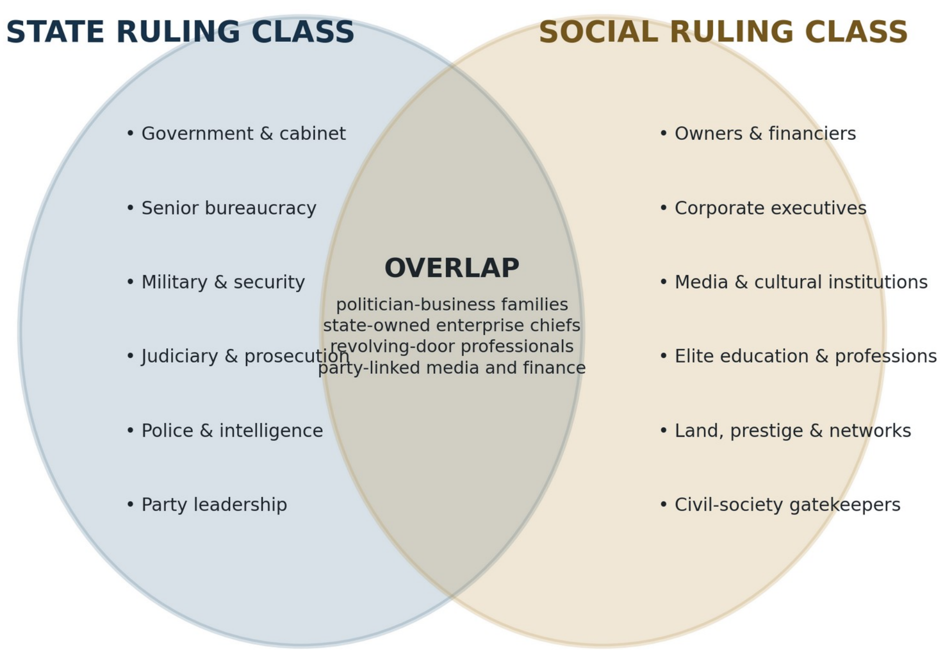
STATE RULING CLASS AND SOCIAL RULING CLASS

Institutions, Elites, Capital, Networks, and the Architecture of Domination



The analytical question is not “Who is powerful?” but “Through which institution, resource, and decision process is power exercised?”

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Editorial and Methodological Note

The expressions “state ruling class” and “social ruling class” are analytical categories rather than universally standardized legal or sociological terms. They are used here to distinguish two different locations of durable power: command over the organizations of the state, and command over resources and institutions distributed across society. The word “class” is used in a broad structural sense. It does not imply that every member shares one ideology, belongs to a secret organization, or acts in perfect coordination.

The report treats domination as an empirical question. It asks who controls appointments, budgets, coercive instruments, investment, credit, media visibility, credentials, expert knowledge, and access to decision makers; how those resources are reproduced; and what countervailing institutions can review or reverse decisions. The approach therefore rejects both naive pluralism, which assumes that all interests enjoy equal access, and totalizing conspiracy theories, which infer unified control without evidence.

Country comparisons are ideal-typical and relational. They identify recurrent institutional patterns, not immutable national essences. Political systems change over time, and different sectors inside the same country may display different configurations.

Core Proposition

The groups that rule the state and the groups that dominate society may overlap, but they are analytically distinct because state authority and social power rest on different organizations, resources, selection procedures, legitimating claims, and forms of accountability.

Contents

Executive Summary

A state ruling class is the relatively small set of groups that occupies, commands, or decisively influences the strategic positions of the state: executive office, senior administration, armed forces, courts and prosecution, police and intelligence, central fiscal and monetary institutions, and governing party organizations. Its distinctive resource is public authority - the legally or practically recognized capacity to make collectively binding decisions, tax, spend, regulate, license, adjudicate, police, punish, classify information, and deploy organized force.

A social ruling class is the relatively small set of groups that controls or gatekeeps the major resources through which social life is organized outside, alongside, or across the formal state: capital, corporations, finance, land, employment, media, universities, religion, the professions, cultural production, philanthropy, social prestige, and dense interpersonal networks. Its distinctive resources are ownership, market position, organizational scale, expert and cultural authority, control over attention, and the ability to reproduce advantage through family, education, inheritance, and network closure.

The two groups can coincide, as when senior party officials control state-owned enterprises and distribute access to wealth; partially overlap, as in systems with lobbying, campaign finance, elite schools, corporate boards, and revolving doors; or remain sufficiently separate to enter conflict, as when a reformist state taxes entrenched wealth, an authoritarian state subordinates independent capital, or business coalitions seek to displace rulers whose policies threaten property or accumulation.

No occupational title automatically proves membership. A cabinet minister generally belongs to the state ruling class, while a controlling shareholder generally belongs to the social ruling class. Yet a political family that owns media, a general who controls business holdings, a financier appointed to a central state office, or a senior party cadre heading a strategic enterprise may occupy both positions simultaneously. Membership should therefore be inferred from control over institutions, resources, appointments, and consequential decisions - not merely income, fame, or status.

The principal theoretical traditions illuminate different dimensions. Marx and Engels foreground class relations and the dependence of state forms on modes of production. Weber separates economic class, status, party, bureaucracy, and legitimate domination. Pareto, Mosca, and Michels emphasize minority rule, elite circulation, political organization, and oligarchic tendencies. Mills identifies interlocking corporate, political, and military command posts. Gramsci explains how coercion is stabilized by consent and cultural leadership. The Miliband-Poulantzas debate contrasts the social background and networks of state managers with the structural constraints that make states reproduce capitalist conditions even without direct capitalist command. Bourdieu explains how economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capital are converted across relatively autonomous fields.

Across countries, liberal democracies tend to separate formal state authority from private ownership but permit extensive interfaces through parties, elections, lobbying, consultation, law, media, and professional careers. Coordinated market economies institutionalize some interfaces through employer associations, labor organizations, federalism, and co-determination. Developmental states historically give senior bureaucracies greater capacity to discipline and promote business, while large business groups acquire social power that can later constrain the state. Party-states place the political organization above both state agencies and market actors, producing a higher degree of hierarchical integration. Personalist-authoritarian systems often convert public authority into selective property rights and wealth, making economic privilege contingent on political loyalty.

The most reliable empirical analysis combines positional evidence, decision evidence, network evidence, and outcome evidence. Researchers should map formal powers, appointment chains, ownership, funding, board interlocks, career circulation, family ties, educational pipelines, access to classified or agenda-setting

institutions, and the distribution of benefits and burdens after major decisions. A strong analysis also identifies countervailing forces: elections, courts, legislatures, federal units, unions, investigative media, professional ethics, civil society, market competition, and internal divisions among elites.

