

Power or Influence, Which is Better?

-Andy Martin

I recently ran a Twitter poll with a simple question. *Would you rather have power or influence?* The reactions I got from the question were as revealing as the poll results:

How do you define each? Asked a financial planner.

A distinction without a difference. Tweeted a PhD economist and writer.

Isn't influence a type of power? From a mother of four.

They revealed that power and influence are often used interchangeably. Certainly, these two sentences are more alike than different. He wielded his *power* over me. He wielded his *influence* over me.

Nevertheless, the words are not the same; the distinction is important, even edifying. One can see this difference from their etymologies.

Power comes from the Latin *potere*, which means “to be able.”

Influence comes from Middle English and Old French, and has a more philosophical aim, “emanation from the stars affecting one’s fate.”

Maybe examples can help.

Hunter Biden made millions as a lobbyist and *son of*, appears to be immune to legal repercussions from his carelessness, has immense power, yet he wields no influence. No one quotes or follows Biden, but he can instantly connect with anyone he wishes to in the world by telephone. In contrast, Jordan Peterson has tremendous influence, 15 million followers on social media, sells out huge auditoriums, and was called “the most influential public intellectual in the Western world” by the *New York Times*. Yet, he doesn’t have power enough to protect his medical license from being pulled by the tiny *College of Psychologists of Ontario*, or from being de-platformed.

You may take issue with this simple contrast, but it is hard to conclude that power and influence are the same.

A longer look back may be more convincing. Joseph Stalin and C.S. Lewis died just 10-years apart but had markedly different impacts. Stalin had vast power, even over those who lived and died. Nikita Khrushchev said eerily, “All of us around Stalin were temporary people.” But you can be sure that few are quoting, following, or modeling Stalin today = 0 influence. C.S. Lewis wielded no power as such, and died with a meager net worth. Yet, 60 years after his death he still exerts enormous influence with 200 million books sold, is the third most quoted author on *Goodreads*, behind Jane Austen and Wm Shakespeare, and even today is an apologetics essential.

The difference?

Power is leverage. The goal is advantage.

Influence is persuasion. The goal is reach.

Power is self-focused, less charitable by nature. No one can say that Putin, for example, is exercising anything but power over Ukraine. Putin’s hunger for power, ironically, comes from his exasperating lack of influence.

So, who are you? The poll had a clear winner. 66% of men and 70% of women voted they would rather have influence than power.

Ultimately, power is a living legacy, “look at me now!” Power redounds chiefly to the powerful.

Influence, however, “emanation from the stars” is *power* to do good, a lasting legacy, of which we all benefit.