; and discourse constructivism, which explains how meaning and "truth" are produced to build compliance. This article also finds that these four approaches are complementary when adapted to the questions and available evidence. The implications of this article emphasize the need for integration of theoretical lenses and methodological disciplines so that political studies are able to explain power relations in their entirety without falling into opinion.

Abstrak

Ilmu politik kerap dipahami secara sempit sebagai kajian tentang negara dan institusi formal, padahal praktik politik juga berlangsung dalam relasi sosial yang membentuk kekuasaan, otoritas, dan legitimasi di luar arena negara. Artikel ini bertujuan merumuskan kembali posisi ilmu politik sebagai ilmu sosial dengan memetakan objek kajian utama, memperbandingkan empat pendekatan analitis, serta menegaskan pentingnya ketelitian empiris dalam penjelasan politik. Artikel ini ditulis menggunakan desain kualitatif berbasis studi literatur, dengan sumber data berupa buku dan artikel ilmiah yang relevan, lalu penulis menerapkan analisis tematik-konseptual melalui pembacaan berulang, pengodean konsep kunci, dan penyusunan sintesis tematik. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahwa ilmu politik dalam kerangka ilmu sosial melihat terdapat empat pendekatan antara lain institusionalisme yang menyoroti peran aturan dan insentif, pendekatan perilaku/rasional yang menekankan pilihan dan strategi aktor, ekonomi-politik/struktural yang menempatkan ketimpangan material sebagai

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penentu konfigurasi kekuasaan, sedangkan konstruktivisme-diskursus menjelaskan bagaimana makna dan "kebenaran" diproduksi untuk membangun kepatuhan. Artikel ini juga menemukan bahwa keempat pendekatan tersebut bersifat komplementer jika disesuaikan dengan pertanyaan dan bukti yang tersedia. Implikasi artikel ini menekankan perlunya integrasi lensa teoretik dan disiplin metodologis agar kajian politik mampu menjelaskan relasi kekuasaan secara utuh tanpa jatuh pada opini.

1.

Introduction

The study of political science remains relevant as a social science because it provides analytical tools for understanding how humans organize their lives together amidst differing interests and limited resources. Politics itself can be viewed as a social phenomenon that extends beyond the state, but rather within power relations among citizens, groups, organizations, and elites, who mutually influence the direction of collective decisions (Madung, 2016). Such a framework is important because contemporary politics increasingly demonstrates that power does not always exist as a position, but rather as the ability to regulate, persuade, pressure, or limit the choices of others in everyday practice.

However, discussions of political science in academic circles often remain trapped in a narrowing of study objects that are too institutional and legalistic, leaving little room for the social dynamics that support or challenge institutions. Yet, concepts such as the state, power, decision-making, public policy, and resource allocation need to be read as entry points for exploring who benefits from collective decisions, not simply as a list of normative definitions. This emphasis aligns with the tradition of Indonesian political studies, which views political science as being able to explain the social processes that shape collective action, not simply portray formal structures (Supriyadi, 2015).

It is at this point that this article takes its position, offering a reading of political science as a discipline whose object of study extends to power distributed within social networks, norms, and the distribution of resources, including the realm of language and discourse. Power can operate through knowledge and discourse that produce "truth," discipline behavior, and normalize boundaries deemed legitimate. This argument aligns with classic studies of Indonesian political sociology, which emphasize that power is not merely a matter of state institutions, but also a matter of social relations that build obedience, domination, and resistance within society.

To clarify the workings of power, this article links the object of political science study with four groups of approaches frequently used in political science: institutionalism, behaviorism and rationality, political economy/structuralism, and discourse constructivism. Theory is not simply used to memorize schools of thought, but is used to organize questions about actors, arenas, contested resources, and the mechanisms of domination that give one party the upper hand over another. This explanation emphasizes that theoretical perspectives serve as lenses for formulating questions and strengthening empirical arguments (Mudhoffir, 2013).

This article then emphasizes that political science must maintain its empirical character so that discussions of power do not degenerate into opinion. Political science claims must be supported by evidence that can be examined, retested, and debated, whether through quantitative data, qualitative data, comparative methods, or mixed methods. This assertion is

intertwined with methods in social science research that view data transparency, traceability of the analytical process, and ethical prudence as prerequisites for robust scientific explanations in political studies (Setiyono, 2024, Surbakti, 1992).