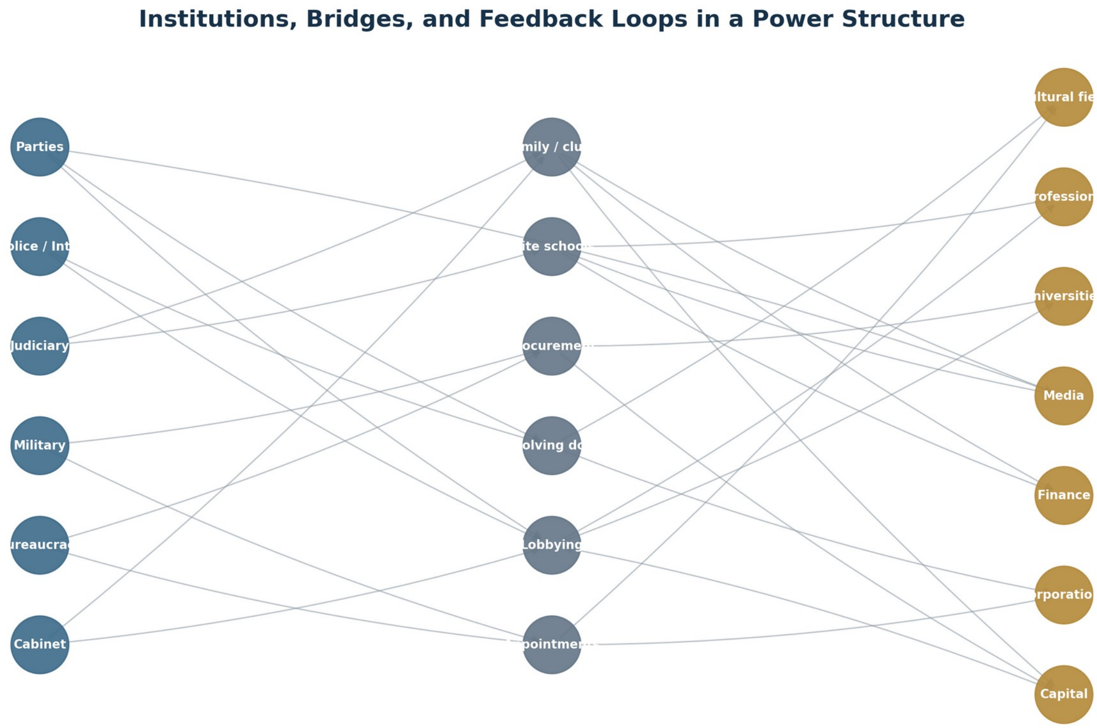

Figure 1. Institutions, bridges, and feedback loops in a power structure. Original analytical illustration.

1. Definitions and Conceptual Boundaries

1.1 State ruling class

The state ruling class consists of those groups that occupy or control the command positions from which the state's binding capacities are directed. Its core includes elected executives and ruling-party leadership, senior civil servants, top military officers, senior judges and prosecutors where they exercise strategic autonomy, police and intelligence chiefs, and managers of central institutions that allocate public money, credit, licenses, contracts, or coercive attention. In some systems, royal households, revolutionary councils, clerical authorities, or party disciplinary organs are also central.

The category is narrower than "everyone employed by the state." Most teachers, soldiers, police officers, clerks, and local officials implement decisions without controlling strategic priorities. The key tests are authority over major appointments, budgets, legal interpretation, coercive capacity, policy agendas, and exceptions to ordinary rules. A group may belong to the state ruling class even if formally subordinate when it possesses durable veto power, control of information, or the capacity to remove nominal leaders.

The term is also broader than "government of the day." Cabinet ministers may rotate while a durable administrative, military, judicial, or party stratum preserves continuity. Conversely, a highly politicized executive may penetrate and reshape previously autonomous state institutions, reducing the independence of permanent officials.

1.2 Social ruling class

The social ruling class consists of groups whose control over socially consequential resources allows them to shape life chances, agendas, norms, and institutional priorities across society. The most obvious members are major owners, dynastic wealth holders, corporate controllers, financiers, landowners, and executives of firms whose investment and employment decisions affect large populations. But social domination may also be exercised through media ownership, platform control, elite universities, professional licensing, religious authority, cultural canon formation, philanthropy, think tanks, prestigious law and consulting firms, and exclusive networks that allocate trust and opportunity.

The category is narrower than "the rich" and broader than "capitalists" in a strictly ownership-based sense. A celebrity with high income but no institutional control may be socially prominent without being part of a ruling class. A university president, media editor, senior lawyer, or foundation director may possess modest personal wealth but significant organizational and symbolic power. Social ruling-class membership is therefore based on control and gatekeeping, not consumption style alone.

Social power often operates indirectly. A corporation can alter public choices by relocating investment; a financial institution can determine which projects receive credit; a media organization can define salience and legitimacy; a professional body can determine who is qualified to speak; and an elite school can reproduce networks that later populate government, business, law, and culture.

1.3 Related concepts

Term	Working definition	Relation to the two concepts
Ruling class	Broad umbrella for a group that dominates the central institutions and resource systems of a society. In Marxist usage it usually refers to the class controlling the dominant means of production.	May include both state and social ruling groups; often too broad to specify the institutional location of power.
Governing class	Those who actually conduct government and political administration at a given time, including ministers, legislators, and senior officials.	Closer to the state ruling class, but can be more temporary and office-centered.
Power elite	A small set of interlocking leaders at the top of major organizations, especially political, military, and corporate institutions.	Highlights integration and networks across state and society rather than preserving a strict two-category distinction.
State elite	High-ranking actors within state institutions.	A positional category; not every state elite necessarily rules if constrained by elected leaders, law, or stronger agencies.
Economic elite	Large owners, financiers, corporate controllers, and highly consequential market actors.	A core component of the social ruling class, but excludes cultural, professional, religious, and symbolic elites.
Social upper class	A status group marked by wealth, pedigree, lifestyle, marriage patterns, schools, clubs, and prestige.	May possess ruling power, but high status does not automatically equal command over major institutions.
Political class	Professional politicians, party officials, advisers, campaign professionals, and political intermediaries.	Overlaps the state ruling class but may include opposition actors without current command of the state.
Establishment	A historically embedded network of prestigious institutions and families treated as socially authoritative.	Useful for informal cohesion, but often vague unless specified through organizations, careers, and decisions.

2. Comparative Anatomy

The following table treats the two categories as ideal types. Actual cases frequently combine features from both columns. The comparison is designed to prevent a common error: equating public office with all power, or equating private wealth with direct command of the state.

Dimension	State ruling class	Social ruling class
Primary power base	Public authority, law, taxation, budgets, appointments, coercion, information, regulatory and adjudicative powers.	Ownership, investment, credit, employment, land, media, credentials, prestige, culture, philanthropy, and networks.
Typical membership	Cabinet and executive leaders; ruling-party command; senior bureaucracy; military, police and intelligence chiefs; senior judiciary/prosecution; central fiscal or monetary authorities.	Controlling owners; dynastic wealth; executives; financiers; large landowners; media proprietors/editors; elite educational, professional, religious and cultural gatekeepers.
Selection	Election, party promotion, examination, professional appointment, military promotion, patronage, hereditary succession, revolutionary credentials, or internal security vetting.	Inheritance, ownership accumulation, market success, board selection, professional certification, cultural consecration, philanthropy, marriage, school and network sponsorship.
Reproduction	Control of appointments; party cadres; civil-service careers; military academies; judicial pipelines; security clearance; institutional memory and secrecy.	Family wealth; trusts and corporate control; elite schools; internships; professional firms; social clubs; marriage; reputational sponsorship; network closure.
Legitimacy claims	Constitution, election, law, public service, expertise, order, nationalism, religion, revolution, security, or administrative competence.	Property rights, entrepreneurship, efficiency, merit, expertise, tradition, taste, philanthropy, moral authority, educational achievement, or public popularity.
Influence mechanisms	Commands, statutes, regulation, adjudication, budgeting, procurement, licensing, surveillance, policing, diplomacy, war, public appointments.	Investment and disinvestment, pricing and credit, lobbying, donations, advertising, media framing, research funding, professional advice, employment, reputation and exclusion.
Accountability	Elections, legislatures, courts, audits, administrative law, inspectors, press scrutiny, party discipline, or - in authoritarian systems - internal hierarchy.	Shareholders, markets, boards, professional bodies, donors, consumers, employees, reputational pressure, competition law, taxation, and public regulation.
Transparency	Potentially high where records, budgets, hearings and freedom-of-information rules exist; potentially very low in security, military, prosecutorial and party domains.	Often fragmented: ownership and financial disclosure may be public, while private contracts, networks, algorithms, family offices and informal influence remain opaque.
Continuity	May be interrupted by elections, coups, purges, reform, retirement, or party turnover; permanent institutions can nevertheless preserve long memory.	Often highly continuous through inheritance, corporate succession, endowments, property, brands, elite education and intergenerational networks.
Relation to the state	It is located within or immediately around the institutions of public authority.	It seeks access to, protection from, influence over, or autonomy from the state; in some systems it is subordinated to or incorporated into the ruling party.
Relation to the market	May regulate, tax, plan, own, subsidize, procure, or police markets; can create rents and property rights.	Operates primarily through market and quasi-market organizations, but frequently depends on law, money, infrastructure, contracts, and enforcement supplied by the state.
Characteristic vulnerability	Loss of office, legal reversal, electoral defeat, bureaucratic displacement, military defeat, internal purge, legitimacy crisis.	Market collapse, technological disruption, taxation, regulation, expropriation, reputational loss, succession failure, antitrust action, withdrawal of state protection.

