

Faces of Power

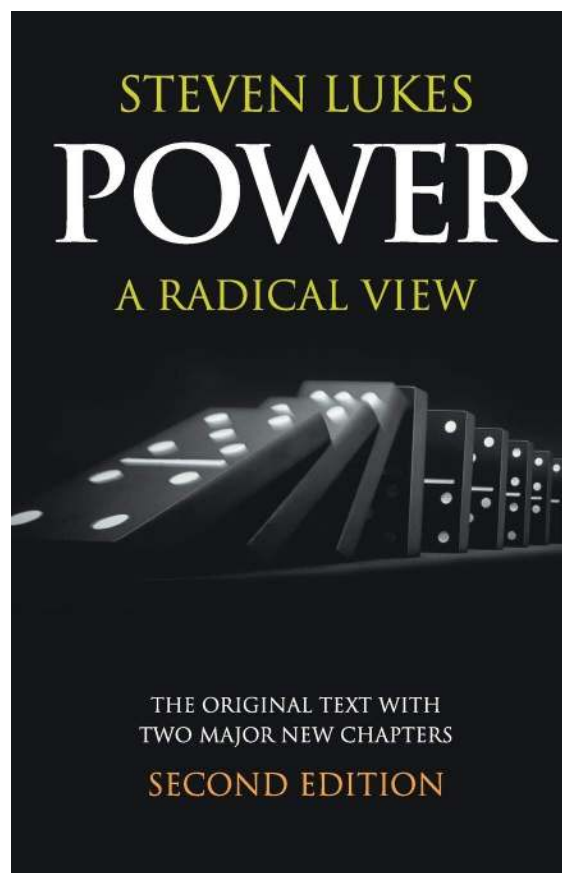
The Open Face of Power
according to Steven Lukes



What is power?

Power comes in many forms. You cannot talk about the state, government, democracy, freedom, equality or ideologies without talking about power. Power is central to politics.

In this eBook you will learn about the work of political theorist, Steven Lukes. Lukes' work, 'Power: A Radical View' was first published in 1974 and then in 2005 offers an interpretation of the concept of power. Lukes divides his theory of power into three dimensions or 'faces' of power. In this eBook you will explore the first face of power.

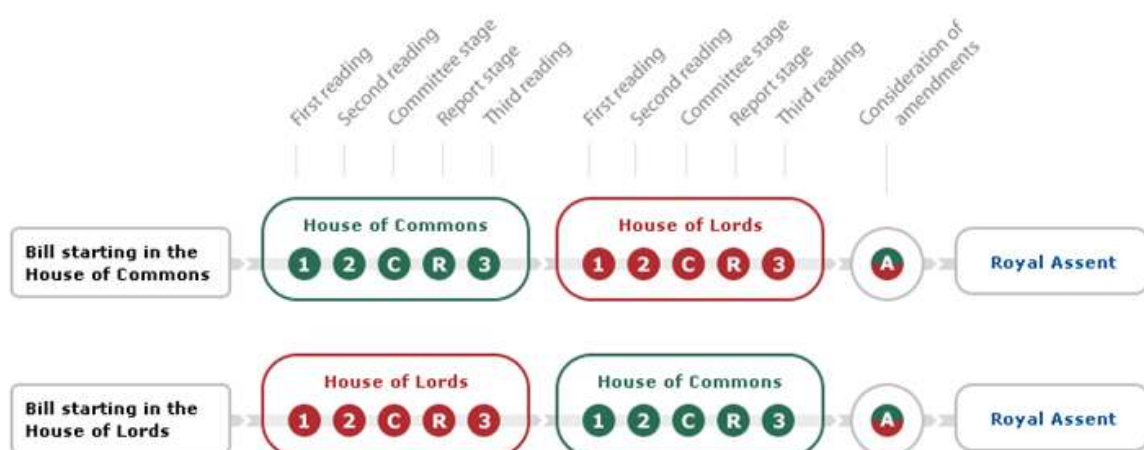


What is the open face of power?