Based on this description, this article is important because it reunites three things that are often separated in the teaching and writing of political science: the breadth of the object of study, the rigor of the theoretical lens, and the empirical discipline of proof. This manuscript is also relevant for reading contemporary society, where power moves not only through formal procedures, but also through patronage, political-economic inequality, and the production of discourse in the digital space that shapes opinion and polarization. Thus, the following sections of the discussion will show how political science as a social science can be used to interpret power in institutions, behavior, structures, and discourse more comprehensively, while also demonstrating why empirical rigor remains the main foundation of this discipline.

2. Method

This article uses a qualitative approach with a literature study design to emphasize the position of political science as a social science that focuses on power, authority, and legitimacy that operate beyond the boundaries of state institutions. This article treats academic texts as the main data sources, especially books and journal articles that discuss the object of political science study, theoretical approaches (institutionalism, behaviorism/rationality, political economy/structuralism, and discourse constructivism), and empirical traditions in political science. The direction of source selection follows the focus of the article's argument, namely the expansion of the object of study from the state to power relations in social networks and discourse, as well as the need for empirical discipline so that political studies do not fall into opinion.

Thematic-conceptual analysis was applied to organize the literature findings into themes that answer the article's objectives, namely (1) mapping the objects of political science study within the social science tradition, (2) mapping four clusters of approaches to reading power, and (3) affirming the empirical character of political science along with the implications of method choices. The analysis process was carried out through repeated readings, marking key concepts, coding themes, and compiling a "concept map" that connects actors, arenas, resources, and mechanisms of domination discussed in the literature. The author maintains the traceability of the argument by noting the reasons for source selection, linking each theme to relevant references, and testing the consistency of the discussion logic with the framework built in the introduction and the results-discussion section.

3. Result and Discussion

3.1. Objects of Political Science Study in the Social Science Tradition

The object of study of political science within the social science tradition stems from the understanding that politics is a social phenomenon that arises when humans must organize their lives together amidst differing interests and limited resources. Therefore, the focus is not solely on the state as an institution, but on the power relations at work among social actors (citizens, groups, organizations, and elites) that mutually influence the direction of collective decisions. This emphasis is important because power does not always exist as a "position," but rather as the ability to regulate, persuade, pressure, or limit the choices of others.

Concepts such as the state, power, decision-making, general policy, and allocation are the core of political science discussions, which shows that from the beginning this discipline has focused on how decisions are made and who benefits from them (Budiardjo, 2001). Politics, in this sense, is both a way for society to produce order and a constantly evolving space for contestation. The social science tradition thus encourages readings that link institutional facts with the social dynamics that support or challenge them.

The expansion of the object of study occurs because political science does not consider the state as the sole political arena, but rather as one node in a broader network of power. Political science needs to be understood through basic concepts and their relationship to social phenomena, so that it can explain the processes that shape collective action, not just photograph formal structures (Surbakti, 1992). This perspective makes political science close to sociology, anthropology, economics and social psychology, because all these disciplines examine human behavior in social structures and relations.

The boundaries of study become more open when attention is directed to how power is exercised through networks, norms, and the distribution of resources. Ontologically, the object of study of political science is events that can be categorized as political activities and how political science is constructed to explain them. At this point, the object of political science takes on the form of a study of power, decisions, and social order (Rismawati, 2022).

In the social science tradition, power is understood as a relation that is not always centered on the state and not always easily measured through formal decisions. Michel Foucault emphasized power as something that exists in relations, is distributed, and is intertwined with knowledge and discourse (Af., 2012). The implication is that the object of study of political science includes how "truth" is produced and used to justify policies, regulate populations, or discipline behavior. This approach enriches the reading of power dynamics because it opens up space to examine politics at the level of everyday practices, language, symbols, and administrative apparatus. Power can operate through regulations, categorizations, or standardizations that appear technical but influence the distribution of opportunities. When this relational perspective is adopted, politics is not reduced to the struggle for office, but rather seen as a social process that shapes the boundaries of what is considered normal and legitimate.