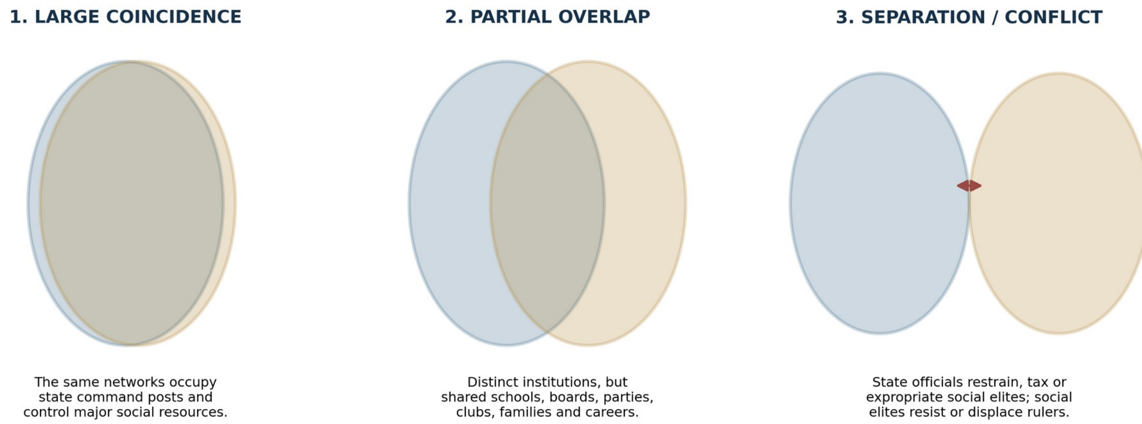

Figure 2. Three ideal-typical relationships between state and social ruling groups. Original analytical illustration.

3. Coincidence, Overlap, Separation, and Conflict

3.1 Large coincidence

Coincidence occurs when the same organized group controls strategic state offices and major social resources. A ruling party may appoint enterprise managers, supervise media and universities, allocate credit, and determine access to licenses or land. A royal or revolutionary household may simultaneously command the executive, military, and major business assets. In such settings, movement between state and society is not a bridge between autonomous domains; it is often an internal rotation within a single ruling bloc.

Coincidence should not be overstated. Even highly integrated regimes contain bureaucratic, military, regional, corporate, and ideological factions. State-owned enterprises may pursue organizational interests distinct from ministries, and private entrepreneurs may bargain for autonomy. The analytical claim is therefore hierarchical integration, not perfect unity.

3.2 Partial overlap

Partial overlap is common in constitutional democracies and mixed economies. Political leaders, civil servants, business executives, financiers, lawyers, journalists, academics, and foundation officials remain institutionally distinct, yet they meet in advisory bodies, parties, boards, professional firms, universities, clubs, and philanthropic networks. Their children may attend the same schools; their careers may circulate through government, consulting, finance, law, media, and think tanks; and their shared assumptions may narrow the range of policies regarded as practical.

Partial overlap allows both influence and conflict. Business coalitions may win tax or regulatory concessions but lose on antitrust, labor, environmental, or national-security issues. Civil servants may cooperate with firms to obtain expertise while guarding administrative autonomy. Political leaders may use corporate support yet attack particular companies for electoral advantage. The outcome depends on issue area, institutional venue, public mobilization, and the distribution of veto points.

3.3 Separation and conflict

Separation becomes visible when state rulers and social dominators possess independent resources and incompatible projects. Historically, monarchies have taxed or confiscated aristocratic and commercial wealth; revolutionary states have displaced landed and capitalist classes; democratic governments have broken monopolies, expanded labor rights, or nationalized industries; and business coalitions have financed opposition to governments viewed as threatening property, currency stability, or market access.

Conflict can also occur inside authoritarian systems. A politically autonomous entrepreneur, media owner, regional boss, religious institution, or military network may be perceived as a rival center of power. The state may respond through regulation, prosecution, forced ownership changes, or incorporation into official organizations. Conversely, concentrated wealth may exploit fiscal crisis, capital flight, control of media, or external alliances to constrain rulers.

3.4 What determines the pattern?

- The ownership structure of the economy: dispersed ownership, family groups, state ownership, foreign capital, or oligopoly.
- The organization of the political system: competitive parties, dominant party, military rule, monarchy, or personalist presidency.
- The autonomy and professionalism of bureaucracy, judiciary, military, police, and central banking.
- The strength of labor unions, civic associations, independent media, universities, professions, and regional governments.
- The importance of public procurement, licenses, state credit, natural resources, and regulated monopolies to private wealth.
- The transparency of political finance, lobbying, beneficial ownership, appointments, procurement, and post-public employment.
- The degree to which elite recruitment is open, examination-based, electoral, hereditary, clientelist, or network-closed.
- The capacity of mass publics and subordinate groups to organize, vote, litigate, strike, publish, and create counter-expertise.

4. Converting Economic Power into Political Power - and State Power into Privilege

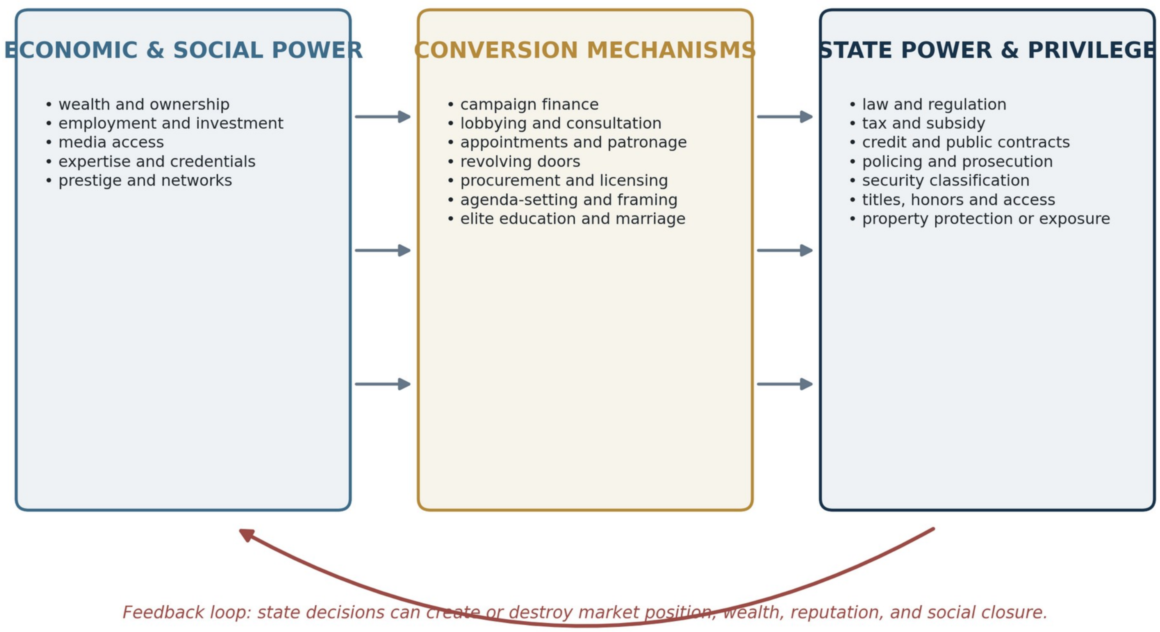

Figure 3. Bidirectional conversion circuits between social resources and state authority. Original analytical illustration.

