

PYQ Vault

560

questions

50

days

10

years of PYQs

DAY 2

Theories of the State · 9 questions

Every question carries a *Flow Snapshot* — and a handwritten model answer on the channel.

So no PYQ will be unfamiliar.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2016 · 15 marks

Discuss the Feminist theory of the State.

FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

- R1 state is no neutral arbiter → male power built into law, bureaucracy, welfare
- R2 “personal is political” (Hanisch) → public-private divide broken

Body flow

liberal: state reformable (Wollstonecraft) → “too institutional” critique → Marxist: oppression tied to capital + domestic labour (Engels) → radical: patriarchal in structure → sexual contract (Pateman) → state is male, law sees women as men do (MacKinnon) → public-private split hides domination

Counter-view

universalising all states as patriarchal risks essentialism → variation across class, race, caste

Conclusion routes

- R1 state not gender-neutral → formal equality insufficient
- R2 neither enemy nor saviour → gendered terrain of struggle

Feminist theory denies the state is a neutral arbiter, treating it as a structure of power where male dominance is built into law, bureaucracy and welfare. Carole Hanisch's claim that "the personal is political" breaks the public-private divide.

Feminists then divide over how deep this control runs. Mary Wollstonecraft and later liberal feminists treat the state as reformable through suffrage, education and law; critics call this too institutional, since admitting women into existing structures may entrench patriarchy rather than end it.

Marxist feminists go further, linking women's oppression, after Friedrich Engels, to capitalism & unpaid domestic labour, so the state serves both capital and men.

Radical feminists make the sharpest claim - the state is patriarchal in structure, not merely biased in practice. Carole Pateman, in *The Sexual Contract*, shows that the

liberal contract hides a prior sexual contract that "establishes men's political right over women." Catharine MacKinnon takes this to its conclusion: the state is male, since law treats women as men do, the public-private split letting domination pass as neutrality.

Reading every state as uniformly patriarchal risks essentialism and women's experience differs across class, race and caste. But the core insight holds: the state is not gender-neutral, formal equality alone cannot end structural disadvantage and real equality means confronting power in both public and private life.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2017 · 10 marks

Comment on the neo-liberal perspective of the state.

FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

- R1** neo-liberalism = revival of 19th-c economic liberalism → market over state
- R2** late-1970s welfare-state crisis → “market fundamentalism” → roll back the state

Body flow

individual + market primacy → **Hayek** (planning → lost liberty; social justice a “mirage”) → **Nozick** (minimal night-watchman) → **Thatcher’s** TINA → privatisation / deregulation / austerity → Thatcherism, Reaganism, LPG 1991

Counter-view

2008 crisis → **Polanyi** (markets need state) → **Stiglitz** “failed ideology”

Conclusion routes

- R1** efficiency real, but welfare / equality costs → minimal state utopian
- R2** markets cannot function without the state they seek to shrink

Neo-liberalism is a 20th-century rival of 19th century economic liberalism. It gained force in the late 1970s, amid welfare-state stagnation & fiscal crisis. Its claim is that the market, not the state, better secures freedom, so the state must be rolled back - what critics call market fundamentalism.

Friedrich Hayek opposed central planning as a road to lost liberty and called social justice a "mirage", while Robert Nozick defended a minimal, night-watchman state protecting only property. As Margaret Thatcher insisted, "There is no Alternative", and privatisation, deregulation and austerity spread through Thatcherism, Reaganism and India's LPG reforms of 1991. Yet the model carries contradictions.

Karl Polanyi showed markets are not self-sustaining & need state enforcement and the 2008 crisis weakened faith in deregulation. Joseph Stiglitz calls neo-liberalism "a failed ideology". It rewards efficiency and enterprise but weakens welfare and equality; the minimal state stays utopian, since even markets cannot function without the state they seek to shrink.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2018 · 20 marks

Critically examine the neo-liberal theory of the State.

FLOW SNAPSHOT – how the answer moves

Intro routes

- R1** market-centred theory → not abolition but rollback of welfare → state as facilitator of markets
- R2** revival of 19th-c liberalism → rose late 1970s against welfare-state crisis → “market fundamentalism”

Body flow

individual + market primacy → **Hayek** (*The Road to Serfdom*: planning → lost liberty; social justice a mirage) → **Nozick** (*Anarchy, State, and Utopia*: minimal night-watchman, redistribution illegitimate) → programme (privatisation, deregulation, free trade, austerity) → **Thatcher’s** TINA → Thatcherism / Reaganism / LPG 1991 / Washington Consensus

Counter-view

Polanyi (markets need the state to exist) → 2008 crisis → inequality / wealth concentration → **Stiglitz** “failed ideology”

Conclusion routes

- R1** minimal state utopian → market rests on state enforcement → not state vs market but what kind of state
- R2** social-liberal synthesis (**Rawls** / **Sen** / **Dworkin**) → private growth + state capacity + civil-society accountability

Neo-liberalism rebuilds the theory of the state around market. It does not abolish the state but rolls back its welfare role for the market. A 20th-century rival of 19th century economic liberalism, it rose in the late 1970s, amid welfare-state stagnation, fiscal crisis and corruption.