Alongside power, the social science tradition also places authority and legitimacy as key concepts, explaining why obedience can be achieved without constant coercion. Political science examines how this authority is constructed through laws, institutions, leadership, and narratives that make commands seem legitimate. Authority and legitimacy are part of the conceptual apparatus of political science. The two are interconnected, so analysis does not stop at who governs, but at the social reasons that make government acceptable. When legitimacy is fractured, political change can emerge in the form of institutional delegitimization, increased resistance, or shifting social group allegiances (Budiardjo, 2001). In the context of power dynamics, legitimacy is often constructed through performance, redistribution, or moral symbols, each of which has different vulnerabilities. Therefore, the object of study of political science also includes how legitimacy is produced, contested, and tested in social conflict.

The next object of study is interests and how they are shaped into political action. Political science rejects the notion of interests as something that automatically "exists," as they often arise from social experiences, class positions, identities, and available political language. Here, political science examines how organizations, the media, and leadership frame grievances into demands, then transform those demands into mobilization or negotiation. Thus, political science connects with other social disciplines in understanding human interests and behavior in both cooperation and conflict. Interests then intersect with the distribution of resources in the form of access to money, information, networks, and reputation, which determine who can speak and who is excluded. This aspect serves as a bridge between studying politics as an idea and politics as a practice of distribution (Suhartana, 2016).

Focusing on institutions prevents political science from focusing on the psychologization of actors. This is because political action always operates within formal and informal rules that govern incentives. Formal institutions include constitutions, elections, political parties, bureaucracies, and the judiciary, but informal institutions such as patronage, political intermediaries, and unwritten agreements often determine the decision-making process.

Patronage and clientelism show how patron-client relations become strategic patterns in electoral competition and the distribution of support, so that politics proceeds through exchanges that are not always captured by official rules (Setiawan et al., 2022). Therefore, the object of political science study can examine how formal rules are "translated" in the field through the social networks and interests surrounding institutions. Reading institutions as social practices helps explain why the same institutional design can produce different outcomes in different social contexts. This is where political science demonstrates its social science character, as institutions are understood as both products and producers of social relations.

The shift from strictly institutional studies to the study of political behavior broadens the research object of political science to citizens and elites as social actors. Voting behavior, participation, apathy, and non-electoral forms of engagement become important because they reveal how power gains or loses support. On the elite side, coalition behavior, communication strategies, and conflict calculations reveal power dynamics in a more operational form. The behavioral approach becomes an important pathway for "reading" political science, including its critique, so that readers can see that (political) behavior does not stand alone from social structures (Budiardjo, 2001). This also demonstrates that political behavior is influenced by many factors, such as education, class, identity, networks, and the information environment. Therefore, the study of (political) behavior always invites dialogue with sociology and social psychology. In this way, the object of study becomes more precise, as it connects individual attitudes with the structures that condition choices.

Besides behavior, an important object of study in political science is the political process. This process is demonstrated in the way issues become agenda items, how decisions are formulated, and how policies are implemented. This process reveals power dynamics at each stage, as actors who influence agenda-setting may not necessarily influence implementation.

The dynamics of power are discussed in political science by looking at how the mechanisms of power and how political power regulate society, so that it can be read as a process and not just the end result (Gamurti & Siregar, 2021). Process analysis demands attention to the relationships between actors, including lobbying, compromise, conflict, and the bureaucratic

processes that transform decisions into practice. Process analysis also opens up the opportunity to view politics as a series of negotiations, including those that are opaque and heavily dependent on informal networks. When process is positioned as the object, political science can explain why policies that appear good on paper can have unequal impacts on the ground.

The boundary between formal and informal politics needs to be treated as a deliberately fluid object of study, as power dynamics often occur at the intersection of the two. Formal politics provides a legal framework and symbols of legitimacy, while informal politics provides operational channels connecting elites, brokers, and citizens in the distribution of benefits. The study of core political concepts emphasizes that the definitions of the state, power, and political mechanisms need to be understood as tools for interpreting social practices, not simply normative definitions (Setiyono, 2024). In the contemporary era, digital space also adds a new layer, in which the production of discourse, the flow of information, and the management of public attention become part of how power operates. The link between power and knowledge provides a language for reading how discourse shapes what is considered a public issue and who is considered legitimate to speak (Af, 2012). The object of study of political science, in the social science tradition, is ultimately directed at the power relations that shape collective decisions, resource allocation, and legitimacy, without having to limit politics only to state buildings.