4.1 Economic and social power into political power

Mechanism	How conversion occurs
Campaign and party finance	Money supports candidates, parties, advertising, mobilization, data, and policy infrastructure. The effect depends on contribution rules, public financing, disclosure, and electoral competition.
Lobbying and consultation	Firms, associations, unions, NGOs, professions, and experts supply information and arguments. Unequal resources can produce unequal access even when lobbying is legal and useful.
Structural dependence	Governments depend on investment, employment, credit, tax revenue, technology, and supply chains. Anticipated market reactions can shape policy without an explicit request.
Agenda and information control	Media ownership, advertising, research funding, polling, think tanks, and platforms influence which issues receive attention and which solutions appear legitimate.
Personnel circulation	Executives, lawyers, consultants, academics, and financiers enter public office; former officials move into regulated sectors. This can transfer expertise but also create conflicts of interest.
Litigation and professional authority	Well-resourced actors shape doctrine and implementation through strategic litigation, expert testimony, compliance systems, and prestigious legal representation.
Local and regional leverage	Major employers, landowners, developers, and lenders may dominate municipalities or regions that depend on their tax base and investment.
International mobility	Capital, firms, data, and skilled personnel can move across borders, allowing social elites to bargain with states over tax, regulation, and market access.

Economic influence is not synonymous with bribery. Much of it is lawful, institutionalized, and sometimes socially beneficial. Governments require information from producers, workers, scientists, and professionals. The analytical problem is asymmetry: who can afford continuous representation, who can credibly threaten exit, whose expertise is treated as authoritative, and whether competing groups have comparable access and capacity.

The OECD's contemporary integrity framework treats lobbying and influence as legitimate democratic participation while emphasizing transparency, equitable access, political-finance safeguards, beneficial-ownership disclosure, and controls on conflicts of interest and revolving doors. This balanced approach is preferable to treating all influence as corruption or, conversely, assuming that formal legality guarantees equal political voice (OECD 2024; OECD 2026).

4.2 State power into economic and social privilege

Mechanism	How privilege is produced
Property creation and protection	Law defines ownership, limited liability, bankruptcy priorities, intellectual property, land title, and enforceable contracts.
Licensing and market entry	Permits, charters, spectrum, concessions, professional licenses, and regulatory approvals can create scarcity and rents.
Procurement and subsidy	Public contracts, grants, tax credits, loan guarantees, infrastructure, and rescue packages can build firms and fortunes.
Credit and monetary access	State banks, central-bank facilities, exchange controls, and regulatory classifications determine the price and availability of finance.
Selective enforcement	Tax, antitrust, labor, environmental, customs, and criminal enforcement can advantage allies or discipline rivals when institutions lack independence.
Privatization and concession	Public assets may be transferred through transparent competition or distributed to insiders, converting administrative access into ownership.
Information privilege	Early access to policy, land-use plans, sanctions, procurement, or monetary decisions can generate private gain.
Honors and symbolic recognition	Titles, decorations, official invitations, appointments, and public endorsements can convert state recognition into prestige and market credibility.
Post-office opportunity	Officials may monetize expertise, contacts, security knowledge, and regulatory familiarity after leaving office; safeguards determine whether this is normal career mobility or improper advantage.

Key Diagnostic

Ask whether wealth creates political access, whether office creates private wealth, and whether the conversion is transparent, contestable, reversible, and governed by general rules rather than personal loyalty.

5. Major Theoretical Perspectives

5.1 Marx and Engels: class power and the state

Marx and Engels direct attention to the relationship between the state and the dominant mode of production. The ruling class is defined primarily by its position in production and ownership, and political institutions generally stabilize the conditions under which that class reproduces itself. This approach clarifies why property, labor discipline, contract, taxation, and accumulation are central political questions, and why formally equal citizenship can coexist with large inequalities in material power.

A crude instrumental reading - the state as a simple committee taking orders from individual capitalists - is insufficient. Marx's historical writings describe political institutions with relative autonomy, factional conflict, and situations in which executive power rises above competing classes. The strongest use of the tradition therefore asks how state policies reproduce a social order, which class fractions benefit, and what crises allow state managers to act against particular owners in defense of the system as a whole.

5.2 Weber: class, status, party, bureaucracy, and legitimate domination

Weber refuses to collapse all power into property. He distinguishes class situations in markets, status groups based on social honor, and parties oriented toward acquiring power in organized communities. He also analyzes three ideal types of legitimate domination - traditional, charismatic, and legal-rational - and explains how modern states depend on specialized, hierarchical, rule-bound administration.

For the present distinction, Weber supplies two essential insights. First, senior bureaucratic officials possess organizational knowledge, continuity, files, and expertise that can make them powerful even without private wealth. Second, social upper classes may dominate through status closure, credentials, clubs, marriage, and honor even when they do not directly control public office. The state ruling class and social ruling class thus correspond to partially autonomous orders of power.

5.3 Pareto, Mosca, and Michels: minority rule and organization

Pareto emphasizes the circulation of elites and the changing combinations of force, cunning, residues, and governing styles. Mosca argues that an organized minority normally rules an unorganized majority and legitimates itself through a political formula. Michels's "iron law of oligarchy" identifies how organization creates leadership specialization, control over information, and dependence of members on professional officials.

These theories are useful correctives to the assumption that elections or formal membership eliminate hierarchy. They highlight the organizational advantages of party leadership, bureaucratic staffs, union officials, corporate managers, and media professionals. Their weakness is that "elite" can become too general unless combined with analysis of ownership, state authority, class structure, and institutional accountability.

5.4 C. Wright Mills: the power elite

Mills argues that modern mass society concentrates consequential decisions in large corporate, political, and military organizations. The power elite is not merely a list of wealthy or famous people; it is an interlocking set of command positions whose occupants share social origins, schools, clubs, outlooks, and career circulation. Mills therefore bridges the state-social divide by focusing on institutional integration.

The concept is especially powerful where corporate executives, defense leaders, and political officials coordinate around national security, industrial policy, and large-scale investment. It is less precise where institutions are fragmented, elite factions are deeply opposed, or courts, federalism, parties, unions, and public mobilization create multiple vetoes.

5.5 Gramsci: hegemony, civil society, and the integral state

Gramsci explains durable rule as a combination of coercion and consent. Dominant groups organize a historic bloc by linking material interests to moral, cultural, and intellectual leadership. Schools, churches, media, associations, professions, and intellectuals are therefore not decorative additions to economic power; they help produce the common sense through which an order becomes accepted.

This perspective expands the social ruling class beyond owners and executives. Organic intellectuals, editors, academics, clerics, and cultural producers may help articulate or contest hegemony. Gramsci's "integral state" also shows why the boundary between state and civil society is analytically necessary but historically permeable.

5.6 Miliband and Poulantzas: personnel, networks, and structural selectivity

Ralph Miliband emphasizes the social background, education, ideology, and networks of state elites. Senior officials in capitalist democracies often come from privileged classes and interact routinely with business leaders, making direct and indirect influence empirically visible. Nicos Poulantzas criticizes excessive focus on personal ties and argues that the capitalist state has structural selectivities: its institutional form is organized in ways that reproduce capitalist social relations even when officials are not personally controlled by capitalists.

The debate is best treated as complementary rather than binary. Personnel and networks matter because institutions are operated by people; structures matter because those people confront fiscal dependence, investment incentives, legal commitments, administrative routines, international constraints, and the need to reproduce social order. A robust analysis tests both who governs and what institutional imperatives shape their choices.

5.7 Bourdieu: capitals, fields, conversion, and reproduction

Bourdieu distinguishes economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capital and analyzes relatively autonomous fields - political, bureaucratic, academic, legal, journalistic, artistic, and economic - with their own rules and currencies. Dominant actors are those who possess the volume and composition of capital valued in a field and who can convert it into other forms.

This framework is particularly suited to the distinction developed here. The state ruling class is located mainly in the bureaucratic and political fields, where juridical authority, credentials, office, and control of public resources matter. The social ruling class is distributed across the economic, cultural, professional, and status fields. Elite schools, family networks, prestigious credentials, media recognition, and public appointments become conversion devices. The "field of power" is the arena in which holders of different forms of capital struggle over the exchange rate among wealth, office, expertise, and prestige.

