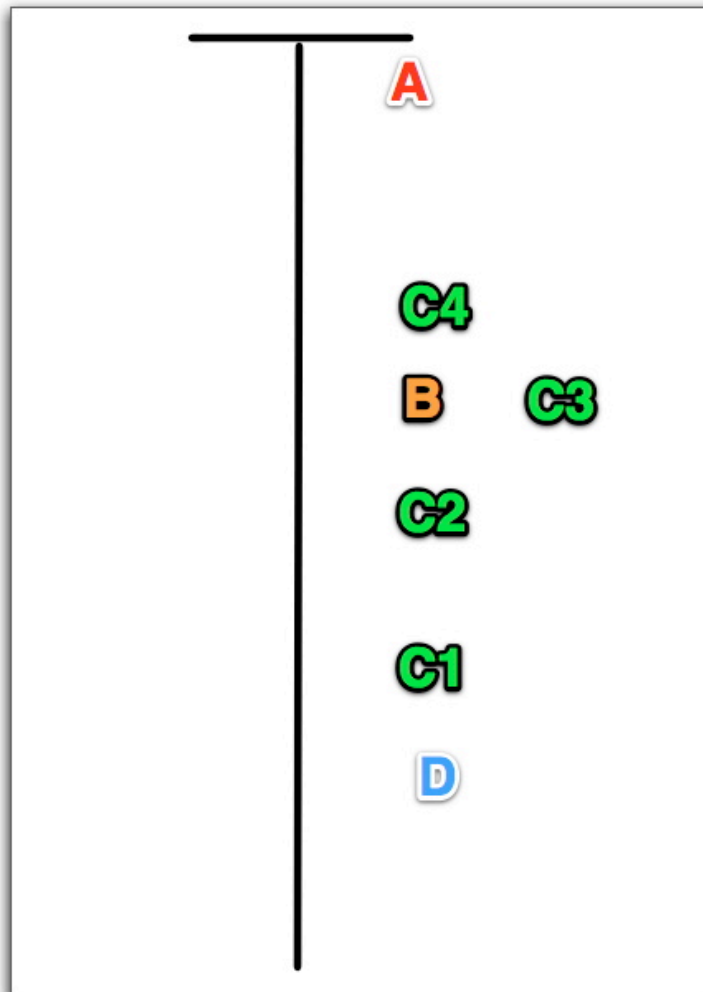


## The Power Pole



The 'power pole' represents a snapshot of relative power, which may be a combination of economic, ideological and/or political power. Most intentional social change may be seen as an attempt by one or more groups to move up the power pole.

In the power pole diagram the letters A, B, C and D represent groups with different levels of power (A having the greatest and D with the least). If a social change initiative is effective, a group's position (C1) will improve (e.g. to C2, C3, or C4). Relative power will then have changed considerably; the gap between A and C is now less; between D and C it will be greater, and between B and C it may even be reversed. C will have more power, by definition; whether that means that A, B, or D must then have less depends on whether you think power is infinite or finite and where C's power came from.

Whoever was controlling C's choices has less control now. If power is finite, then some groups have less power now over C than they did before. It is important to know who will have less in this situation because they are likely to fight to retain that power. If D loses any power as a result of C gaining more, ethical questions arise — is it acceptable to increase power at the expense of those who have less to begin with?

### Shifting power on the power pole

Dictionary definitions of **empowerment** include 'giving power to', 'permitting', 'giving authority to', and 'enfranchising'. It implies a person or group (**A**) with relatively more power facilitating another person or group (**B**) moving up the power pole. The emphasis is on **A** as the active party.

Power cannot truly shift unless **B** moves to take it, becoming the active party. It is probably more useful to think of the degree of resistance **A** has to **B**'s taking power, which may range from negligible to considerable. **A** may choose not to exercise its **positional power-over B**, but is still attached to the position until there is structural change. **A** may not want to exercise influence, but it is difficult to stop **B** from being influenced by the inequality in power.

Often people who believe that they want to divest themselves of **power-over** others — for example, a parent's power over children — find themselves resisting when it is taken eventually.

### Top-down or bottom-up change

**Top-down** social change is driven by those with most power; for example, the imposition of neo-liberal economic policies by governments in the 1980s. Bottom-up change is driven by flax-roots pressure; for example, homosexual law reform. Top-down change can utilise **power-over** others, for example, to pass a law, but bottom-up change cannot, unless people are willing to act illegally by using violence, sabotage or other coercion.

The most frequent exception is when **power-with** among large numbers of people is transformed into effective alliances and converted to **power-over**. **Bottom-up** strategies for social change may also use **power-with** in relation to the dominant group, if the oppressed group has knowledge or a relationship with them that the dominant group values. But **power-with** in a relationship that has an inherent power imbalance carries high costs for the party with less power.

For a relationship to be sustainable, both parties must contribute resources of equal value to the other party. If one party has more power, they have more control of resources and are more likely to be able to contribute more. This forces the other party to be more compliant and can lead to resentment.

On the other hand, some social movements do not want to try to move up the power pole, collectively or individually because members:

- are unwilling to define themselves in terms of the powerful
- do not want to use means they don't agree with to achieve their goals
- believe that it is futile to play the game when the dominant group makes the rules
- do not want to engage in a power-play with a group whose members live next door, so that the struggle comes into the neighbourhood or the kitchen.

Some people argue that one has to compromise and at least pretend to share dominant values to be invited to join the elite so they can change the system. Others counterclaim that the very process of climbing the power pole changes one's perspectives so that by the time they get to the top of the pole they no longer want to change the system.

This thinking can lead to despair, or to the development of alternatives, such as separating from the existing system to create another.

For definitions of power-over and power-with see **The Powercube**: <http://www.powercube.net/other-forms-of-power/expressions-of-power/>