3.2. Political Science and the Power Approach

Theoretical perspectives in political science serve as "lenses" that can help understand how power operates, persists, and is contested in society. In the social science tradition, theory is not used to memorize currents, but rather to organize questions related to who the actors are, what arenas are contested, what resources are at stake, and what mechanisms make one party dominant over another. Therefore, various theories in political science can serve as "maps" for reading power as a moving relationship between institutions, behaviors, social structures, and the production of meaning. This mapping also helps avoid the analytical trap of stopping at surface phenomena, such as elite changes or policy changes, without exploring the logic that drives them. Each theoretical perspective brings assumptions about humans, society, and the state, resulting in different explanations for the same political events. These differences in perspective can be more productive if framed as complementary, rather than as a win-lose competition between theories.

In the study of power, there are at least four groups of approaches often used as the backbone of political science analysis in understanding power. First, institutionalism. Second, actor behavior and rationality. Third, political economy/structuralism, and fourth, discourse constructivism. All four can be understood as explanatory paths that emphasize different "drivers," including the rules of the game, actor choices, material structures, and the formation of meaning (Budiardjo, 2001; Marsh & Stoker, 2018).

The institutionalist approach positions institutions as the "rules of the game" that shape the direction and boundaries of political action. In its classic version, the legal-institutional approach interprets power through constitutional design, formal authority, the division of

powers, and the structure of state institutions. This approach is important because it reveals how authority is institutionalized, who has the right to make decisions, what procedures are considered legitimate, and how conflicts are resolved through recognized channels. However, the institutional perspective also demands attention to informal institutions in the form of customs, unwritten norms, and practices that accompany formal rules, as this is where the "gap" between the law and the reality of power often emerges (Friel, 2017).

By examining institutions as sets of formal and informal rules, analysis becomes more precise in explaining why certain policies are easily passed but difficult to implement, or why seemingly strong institutions are easily hijacked. This approach also helps understand the "law" of stability: that power tends to persist when it finds institutional forms that manage conflict and distribute benefits in a relatively acceptable manner (Mudhoffir, 2013).

In the (new) institutionalist approach, attention to institutions is expanded to emphasize how institutions shape incentives, reduce uncertainty, and produce recurring patterns of behavior. New institutionalism in political science shows that institutional analysis is no longer merely normative, but emphasizes how institutions are broadly understood and used to explain political phenomena empirically (Sobari, 2024). Consequently, power is explained not simply by "who occupies the seat," but by how the configuration of rules and procedures creates strategic advantages for certain parties. Studies applying new institutionalism, for example to the formulation and implementation of the MD3 Law, demonstrate how contestation and the balance of power can be interpreted through the workings of rules, veto points, and the struggles of actors within specific institutional spaces. Such examples demonstrate that institutions are not passive backdrops, but arenas that produce political consequences. The institutional approach also provides language for explaining why political change is often gradual, as institutions create path dependencies that make certain choices seem "reasonable" while others become politically costly (Kosandi, 2015).

In contrast to institutionalism, the behavioral approach emphasizes that power needs to be explained through the observable, measurable, and comparable behavior of actors, both citizens and elites. In this approach, the central question is not simply "what rules apply" but "how people react to those rules." This orientation opens up the study of public opinion, voting behavior, participation, the formation of political attitudes, and how elites build support or manage conflict (Varma, 2007).

In the context of power dynamics, behavior is important because the legitimacy of power depends heavily on support, compliance, or at least acceptance, which can change due to economic crises, scandals, or changes in information. Behavior also explains why the same strategy can succeed in one place and fail in another, as political behavior is influenced by social structures, networks, and collective experiences. Reading behavior makes power appear as a process that continuously requires renewed support, rather than something automatically inherent in institutions.

The behavioral approach is often combined with rational choice theory, which emphasizes that actors act based on calculations of goals, preferences, and costs and benefits within the limits of the information they have. Rational choice theory is used to interpret political choices and individual decisions in the context of political psychology and political behavior (Herfeld, 2022). Within this framework, power can be explained as the result of the strategies of actors who are able to design coalitions, manage incentives, and resolve collective dilemmas and are

more likely to win in competition. This theory is useful for explaining elite behavior such as coalition formation, office allocation, and the logic of compromise, as well as explaining citizen behavior when voting based on calculations of perceived benefits.

However, rational choice theory needs to be positioned as a specific analytical tool, not as a claim that all political action is always "rational" in the narrow sense. It works best when political actors are able to map preferences, incentives, and binding institutional constraints, so that power dynamics appear as strategic interactions under specific rules. This theory is effective when linked to concrete cases such as shifting alliances or policy designs deliberately designed to lock in support (Gandhi, 2006).