Perspective	Primary mechanism	Contribution to the distinction	Main caution
Marx & Engels	Relations of production, property, class struggle, accumulation	State stabilizes or reorganizes class order; may have relative autonomy	Can understate non-economic status and professional power if used reductively
Weber	Class, status, party, legitimate domination, bureaucracy	Bureaucratic office is an autonomous source of organized power	Less unified theory of systemic class reproduction
Pareto / Mosca / Michels	Elite circulation, organized minority, political formula, oligarchy	Explains leadership concentration and organizational control	Can flatten differences between democratic accountability and closed domination
C. Wright Mills	Interlocking command positions in corporate, political, military orders	Directly analyzes cross-institutional overlap	May overstate cohesion or understate fragmented veto structures
Gramsci	Hegemony, consent, civil society, historic bloc, intellectuals	Shows how social leadership legitimates state power	Empirical boundaries of hegemony can be difficult to measure
Miliband	Social origins, ideology, personnel, networks of state managers	Makes ruling-class access and recruitment observable	Risk of treating the state as too instrumentally controlled
Poulantzas	Structural selectivity and relative autonomy of the capitalist state	Explains pro-system outcomes without direct commands from owners	Can become abstract unless linked to institutions and actors
Bourdieu	Multiple capitals, fields, symbolic power, reproduction, conversion	Explains movement between office, wealth, credentials, networks, prestige	Requires careful field-specific operationalization

6. Occupational and Institutional Classification

Classification should be probabilistic, contextual, and role-specific. The same occupation can occupy different structural locations in different systems. A journalist in an independent commercial outlet, the editor of a party newspaper, and the director of a state broadcaster do not possess the same relationship to public authority. A corporate executive of a competitive private firm differs from the head of a strategic state enterprise appointed by a ruling party.

Category	Primary location	Typical source of power	Conditions for dual membership
Hereditary capitalists and dynastic owners	Primarily social ruling class	Ownership, inheritance, family control, philanthropy, elite networks	Both when family members hold office, control parties/media, or depend on political allocation of assets.
Corporate executives	Primarily social ruling class	Organizational control over investment, employment, technology, and supply chains	Both when leading state-owned or party-controlled firms, serving in cabinets, or exercising delegated public authority.
Financiers and major investors	Primarily social ruling class	Credit allocation, asset pricing, liquidity, market access, and policy expertise	Both when appointed to central banks, treasuries, sovereign funds, or regulatory agencies.
Senior bureaucrats	Primarily state ruling class	Administrative command, files, expertise, budgets, regulation, and continuity	Social ruling status may follow from elite education, family background, prestige, or post-office careers.
Politicians and party leaders	Primarily state ruling class when governing	Control of legislation, appointments, budgets, agenda, and public legitimacy	Opposition politicians may be political elite without current state command; wealthy politician-owners can be both.
Military leaders	Primarily state ruling class	Command of organized force, national security information, emergency powers	Both in military-business complexes, juntas, veterans' corporate networks, or military-owned enterprises.
Judges and prosecutors	State ruling class when strategically authoritative	Adjudication, prosecution, legal interpretation, vetoes, and coercive process	Corporate lawyers and bar leaders are usually social/professional elites; judicial families and revolving doors create overlap.
Legal professionals	Primarily social/professional elite	Gatekeeping access to law, transactions, litigation, compliance, and elite networks	Both when holding public prosecutorial, judicial, ministerial, or regulatory office.
Journalists and media leaders	Primarily social/cultural ruling class when they control agendas	Attention, framing, reputation, investigation, and public legitimacy	State category where media are directly commanded by government or ruling party; most rank-and-file journalists are not rulers.
Academics and university leaders	Primarily social/cultural ruling class when gatekeeping institutions	Credentials, expertise, research agendas, canonical knowledge, and elite reproduction	Both in party schools, official academies, regulatory panels, or senior state advisory roles.
Religious leaders	Primarily social/status ruling class	Moral authority, community organization, education, welfare institutions, and legitimacy	Both in theocracies, established churches with formal powers, or clerical oversight institutions.
Cultural figures and celebrities	Usually social influence, not necessarily ruling class	Symbolic capital, attention, taste, identity, and mobilization	Ruling status requires institutional control, durable gatekeeping, or systematic access to consequential decisions.

Non-membership by itself

High income, fame, education, or proximity to elites does not by itself establish ruling-class membership. The threshold is durable control, gatekeeping, veto power, or privileged access over consequential institutional decisions.

7. Comparative Country Cases

The country cases below compare institutional configurations rather than rank countries morally. Each system contains multiple centers of power, internal conflict, and historical change. The map is illustrative, not a numerical index.

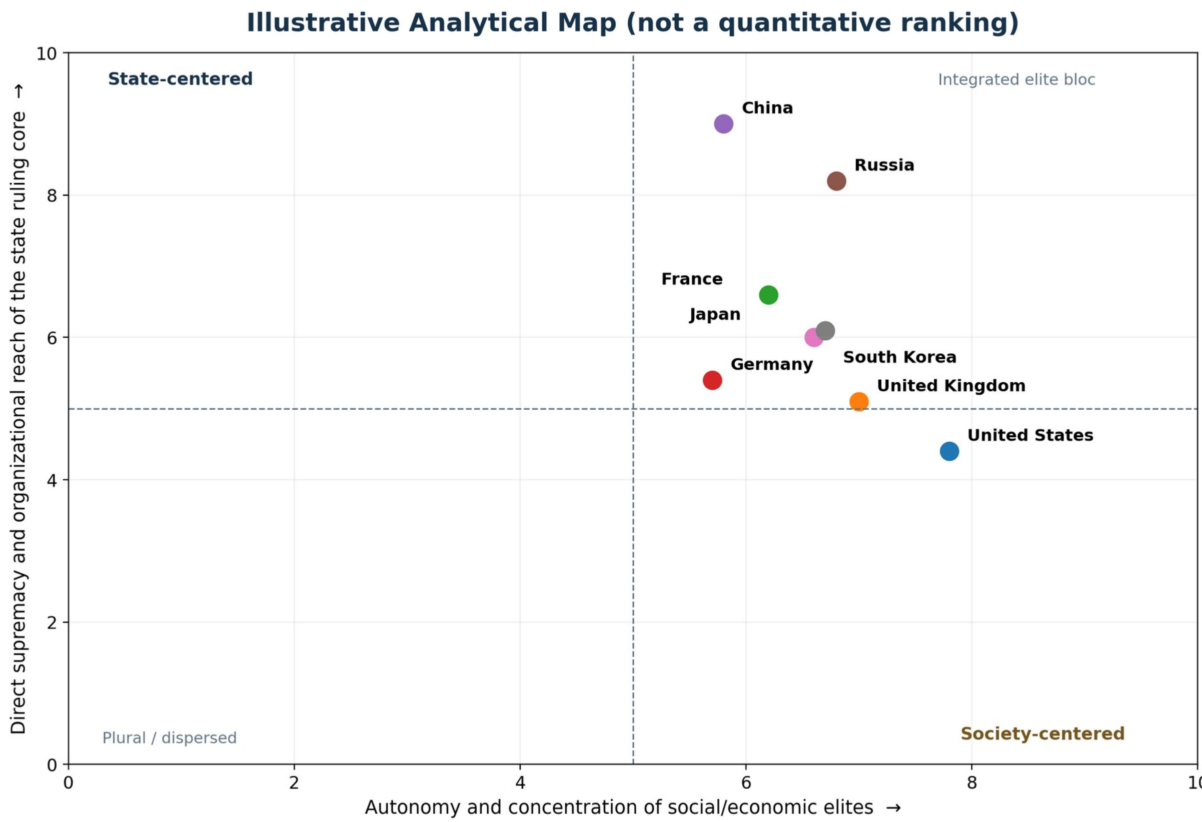

Figure 4. Illustrative map of state supremacy and social-elite autonomy. Positions are heuristic, not measured scores.

7.1 United States: fragmented state authority and concentrated social resources

The United States separates public office from private ownership through constitutional institutions, elections, federalism, professional administration, courts, and a large private economy. The state ruling class is fragmented among the presidency, congressional leadership and committees, senior executive appointees, permanent agencies, the judiciary, national-security institutions, state governments, and party organizations. No single center automatically controls all others.

The social ruling class includes major shareholders, corporate executives, finance and technology leaders, media owners and senior editors, elite professional firms, universities, foundations, and donor networks. Conversion mechanisms include campaign finance, lobbying, litigation, advisory committees, think tanks, procurement, federal contracting, and circulation among government, law, finance, consulting, universities, and regulated industries. The scale of private resources creates unequal access, but influence is issue-specific and contested by elections, courts, federalism, unions, civil-society organizations, investigative journalism, and rival business sectors.

