

Encyclopedia of Governance

Authority

Contributors: Jeremy Darrington
Editors: Mark Bevir
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Authority is the right to command obedience. Authority implies both one who commands and others who obey, the wielder and the subjects of authority being linked in a hierarchical relationship mutually recognized as legitimate and based on the shared norms of a collectivity. As a consequence of this relationship, authority endows the wielder with the right to issue commands that the subjects of this authority feel obligated to obey. Thus, authority is distinguished by the voluntary compliance of its subjects on the basis of the perceived legitimacy of a hierarchical relationship, rather than on the basis of persuasion, calculations of self-interest, or physical coercion. Authority is also by definition limited in its scope, being constrained by a set of shared beliefs and norms that justify the hierarchical relationship between wielder and subjects.

Authority is a robust and efficient form of social and political order, as the voluntary obedience of subjects means that few resources need to be expended on eliciting compliance. In contrast, when physical coercion (or the threat thereof) is the basis of social control, compliance is the result of fear. Those seeking to exert control must expend immense resources on policing and enforcement of rules. Likewise, compliance on the basis of self-interested calculations suggests a tenuous form of social control because an individual's observance of the rules is open to constant reevaluation to determine if obedience still provides the greatest utility. Finally, securing obedience to rules through persuasion or appeals to reason, emotion, or norms may be more stable and less costly than either physical coercion or self-interest, but it is clearly less effective and more costly than the habitual obedience elicited by authority. In any complex social system, however, control is likely to be achieved through a combination of these methods.

Waning State Authority?

Current writing on governance often asserts that the authority of the state is declining. This could mean at least three things. First, states may be increasingly less able to rely on authority as a key method for exerting social control. This may be the result of individual crises of legitimacy or a more general trend associated with globalization or broad cultural changes that have undermined the normative foundations of hierarchical authority relationships. In this case, a loss of authority suggests that states are

increasingly governing in networks with voluntary and private bodies either as a means of increasing legitimacy or to mitigate the costs associated with having to rely on less efficient forms of securing compliance. Second, decreasing state authority could refer to a narrowing scope for the exercise of authority. In this case, it may not be that states are less able to rely on authority for social control but, rather, [p. 42 ↓] that normative changes have led to a redefinition of the range of areas where that control applies. Thus, new forms of governance may emerge as states seek to exercise influence in areas where they previously commanded obedience. Third, a loss of state authority could mean that authority has shifted to other levels. In response to economic, political, and normative changes, new governance forms may emerge as state authority is transferred upward to the supranational level, downward to the subnational level, or outward to the private realm. This could represent a voluntary delegation of authority (with the implication that states could take authority back), or an involuntary loss to bodies at other levels that are either actively “poaching” on state authority or merely willing and able to fill in for a retreating state.

Empirically, there is still much debate about to what extent and in what ways state authority is declining. What are the consequences of declining state authority for social and political control? Have states voluntarily delegated their authority, or is this happening against their wills? Can states regain lost authority, or is this an irreversible process?

Authority outside the State?

Much of the writing on authority and governance has focused on this shift of authority to other levels. However, the concept of authority must not be confused with governance. Global economic integration and other challenges may be shifting the locus of governance beyond the state to supranational, subnational, or private arenas without creating hierarchical relationships that give one party a mutually recognized, legitimate right to command and receive obedience. This is especially relevant to arguments about authority in the private realm. Arguments about the authority of firms and markets, the “illicit” authority of transnational criminal groups, or the “moral” or “knowledge” authority of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) or epistemic communities often confuse authority with the ability simply to elicit voluntary compliance. These groups'

expertise, knowledge, or values may provide convincing reasons for obeying their directives, but being convinced is not the same as being obligated to obey a socially legitimated authority. Will authority have a place in evolving forms of governance, or will governance instead rely on other forms of social control to deal with the consequences of fragmented or waning state authority?

JeremyDarrington

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See also

- [Coercion](#)
- [Differentiated Polity](#)
- [Legitimacy](#)
- [Organizational Structure](#)
- [Sovereignty](#)

Further Readings and References

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