While institutionalism emphasizes rules and the actor approach emphasizes choice, the political economy/structural approach situates power within a deeper relationship between politics and the distribution of material resources. This perspective sees power relations as inseparable from the structures of production, ownership, class, and inequality patterns that determine who has greater access to resources. The political economy approach focuses on the macro-relationships between economics and politics, including the dependency and neo-Marxist traditions often used to interpret domination and inequality (Razak & Elyta, 2018).

In this approach, power is not simply seen as decisions, but as the ability to control the distribution of benefits, shape policies that benefit certain groups, and maintain an order that perpetuates inequality. Electoral politics and public policy are then read as part of a struggle of asymmetric interests, as some actors possess stronger economic capital, networks, and access to information. In other words, power is explained through structures that make some choices seem "reasonable," while others are deemed extreme or unrealistic because they clash with dominant interests.

In the context of modern democracies, a political economy approach helps explain why redistributive policies often encounter resistance, why regulations can become lobbying arenas, and why some groups find it easier to influence agendas. This framework also encourages readers to examine the relationship between formal and factual power, where positions may change, but configurations of material interests can persist (Elfira et al., 2023). When combined with institutional analysis, political economy makes reading the dynamics of power more "substantial" because it does not stop at procedures, but rather traces who enjoys the results of those procedures.

The final important group is constructivism and discourse analysis, which emphasize that power operates through the production of meaning, language, and knowledge that shape how people understand political reality. In this perspective, political struggles are not only about material resources, but also about definitions: who has the right to define problems, what categories to use, and what narratives are considered true. In this regard, Michel Foucault emphasized the often invisible link between discourse and modes of subjugation, so that power operates through normalization and the dissemination of knowledge (Ramadhani, 2020). This approach helps explain why policies can be widely accepted despite being detrimental to some groups, because the language of the policy can frame it as "technical," "scientific," or "for the sake of order." In contemporary political studies, discourse analysis is also relevant to reading image production, identity politics, and the struggle for meaning in

the media because of the links between language, ideology, and politics, and how discourse works as a social practice (Supriyadi, 2015).

Discourse constructivism is often enriched by the theory of hegemony, which emphasizes that stable domination usually operates through consent, moral-intellectual leadership, and the organization of meaning, not just violence. Antonio Gramsci explains how hegemony influences readings of domination and social change, while also situating power in the relationship between political society and civil society. Gramsci also shows how this concept is widely used in socio-political studies, especially to read how domination operates through culture and discourse (Siswati, 2018). The hegemonic approach provides a neat link between structure and meaning, where material interests require ideological work to be accepted, while the production of meaning is often grounded in unequal access to resources. This approach makes explanations of power more sensitive to seemingly "peaceful" stability but actually contains relations of domination maintained through consensus and cultural institutions. It also opens up space to read political change as shifting configurations of meaning, social alliances, and legitimacy crises that break down hegemony.

3.3. Political Science as an Empirical Science

Political science is called empirical when it demands that its claims be supported by evidence that can be examined, retested, and openly debated. This empirical emphasis is important because power—the subject of political science—can easily become a rhetorical term if it is not linked to indicators, data, and tangible traces of processes. Therefore, a fundamental methodological question that needs to be addressed is how the phenomenon of power is identified, measured, and explained without reducing it to mere numbers. In the social science tradition, evidence is not only in the form of statistics, documents, interviews, archives, and observations; digital traces can also become valid data if maintained with clear procedures.

The empirical side also demands that research questions guide the research design, not merely complement it. Descriptive questions require sufficient data to illustrate patterns, while explanatory questions require strategies to explore causal mechanisms. Various research methods in political science can employ a variety of strategies as long as there is a good fit between the problem, data, and analytical methods. From this point on, methods are not understood as a list of techniques, but rather as logical decisions about how to obtain sufficient evidence to explain power dynamics. This precision ensures that discussions of politics do not become opinionated, even when the topic is closely related to public debate (Sagena et al., 2023).