The American pattern is therefore partial overlap under fragmented authority. Mills's power-elite model remains relevant in defense, finance, and national-security networks; pluralist competition remains relevant where institutions and organized interests divide. The empirical question is not whether "business" rules everything, but which sectors gain access to which venues, how preferences are translated into policy, and when public mobilization or institutional vetoes defeat them.

7.2 United Kingdom: parliamentary government, permanent administration, and status-network continuity

The British state ruling class centers on the prime minister and cabinet, governing-party leadership, Parliament, senior civil servants, the judiciary, security services, and the monarchy's residual constitutional position. Permanent secretaries remain the most senior departmental civil servants, responsible for administration and public money while ministers are politically accountable to Parliament. This dual structure creates both continuity and potential tension between partisan direction and administrative stewardship (UK Civil Service 2026).

The social ruling class historically includes landed wealth, the City of London, major corporate leaders, media proprietors, prestigious professions, elite schools and universities, cultural institutions, and social networks associated with class and status. Contemporary recruitment is more open than the traditional "establishment" model suggests, yet private education and elite universities remain disproportionately represented in influential sectors. The Sutton Trust's 2025 data continue to show substantial educational concentration among political and other elites.

The British case is a classic partial-overlap system: distinct legal institutions joined by education, party finance, honors, clubs, professional careers, media networks, and advisory appointments. Parliamentary sovereignty and executive concentration can increase the importance of access to cabinet and party leadership, while elections, parliamentary scrutiny, courts, public inquiries, and a competitive press impose counterweights.

7.3 France: the administrative state and elite-school circulation

France has historically combined a strong central state, presidential leadership, ministerial cabinets, and prestigious senior administrative corps. The state ruling class therefore includes elected executives and party leaders but gives unusual weight to senior administrators, inspectors, prefects, judges, and managers of public or formerly public enterprises. The replacement of the École nationale d'administration by the Institut national du service public in 2022 was intended to reform recruitment and training while preserving a centralized institution for senior public leadership (INSP 2022-2026).

The social ruling class includes corporate and financial leaders, family wealth, major media and luxury groups, elite professions, grandes écoles, cultural institutions, and Paris-centered networks. France displays extensive circulation between ministries, state finance, public enterprises, private corporations, banking, and consulting. This creates a high-capacity administrative elite but also recurring criticism of closed recruitment and pantouflage - movement from public office to private positions.

The relationship is partial overlap with stronger state autonomy than in a purely market-led model. The state has historically nationalized, planned, directed credit, promoted national champions, and later privatized, enabling public authority both to discipline and to create economic elites. Electoral competition, courts, unions, street mobilization, decentralized authorities, European institutions, and investigative media constrain the executive-administrative core.

7.4 Germany: federalism, organized interests, and negotiated coordination

Germany disperses state power across the federal government, Bundestag and Bundesrat, Länder, constitutional and ordinary courts, coalition parties, professional ministries, and independent or rule-bound institutions. The state ruling class is therefore less centralized than in France and more dependent on intergovernmental and coalition bargaining.

The social ruling class includes industrial owners and executives, family-controlled Mittelstand firms, banks and insurers, employer associations, trade unions, professional organizations, media groups, universities, and foundations. The German social-market and coordinated-capitalist tradition institutionalizes some relationships through sectoral associations, collective bargaining, works councils, co-determination, chambers, and formal consultation. Rather than treating all organized influence as hidden capture, the system often converts it into recognized representation.

The pattern is partial overlap with negotiated interdependence. Corporate and labor actors possess structured access, but federalism, coalition government, constitutional review, employee representation, competition law, and European Union rules multiply veto points. The social ruling class is comparatively plural and organized; the state ruling class is professional but institutionally fragmented.

7.5 China: party-state supremacy and hierarchical incorporation of social elites

China's core state ruling class is the leadership of the Communist Party of China, its central and local committees, organization and discipline systems, senior state administrators, military command, security institutions, and managers of strategic state-owned enterprises. The constitutional order explicitly identifies Communist Party leadership as the defining feature of socialism with Chinese characteristics, while state institutions operate under democratic centralism (Constitution of the People's Republic of China, art. 1-3).

The social ruling class includes senior managers of state and private enterprises, wealthy entrepreneurs, property and technology leaders, official intellectuals, media and cultural managers, prestigious universities, professional experts, and networks of political connection. Yet their autonomy is conditional. Party organizations, cadre appointments, regulatory campaigns, credit allocation, land, licensing, procurement, and security oversight allow the political core to incorporate, promote, or discipline social elites.

China therefore displays a high degree of coincidence and hierarchical overlap rather than equality between party and capital. Private entrepreneurs can gain status and representation by embedding themselves in party-state networks, while the party depends on firms for growth, innovation, employment, and international competitiveness. The resulting structure is interdependent but politically asymmetric: economic power matters, yet it does not automatically confer an independent right to organize political opposition.

7.6 Russia: presidential-security dominance and politically conditional wealth

Russia's contemporary state ruling class centers on the presidency, presidential administration, senior security and military networks, top bureaucratic officials, managers of strategic state corporations, regional executives, and loyal political institutions. Formal constitutional organs exist, but practical power is strongly concentrated in the executive-security core.

The social ruling class includes large asset holders, energy and resource executives, financial and industrial groups, regional business networks, media managers, and cultural or religious institutions aligned with national projects. The post-Soviet experience illustrates bidirectional conversion: privatization and insider access created concentrated wealth, while the consolidation of presidential power made the security of large fortunes increasingly dependent on political loyalty and access. Analysts frequently describe major business as subordinate to the governing system rather than an autonomous class capable of collectively directing it.

This is a high-overlap system in which state power can define the practical security of property. Oligarchs remain economically consequential, but the relationship is not well captured by the phrase “rule by billionaires” alone. The decisive question is which actors can command security institutions, prosecutions, strategic assets, and political succession.

7.7 Japan: bureaucratic-business-party coordination and controlled circulation

Postwar Japan developed a durable triangle among governing politicians, powerful ministries, and organized business, with additional roles for banks, business federations, media, universities, and local networks. The state ruling class included Liberal Democratic Party leaders, senior bureaucrats, and administrative agencies capable of industrial guidance. The social ruling class included corporate groups, financial institutions, trading companies, business associations, prestigious universities, and major media organizations.

The relationship has been partial overlap through consultation, administrative guidance, policy tribes, electoral support networks, and amakudari - post-retirement movement of officials into organizations connected to their former jurisdiction. Reforms have tightened post-employment rules, and globalization, electoral change, financial restructuring, and stronger political leadership have altered the classical “iron triangle.” Nevertheless, long careers, ministry expertise, and coordinated networks continue to shape access.

Japan demonstrates that state-business cooperation can generate investment and competence without implying seamless unity. Ministries may discipline firms, firms may resist regulation, politicians mediate distributive demands, and courts, media, voters, and international markets constrain all three.

7.8 South Korea: developmental-state legacy, chaebol power, and democratic contestation

South Korea’s developmental period gave presidents and economic bureaucracies substantial power over credit, licenses, trade, industrial targeting, and corporate restructuring. The state ruling class included executive leaders, senior economic ministries, security institutions, prosecutors, military leaders during authoritarian periods, and governing-party networks. The social ruling class grew around chaebol families, corporate managers, finance, media, elite universities, law, medicine, and dense regional and educational ties.

The developmental alliance was neither pure state command nor simple capitalist capture. The state promoted large firms, protected markets, allocated credit, and demanded export performance; business groups accumulated scale and later gained leverage over employment, investment, media, and policy. Democratization strengthened elections, the legislature, courts, civil society, labor mobilization, and investigative media, while repeated corruption scandals exposed illicit channels between political office and corporate wealth.

Contemporary South Korea is best understood as partial overlap combined with recurrent conflict. Chaebol remain powerful social actors, but public prosecutors, regulators, elected governments, courts, shareholders, unions, civic organizations, and global investors can challenge them. Conversely, politicized prosecution, media polarization, and revolving careers complicate any simple separation between state and society.