Lukes' first face of power is what is known as the 'open face'. This is power that you can see. It is not hidden from you. The open face of power is where you can observe decisions being made by political actors. An example of this open face of power is political decision making.

Example

In the UK Parliament, which consists of two chambers: the [House of Commons](#) (where elected Members of Parliament, MPs sit, debate and vote) and the [House of Lords](#) (where unelected peers sit, debate and vote), a proposal for a new Bill can be presented in either chamber of Parliament. A Bill is a proposal for a new law, or a proposal to change an existing law that is presented for debate before Parliament. The details of all Bills are shared on the UK Parliament's website and the public can observe the progress of the Bill from its first reading to its second reading, the committee stage, report stage and the progression of the Bill to the second chamber to go through the same process of scrutiny. Some or all of this process may be televised or reported in the media. Should the Bill be passed by a majority vote in both chambers or Houses of Parliament it will progress to its final stage where amendments may be made before it receives Royal Assent from the monarch. Bills that become laws in this way are known as primary legislation.



The passage of a Bill into an Act of Law in the UK Parliament.

Image taken from [parliament.uk](#)

Read more about this process by clicking this [link](#)

Click on the video below to watch the process of the passage of a Bill into an Act of Law in the UK.



Anomalies

There are anomalies to this example of the open face of power. An anomaly is an exception.

The UK Government, which includes the party or parties in a [coalition](#) government which has the majority of seats in the House of Commons, has a law-making power called 'Secondary Legislation' which involves the use of [Statutory Instruments](#) (SI). The UK Government has the power to add in details to a law that has already been passed by the Parliament.

Approximately 3,500 SIs are made each year and only around 1000 need to be considered by Parliament (which includes all MPs and peers in the House of Lords). When the Parliament are invited to consider an SI it can only approve or reject but it cannot amend an SI. A number of MPs expressed unease about the number of [SIs the UK Government under PM Boris Johnson planned to introduced ahead of the UK's withdrawal from the EU](#).

Example

SIIs that have been introduced or proposed in the lead up to UK-exit day covered a wide range of topics including cross-border taxation, pharmaceutical testing, financial services, energy regulation, and environmental protections. Often, SIIs contain the details of the regulatory framework that primary legislation does not cover, and deal with complex technical topics that only businesses and experts may fully be able to understand and analyse. Consequently, unless businesses are vigilant, there is a risk that the raft of SIIs introduced could inadvertently bring in new obligations on businesses through the back door or fundamentally alter the regulatory landscape.