A quantitative approach is usually chosen when researchers want to map general trends, test relationships between variables, or estimate the magnitude of a factor's influence on political behavior. In power studies, quantitative data are often used to read public opinion, voting behavior, policy performance, or representation patterns, primarily through surveys, election data, political-economic indicators, and institutional datasets. Its main strength lies in its ability to present comparable patterns across time and regions, allowing changes in power dynamics to be systematically tracked. However, this approach requires careful definition of variables. Variables such as trust in institutions or satisfaction, for example, must be translated into consistent and unbiased indicators. A common weakness is the illusion of precision—

numbers appear precise, but in reality, they depend on the instrument, sample, and quality of the measurement (Ikponmwosa et al., 2024). Therefore, the empirical tradition encourages explaining how data were collected, how representative they are, and what the limits of inference are, so that readers can assess the strength of the evidence offered.

Meanwhile, qualitative approaches are also widely used when political research seeks to understand meanings, processes, and mechanisms that are difficult to capture numerically, particularly in the context of power relations that operate through networks, negotiations, and discourse. In-depth interviews, observations, document studies, and archival searches help capture how political actors understand situations, how decisions are made, and how legitimacy is constructed or contested (Amin et al., 2019). Qualitative analysis can be a key approach in political studies, particularly for understanding the processes and contexts that shape actors' actions. In policy studies, for example, document review and interviews can reveal why certain policies are adopted, who drives them, and how compromises emerge behind regulatory texts. The strength of a qualitative approach lies in its ability to reveal causal flows and the logic of actions, not simply correlations. The challenge is maintaining the traceability of evidence—field notes, quotations, and documents must be selected with clear principles to avoid turning them into forced anecdotes (Prayogi et al., 2025; Tohardi, 2020).

Between these two poles, the empirical tradition in political science also recognizes the comparative method as a way to test explanations through case comparisons. Comparisons can be made across regions, periods, or regimes to see whether a power mechanism operates consistently or is context-dependent. Comparison is often positioned as an important approach because it helps avoid hasty conclusions from a single case. Comparisons don't have to be cross-national; comparing two regions within a country or two government periods can also yield robust findings, especially when key variables can be clearly mapped. Comparisons can assess whether policy changes are influenced by institutional design, coalition configurations, or civil society pressure. An added value is the ability to distinguish coincidental factors from truly determinants, without relying solely on intuition (Krupavicius et al., 2021). Here, “evidence” means traces of differences and similarities supported by data, not just narratives that feel plausible.

Another increasingly common approach is mixed methods, which combines quantitative and qualitative strategies to answer complex questions. In power studies, surveys can be used to map patterns of support or levels of trust, while interviews and documents are used to explain why those patterns emerge and how they are produced by particular political practices. Mixed methods involves more than simply collecting two types of data; rather, it involves developing a design that brings together the two types of evidence in a clear sequence and with a clear purpose. The advantage of mixed methods lies in its ability to simultaneously address both the accuracy of pattern mapping and the depth of explanation of mechanisms. The challenge lies in the consistency of the design logic, as the two types of data must truly speak to each other, rather than running parallel without any common ground.

Discussions about methods also cannot be separated from issues of validity, reliability, and ethics, because strong evidence requires accountable procedures. Validity concerns whether instruments and data truly capture the intended concepts, while reliability concerns the

consistency of measurements or procedures when repeated. In qualitative research, these issues often translate into credibility, audit trails, and source triangulation, allowing readers to assess how researchers arrive at particular interpretations. In quantitative research, they emerge as instrument testing, transparency of data processing, and caution against sampling and response bias. Ethics is crucial because political science often examines conflict, violence, or patronage relations that concern informants' security and vulnerable positions. Empirical disciplines demand consideration of the social consequences of research, including how research results can be used to reinforce or correct the power imbalances being studied (Masruroh, 2022).

Beyond methods, as an empirical science, political science relies on data. This data can include election statistics, surveys, policy documents, court minutes, media archives, court decisions, organizational records, and even digital traces such as public conversations on online platforms. Each type of data has its own unique biases; for example, official documents tend to use legitimizing language, media outlets have framing agendas, while digital data contains representational bias because not all groups have the same access and habits. Good scientific practice requires explaining why a particular data set was chosen and how its limitations were addressed, not hiding them. At this point, the method becomes part of the argument: the choice of data and analytical techniques must align with the claims about power dynamics being demonstrated.

Political science as an empirical science is ultimately characterized by the habit of transforming concepts into testable questions, then testing those questions with evidence that is open to criticism. Its power lies not in one best method, but in the ability to choose the most plausible design for a given question, and then to apply it with discipline. Therefore, the debate between methods should not be a clash of methodological identities, but rather a choice of strategies that can complement each other. When these principles are applied to the study of power, explanations emerge not just of what happens, but how and why it happens, with traceable evidence.