Country	State ruling configuration	Social ruling configuration	Relationship	Main conversion channels	Counterweights
ted States	Constitutionally fragmented elected and appointed officials; strong judicial, federal, security, and agency centers.	Concentrated corporate, financial, technological, professional, media, and philanthropic resources.	Partial overlap; competitive and issue-specific.	Campaign finance, lobbying, litigation, procurement, advisory networks, revolving doors.	Federalism, elections, courts, rival firms, civil society, press, professional norms.
ted Kingdom	Cabinet-parliamentary executive plus permanent civil service and security institutions.	Finance, corporate and media leaders; elite educational and status networks.	Partial overlap with strong recruitment continuity.	Party finance, honors, appointments, Oxbridge/professional networks, media access.	Parliament, elections, courts, inquiries, audit, competitive press.
nce	Presidential-ministerial leadership and strong senior administrative corps.	Corporate, financial, media, professional, grande-école and cultural elites.	Partial overlap with relatively high state autonomy.	Pantouflage, public-enterprise careers, state finance, elite schools, ministerial cabinets.	Elections, courts, unions, protest, EU law, decentralized authorities.
many	Federal, coalition-based, professional and legally constrained state institutions.	Industry, family firms, banks, associations, unions, professions, media, foundations.	Negotiated partial overlap.	Corporatist consultation, co-determination, parties, associations, expert bodies.	Federalism, coalition vetoes, constitutional review, unions, EU rules.
na	Communist Party leadership, cadre system, state administration, military and security command.	SOE managers, private entrepreneurs, property/technology leaders, official intellectual and cultural institutions.	High coincidence and hierarchical incorporation.	Cadre appointment, party cells, credit, land, licensing, united-front and consultative channels.	Internal party discipline, performance legitima limited legal/administrative review, market an local bargaining.
sia	Presidential-administrative and security core; strategic state corporations.	Resource, industrial, financial, regional, media and religious elites.	High overlap; wealth politically conditional.	Privatization, state contracts, security ties, selective enforcement, loyalty networks.	Internal factional balance, fiscal/resource constraints, limited institutional and market counterweights.
an	Governing-party leaders, ministries, agencies, courts, local administrations.	Corporate groups, finance, trading companies, associations, media, elite universities.	Stable partial overlap.	Administrative guidance, consultation, amakudari, policy tribes, business federations.	Elections, reforms, courts, media, market globalization, bureaucratic rules.
th Korea	Presidency, ministries, legislature, prosecution/judiciary, security institutions.	Chaebol families and executives, finance, media, elite universities and professions.	Partial overlap with recurring conflict.	Credit and industrial policy legacy, donations, lobbying, procurement, school/regional networks, revolving doors.	Competitive elections, courts, civic mobilizatio unions, media, shareholders, global markets.

8. Regime-Type Comparison

System type	State ruling pattern	Social ruling pattern	Typical analytical error
Liberal-democratic, market-oriented	Formal separation of public office and private ownership; competitive recruitment; multiple veto points.	Private wealth, media, professions, and institutions can gain unequal access; state agencies retain varying autonomy.	Mistaking legal separation for equal influence; or treating all private influence as illicit.
Coordinated or social-market democracy	Organized business, labor, professions, and regional governments are incorporated into formal bargaining and consultation.	Influence is visible and institutionalized; concentration may be moderated by unions, co-determination, and competition rules.	Confusing negotiated representation with capture, or overlooking outsiders excluded from organized bargaining.
Developmental state	Economically capable bureaucracy uses credit, trade, procurement, and regulation to promote and discipline firms.	State can create social elites; successful firms later acquire autonomy and leverage.	Assuming either complete bureaucratic autonomy or total corporate capture across all periods.
One-party socialist / party-state	Ruling party supervises appointments, security, ideology, state agencies, and strategic enterprises.	Social elites are incorporated, monitored, and rewarded; private wealth remains politically conditional.	Treating market growth as automatic political autonomy, or treating the party-state as internally homogeneous.
Personalist or security-authoritarian	Executive-security core dominates appointments, coercion, prosecution, and succession.	Wealth holders depend on loyalty and state protection; office can be a route to property.	Calling the system simply “oligarchic” without identifying who controls coercive and legal instruments.
Military or revolutionary regime	Command organization and revolutionary legitimacy dominate the state; civilian institutions may be subordinate.	Military-owned firms, veterans, party cadres, or revolutionary families may form a social elite.	Assuming uniforms alone explain economic networks, succession rules, and civilian alliances.

Regime type changes the exchange rate between wealth and office. In competitive democracies, large wealth normally purchases access, organization, expertise, and publicity rather than a formal right to command police or courts. In party-states, political status can determine access to ownership, credit, and organizational survival. In developmental systems, state officials may be able to discipline capital while simultaneously building national champions. In security-authoritarian systems, legal ownership may be less decisive than proximity to coercive institutions.

The distinction also clarifies transitions. Democratization can separate party, military, business, and media institutions that were previously fused. Privatization can create a new social ruling class from former state managers. War and emergency can expand the state ruling class’s autonomy. Financial crisis can empower central banks and finance ministries while weakening elected institutions. Technological change can create platform owners whose infrastructural power rivals traditional media and finance.

9. Ten Essential Differences

1	Institutional location - The state ruling class operates from public command positions; the social ruling class operates through ownership, organizations, professions, culture, status, and networks.
2	Distinctive resource - The first possesses authoritative decisions and coercive capacity; the second possesses allocative, organizational, cultural, and reputational capacity.
3	Selection - State rulers are selected through elections, appointments, examinations, party promotion, or military hierarchy; social rulers through inheritance, ownership, markets, boards, credentials, consecration, and networks.
4	Legitimacy - State rulers justify power through law, representation, security, service, or revolution; social

	rulers through property, performance, expertise, tradition, merit, or prestige.
5	Accountability - State rulers may be removable through elections, law, audits, or hierarchy; social rulers face markets, boards, regulation, professional discipline, and reputation, often with less direct democratic accountability.
6	Time horizon - Political office may be short and unstable; inherited wealth, institutions, endowments, and elite networks may persist across generations.
7	Visibility - State decisions often leave statutes, budgets, judgments, or orders; social influence may occur through private investment, contracts, referrals, editorial choices, and informal exclusion.
8	Relationship to coercion - State rulers can ultimately deploy police, prosecution, military force, and legal sanctions; social rulers usually require state enforcement or private organizational discipline.
9	Relationship to markets - State rulers constitute and regulate markets; social rulers act within markets while seeking favorable rules, protection, or autonomy.
10	Possibility of conflict - State rulers may tax, regulate, prosecute, or expropriate social elites; social elites may withhold investment, finance opposition, shape opinion, litigate, or exit.

10. Why State Rulers and Social Dominators Are Not Necessarily Identical

First, the state and society are organizationally differentiated. Courts, ministries, armies, firms, banks, universities, churches, and media organizations possess different rules, careers, incentives, and sources of authority. A person powerful in one institution may lack the credentials or legitimacy needed in another.

Second, state officials must sometimes preserve collective order rather than maximize the interests of any particular owner. They manage taxation, infrastructure, defense, public health, monetary stability, legitimacy, and conflicts among industries and classes. This can require disciplining powerful firms, rescuing weak sectors, redistributing resources, or imposing costs on allies.

Third, social elites are divided. Exporters and domestic producers, finance and manufacturing, technology platforms and legacy media, landlords and developers, employers and professionals, family owners and institutional investors often want different policies. The state can arbitrate among them, exploit their divisions, or become captured by a particular fraction.

Fourth, state institutions develop corporate interests. Bureaucracies seek jurisdiction and budgets; militaries seek strategic capacity; judges defend legal autonomy; parties seek reelection; police and intelligence agencies guard secrecy; central banks defend credibility. These interests cannot be reduced mechanically to private wealth.

Fifth, democratic legitimacy, mass organization, and public opinion matter. Voters, unions, social movements, regional governments, courts, and journalists can impose costs on both state and social elites. Even unequal systems contain contestation and uncertainty.