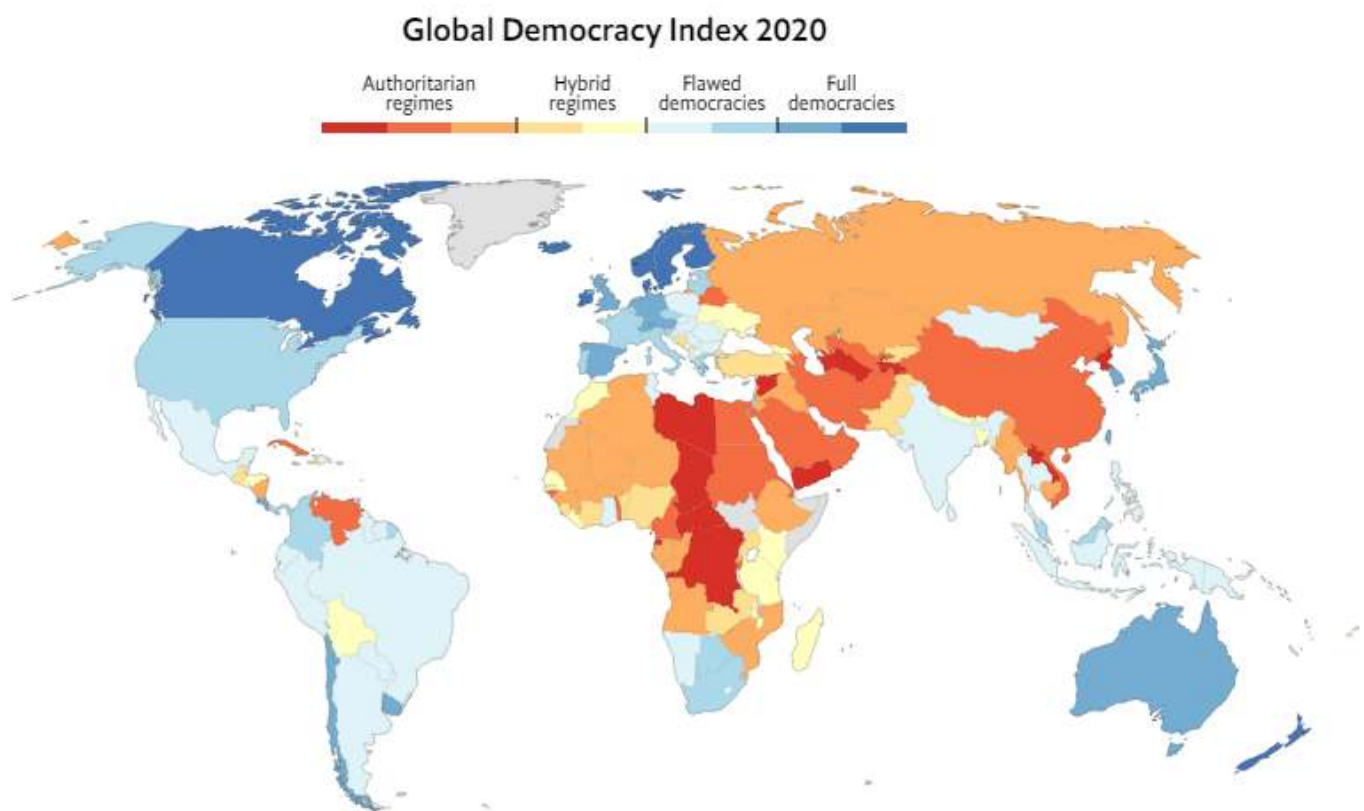
Frustrations centre around the notion of 'government by diktat' as these SIIs are not subject to the more rigorous scrutiny seen with primary legislation. SIIs give a government broad scope to make additions to laws without always being accountable to MPs and peers.

This is regarded by some as at odds with the [principles of democracy](#) because the people grant the government the power, authority and legitimacy to make decisions to make decisions on their behalf and yet some political decisions in democracies such as the UK can be made [arbitrarily](#) 'through the back door' and not as much in the open using SIIs.



Is the Open Face relevant everywhere?

Lukes' open face of power does not relate to all countries and governments. Countries that are deemed to be flawed democracies, hybrid regimes or authoritarian regimes often lack transparency when it comes to political decision making. In 2020 the [Democracy Index](#) reported that just over 35% of the 167 countries examined were classified as authoritarian regimes.



The Democracy Index 2020

Image taken from The Economic Intelligence Unit

Example

According to the [Constitution of North Korea](#), the country is a [democratic republic](#). The Democracy Index places the country under the leadership of [Kim Jong Un](#) as the least democratic country in the world at number 167. Ordinary citizens in North Korea do not have access to the country's laws, which are vaguely worded and lack definitions.

[Human Rights Watch](#) has reported widespread corruption in the country in the form of bribery of government officials to provide access to certain schools, housing or to avoid punishment.

Click on the video below to find out more about the political system of North Korea





In conclusion...

Overall, you could argue that while Lukes' theory of the open face of power is relevant and does exist today, there are anomalies in relation to the transparency of the political decision-making abilities of governments which can appear to be at odds with the principles of democracy.