3.4. The Relevance of Political Science in Contemporary Society

The relevance of contemporary political science is most evident when power is understood beyond national boundaries, namely when it permeates economic, media, legal, and technological networks. In modern societies, public decisions are no longer simply born from formal procedures such as elections or parliamentary sessions, but rather through complex negotiations involving business actors, civil society, bureaucracies, and even digital communities. This phenomenon emphasizes that power dynamics operate through the governance of access, whether in the form of access to resources, information, and channels of influence. While institutional change remains important, it often fails to explain why reforms stall or why representation does not always correlate with accountability. This is where political science emerges not simply as a "useful" discipline, but as an analytical tool for exploring the mechanisms that connect citizen aspirations to state decisions, while also identifying points where these policies are "hijacked" by particular interests.

In the landscape of electoral democracy, a major tension arises between the procedures in place and the quality of representation that remains stagnant. Power dynamics demonstrate that while elections successfully create elite circulation, patronage practices, money politics,

and the distribution of positions remain key instruments in consolidating support (Madung, 2016). The phenomena of democratic recession and oligarchic democracy explain why democratic institutions continue to function procedurally but are trapped in a concentration of influence and a weakening of control mechanisms. The issue now is no longer simply about who wins the contest, but rather how the winner converts that victory into absolute control over agendas, resources, and the rules of the game (Muhajir & Wulandari, 2023).

Political economy adds a crucial dimension to understanding modern power, particularly when capital and policy relations are interlocked. Power often operates through regulatory design and political funding that reshape incentives for certain actors. Efforts to break the chains of oligarchy and clientelism through reforming party funding, for example, are not merely administrative matters, but strategic efforts to reduce parties' dependence on large donors. Without this intervention, concentration of wealth easily transforms into concentration of political power (Syawawi, 2021). This approach calls for democracy to be seen not only as a procedure, but as a configuration of social relations determined by the distribution of resources and the capacity to organize interests.

These dynamics are increasingly complex with the digitalization of public space, where the flow of information has become a decisive arena for contestation. Platform algorithms and the logic of engagement now influence which issues are prominent and which emotions are mobilized. This reality has given rise to a new battlefield of industrialized political disinformation and digital propaganda, no longer merely spontaneous citizen activity. Within the framework of political science, this phenomenon broadens the definition of power from mere control over institutions to control over information infrastructure and opinion production networks (Azwar et al., 2022).

The consequence is increased polarization and identity politics, which narrows the space for compromise. Identity-based mobilization strategies, often intertwined with hoaxes, not only fuel social tensions but also undermine democratic consolidation. At the local level, election monitoring institutions face significant challenges when public digital literacy is unequal and manipulative content spreads rapidly (Erinaldi, 2024). Political science is essential here to distinguish between healthy contestation and conflict that undermines the prerequisites of democracy, as polarization will ultimately erode public trust in institutions and paralyze policy cooperation.

Ultimately, the greatest challenge for states and civil society is to prevent democratic backsliding without sacrificing government stability. Phenomena such as populism, oligarchy, and AI-based disinformation demonstrate that technological advancement is never neutral; it can reduce the costs of manipulation and massively expand its reach. Political science plays a role in connecting these contemporary phenomena with measurable mechanisms. With this framework, modernity can be seen not as an era disconnected from the past, but as a transformation of media that makes the workings of power increasingly complex and multi-layered.

4. Conclusion

This article asserts that political science is best understood as a branch of social science that studies how power, authority, and legitimacy are formed, exercised, and contested in communal life, both through state institutions and broader social relations. From this perspective, politics is no longer limited to formal procedures, but is understood as a process involving the struggle for interests, the distribution of resources, the formation of obedience, and the production of meanings that frame what is considered normal or legitimate. The implication is that the strengthening of political science depends on the ability to connect theoretical frameworks with rigorous empirical evidence. When institutions, behavior, political-economic structures, and discourse are viewed as complementary lenses, political studies can explain the dynamics of power more fully without falling into opinion or reductionism. Thus, the main contribution of this article lies in restructuring the perspective: broadening the object of political study while simultaneously affirming methodological discipline as the foundation of scientific knowledge in political science.

5. References

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