Sixth, social power can survive political turnover. A government may fall while large firms, families, universities, professions, and media institutions endure. Conversely, revolution, war, nationalization, or authoritarian consolidation may destroy or subordinate old social elites and create new ones.

Seventh, information is distributed unevenly. State agencies possess classified, regulatory, and fiscal information; firms possess technological, market, and operational knowledge; professions possess specialized expertise; media possess audience information. Mutual dependence arises because no single group knows or controls everything.

Finally, the boundary itself is politically constructed. Rules on campaign finance, lobbying, appointments, procurement, ownership, conflicts of interest, state enterprises, media independence, and post-public employment determine how permeable the boundary becomes. The question is therefore not only who crosses the boundary, but who writes and enforces the rules of crossing.

Practical implication

Do not infer the social ruling class from a list of officeholders, and do not infer the state ruling class from a list of billionaires. Map the institutions and the conversion channels connecting them.

11. Practical Criteria and Diagnostic Checklist

11.1 Four kinds of evidence

- Positional evidence: who occupies formally powerful offices, boards, commands, committees, ownership stakes, editorial desks, and credentialing bodies?
- Decision evidence: who participates in, vetoes, delays, rewrites, or implements major decisions?
- Network evidence: which family, school, party, professional, board, donor, military, religious, or social ties connect decision makers?
- Outcome evidence: which groups systematically receive benefits, protection, access, exemptions, contracts, prestige, or insulation from risk?

11.2 Diagnostic checklist

A. State command positions

- Who appoints and removes cabinet members, agency heads, judges, prosecutors, military commanders, police chiefs, intelligence leaders, and central financial officials?
- Which institutions control taxation, expenditure, procurement, licensing, regulation, prosecution, surveillance, emergency powers, and classified information?
- Where are the real veto points - constitutionally, administratively, militarily, or within a ruling party?
- Do permanent officials outlast elected leaders and preserve independent agendas?

B. Social resource control

- Who controls major firms, banks, land, digital platforms, media, universities, hospitals, professional firms, foundations, religious institutions, and cultural distribution?
- Is control based on dispersed shares, family pyramids, state ownership, foreign ownership, private equity, trusts, or personal networks?
- Which actors can move investment, employment, credit, data, or public attention at scale?
- Who controls entry into prestigious schools, occupations, boards, and social networks?

C. Recruitment and reproduction

- Which schools, examinations, parties, military academies, firms, law offices, families, and clubs produce leaders?
- How much intergenerational inheritance exists in wealth, office, profession, media access, and political candidacy?
- Are appointments competitive and transparent, or based on patronage, loyalty, kinship, region, ideology, or security vetting?
- Which internships, fellowships, honors, and advisory roles function as gateways?

D. Conversion channels

- How are campaigns, parties, think tanks, research, media, and advocacy financed?
- Who has routine access to ministers, legislators, regulators, judges, military planners, and central bankers?
- How frequently do careers move between public office and regulated firms, law, consulting, finance, media, or academia?
- Do procurement, subsidies, privatization, land, credit, or licensing create private fortunes?

E. Legitimacy and symbolic power

- Which institutions define expertise, respectability, patriotism, professionalism, morality, and cultural value?
- Who is authorized to speak for "the economy," "national security," "science," "the public," or "the nation"?
- Which media frames and educational narratives normalize the existing hierarchy?
- Are dissenting experts and organizations able to obtain resources and public visibility?

F. Accountability and counterweights

- Can leaders be removed, investigated, audited, sued, voted out, or professionally disciplined?
- Are political finance, lobbying, ownership, procurement, meetings, and conflicts of interest disclosed?
- Do courts, legislatures, regional governments, unions, competitors, journalists, and civil society possess independent resources?
- Can ordinary citizens organize, strike, publish, litigate, access information, and contest administrative decisions?

G. Crisis and exception

- Who gains authority during war, emergency, financial crisis, pandemic, or civil disorder?
- Which groups receive rescue, liquidity, contracts, exemptions, or legal immunity?
- Do temporary emergency powers become permanent?
- Does crisis reorder the balance between elected leaders, bureaucracy, security institutions, and economic elites?

11.3 A simple scoring worksheet

Score	Interpretation
0 - Open / weak	No durable control; access is broadly contestable; decisions are transparent and reversible.
1 - Advantage	Above-average access or resources, but meaningful competition and review remain.
2 - Dominant	Repeated agenda control, privileged access, or veto power across important decisions.
3 - Commanding	Controls appointments, coercion, ownership, or institutional survival with limited effective challenge.

For each institution or group, score control over appointments, budgets, information, coercion, ownership, agenda-setting, recruitment, and immunity. The numbers are not a scientific index by themselves. Their purpose is to force explicit judgments and reveal where evidence is missing. A country-level conclusion should be based on multiple sectors and major decisions rather than a single scandal or famous individual.

12. Empirical Research Design

12.1 Unit of analysis

Choose a clearly bounded unit: a country, city, policy field, industry, crisis, administration, or historical period. “Who rules America?” is too broad unless decomposed into defense procurement, banking regulation, digital platforms, local land use, criminal justice, higher education, or another decision system. Power structures vary by sector.

12.2 Data collection

- Formal documents: constitutions, statutes, organizational charts, appointment rules, budgets, procurement records, court decisions, regulatory dockets, and party rules.
- Ownership and finance: beneficial ownership, corporate filings, campaign finance, donor records, foundations, trusts, subsidies, public contracts, and bank exposures.
- Biographical data: education, career history, family connections, military service, party roles, boards, advisory positions, and post-office employment.
- Access data: meeting logs, lobbying disclosures, visitor records, consultation submissions, testimony, expert panels, and invitations.
- Communication and agenda data: media ownership, editorial networks, advertising, think-tank citations, expert appearances, platform visibility, and framing patterns.
- Outcome data: tax burdens, regulatory exemptions, prosecutions, bailouts, contracts, land allocations, credit, licenses, honors, and changes in market concentration.
- Interviews and process tracing: identify who proposed, modified, delayed, blocked, implemented, and benefited from a decision.

12.3 Analytical safeguards

- Distinguish correlation from control. Similar backgrounds do not prove coordinated action.
- Distinguish access from success. Meeting officials does not show that preferences prevailed.
- Distinguish policy agreement from capture. Officials may independently share an analysis.
- Compare counterfactuals. Ask what happened to similarly situated actors without elite connections.
- Identify losing elites. Evidence of powerful groups losing major battles helps measure institutional autonomy.
- Track time. A structure can shift after election, war, scandal, crisis, technological disruption, or generational succession.
- Use rival hypotheses: public interest, bureaucratic routine, electoral incentives, ideology, institutional path dependence, and international constraints.
- Avoid collective nouns without mechanisms. Replace “the establishment decided” with named institutions, rules, meetings, resources, and decisions.

Conclusion

The state ruling class and the social ruling class are best understood as two intersecting but non-identical structures of domination. The first commands public authority; the second commands socially consequential resources. State power is concentrated in offices capable of making and enforcing binding decisions. Social power is distributed across ownership, markets, organizations, professions, culture, status, and networks. Their relationship can range from separation and bargaining to dense overlap or hierarchical fusion.

The distinction improves political analysis because it prevents two opposite simplifications. One is economic reductionism: the belief that owners always directly command the state. The other is institutional formalism: the belief that official officeholders alone determine social outcomes. In practice, state institutions possess autonomy, corporate interests, and coercive capacity, while social elites possess resources that shape agendas, investment, information, legitimacy, and recruitment.

A balanced analysis therefore follows the circuits of conversion. It examines how money becomes access, how expertise becomes authority, how prestige becomes appointment, how public office becomes private opportunity, and how law creates or limits property. It also measures countervailing power and elite conflict. The central empirical questions are: who controls which institution; by what resource; through what procedure; with what evidence; benefiting whom; under what accountability; and with what possibility of reversal.

The groups that rule the state and the groups that dominate society are not necessarily identical because modern societies are institutionally differentiated. But they are never fully independent, because property requires law, states require resources and knowledge, legitimacy requires social institutions, and elites continuously cross organizational boundaries. The task of power-structure analysis is to make those relationships visible without imagining either perfect pluralism or a single hidden hand.

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