It rests on the primacy of the individual and market. In *The Road to Serfdom*, Friedrich Hayek tied central planning to the loss of liberty and dismissed social justice as a mirage. Robert Nozick, in *Anarchy, State and Utopia*, defended a minimal, night watchman state protecting only property, with redistribution illegitimate.

From this followed privatisation, deregulation & austerity captured in Margaret Thatcher's claim that "There is no Alternative", and spread through Thatcherism, Reaganism and India's LPG reforms of 1991 under the Washington Consensus.

However, the theory carries a flaw at its centre. **Karl Polanyi** showed markets are not self-sustaining; they need state authority to exist, so a minimal state presupposes the very state it shrinks. **Joseph Stiglitz** calls it "a failed ideology".

Neo-liberalism rightly exposed an overgrown welfare state, but cannot deliver the minimal state it imagines. The real choice is not state versus market but what kind of state — and social liberals such as **John Rawls**, **Amartya Sen** and **Dworkin** point to a balance : private sector for growth, state for capacity and order, civil society for accountability.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2019 · 10 marks

Comment on the pluralist theory of the state.

FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

- R1** revolt against monistic sovereignty → state = one association among many
- R2** reaction to Hegelian statism → society a web of associations → state mediates, does not command

Body flow

Laski (federal society → federal authority; “keystone”) → **MacIver** (associations precede state; service state “commands because it serves”) → **Dahl** → polyarchy, no centre wholly sovereign

Counter-view

group inequality → wealthy interests get greater access → **Mills’** elite convergence

Conclusion routes

- R1** realistic account of democratic politics → fits federalism, pressure groups, judicial review
- R2** liberty safer when no single centre can close the political field

Pluralism grew out of a revolt against the monistic claim that sovereignty rests in one indivisible will.

Against statist who raised the state to a mystical height, pluralists held that society is a web of associations and the state only one centre of decision among many, a mediator not a commander.

The clearest voices are **Harold Laski** and **R.M. MacIver**. Laski held that "since society is federal, authority should also be federal," though he still called the state the "Keystone of social architecture." MacIver went further: associations precede the state, and his service state "commands because it serves." Robert Dahl later gave it empirical form as polyarchy, where no centre of power is wholly sovereign.

The limitations are also worth noting - groups are unequal, wealthy interests enjoy easier access, and C. Wright Mills noted the merging of ruling elites.

Even so, pluralism is a realistic account of democratic politics ; liberty is safer when no single centre can close the political field.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2020 · 10 marks

Comment on the post-colonial theory of the state in about 150 words.

FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

- R1** post-decolonisation, sovereign but built on inherited colonial apparatus
→ Brar's relabeling
- R2** modern apparatus grafted onto a non-modern base → category defined by that mismatch

Body flow

common insight = apparatus-base mismatch → Riggs's *prismatic society* (formalism, modern + traditional coexist) → Myrdal's *soft state* (institutions can't enforce rules → blocks poverty alleviation) → Alavi's *overdeveloped state* (superstructure outgrows base → relative autonomy → military-bureaucratic oligarchy, Pakistan)

Counter-view

thin as a unified state theory → Myrdal's cultural determinism + Alavi freezing class at independence

Conclusion routes

- R1** still explains why coercive, top-heavy institutions outlived colonialism
- R2** best read as a colonial apparatus over a weak base, theorised from three angles

The post-colonial state emerged after decolonisation - formally sovereign, but built on the bureaucracy, law and institutions inherited from colonial rule rather than grown from its own society. Bhupinder Brar prefers "Post-colonial World" to "Third World," to capture this colonial inheritance and weak development.

The recurring insight is a mismatch between a modern state apparatus and a non-modern base. FW Riggs calls such a society prismatic: modern and traditional coexist, with formalism - a gap between formal rule and actual practice. Gunnar Myrdal, in *Asian Drama*, reads the result as the soft state, whose institutions cannot enforce their own rules and so obstruct poverty alleviation. Hamza Alavi adds the class reading: the coercive superstructure outgrew the base, leaving an overdeveloped state with relative autonomy and a dominant military-bureaucratic oligarchy, as in Pakistan.

Critics find it weak as unified theory of the state-Myrdal verges on cultural determinism, Alavi freezes class structure at independence. But it explains well why coercive, top-heavy institutions outlived colonial rule.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2021 · 10 marks

Comment on the feminist critique of the state in 150 words.

FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

- R1** reject state-as-neutral → law / policy carry male power
- R2** state looks impartial → feminism exposes its gendered foundations

Body flow

public-sphere myth → “personal is political” (**Hanisch**) → patriarchal in structure (radical) → **Pateman**’s sexual contract → **MacKinnon**: state is male → public-private divide hides dominance

Counter-view

may essentialise all states / reduce oppression to gender alone

Conclusion routes

- R1** neither enemy nor saviour → gendered terrain of struggle
- R2** critique holds → equality needs power addressed in public and private

The feminist critique rejects the state as a neutral arbiter, arguing that its law, institutions and public policy are shaped by male power and reproduce it.

It denies that politics belongs only to the public sphere. Carole Hanisch's claim that "the personal is political" brings family, sexuality and domestic labour into politics, where male domination runs deepest.

Radical feminists therefore see the state as patriarchal in structure, not just biased. Carole Pateman argues that the social contract conceals a prior sexual contract that "establishes men's political right over women."

Catharine MacKinnon goes further: "The state is male in the feminist sense: the law sees and treats women the way men see and treat women," the public-private divide making this look neutral.

Critics point out it may essentialise all states as patriarchal and reduce oppression to gender. Even so, it rightly treats the state not as a simple enemy or saviour, but as a gendered terrain of struggle.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2022 · 20 marks

Examine the liberal theory of the State in contemporary politics.

FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

- R1** individual primary → state by consent to protect liberty / rights / property → claim of limited, neutral state now strained
- R2** liberal frame still dominant → neutrality questioned by the market turn, inequality, identity claims

Body flow

Locke foundation (natural rights, consent; “no other end but preservation of property”) vs **Hobbes**’s order-state → classical (**Smith**, laissez-faire, “necessary evil”) → modern (**J. S. Mill**; **Rawls** / **Sen** / **Dworkin** → welfare + opportunity) → neo-liberal turn (**Hayek** “mirage”, **Nozick** minimal state; **Thatcher** TINA; LPG 1991)

Counter-view

2008 crisis + **Stiglitz** “failed ideology” + **Polanyi** (markets need the state) → inequality → feminist / Marxist / neo-pluralist denial of neutrality

Conclusion routes

- R1** constitutionalism still central → strength = liberty + limits; weakness = assumed neutrality amid inequality
- R2** social-liberal reform (**Rawls** / **Sen** / **Dworkin**) → liberal state survives by reforming, not retreating

Liberal theory treats the individual as the primary moral unit and the state as an association by consent. It exists to protect liberty, rights and property, not to impose one idea of the good life and rests on consent not force.

The foundation is John Locke: it protects natural rights and stays limited by consent – "Government has no other end but the preservation of property" – beyond Thomas Hobbes's pure order-state.

Classical liberalism treated the state as necessary evil; Adam Smith argued for laissez-faire. Modern liberalism broke with this: Mill defended positive liberty and welfare and Rawls, Sen and Dworkin later widened its role in opportunity.

Its most powerful recent form is neo-liberalism: Friedrich Hayek called social justice a mirage and Robert Nozick defended a minimal state – Margaret Thatcher's "there is no alternative."

But the 2008 crisis weakened faith in deregulation; Joseph Stiglitz called it "a failed ideology," and Karl Polanyi showed markets need state enforcement.

Liberal constitutionalism still anchors politics—rule of law, separation of powers, rights. Its strength is the defence of liberty and limits on power; its weakness is assuming neutrality amid inequality.

The social-liberal answer of Rawls, Sen and Dworkin is that the liberal state survives by reforming, not retreating to the minimal or all-providing state.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2024 · 10 marks

Comment on the pluralist theory of the state in about 150 words.

FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

- R1** state holds no monopoly of power → one association among many, mediator not command centre
- R2** society is plural → authority must be dispersed → rejects a single sovereign centre

Body flow

Laski's federal authority → MacIver's service state (commands because it serves) → Dahl's polyarchy (power dispersed, none wholly sovereign) → realistic in age of federalism / UN / human rights

Counter-view

groups are unequal → wealthy and business interests get greater access → Mills' convergence of elites

Conclusion routes

- R1** realistic account of liberal-democratic politics
- R2** liberty safer when no single centre can close the political field

Pluralism's defining claim is that the state holds no monopoly of power. It is one association among many, an arbiter among competing groups rather than a supreme command centre. Since society is plural, authority too must be dispersed.

Laski argued, "Since society is federal, authority should also be federal." R.M. MacIver pushed this further through his service state: the state commands only because it serves and stands as one institution beside churches, unions and local bodies.

Robert Dahl later gave the idea empirical form as **polyarchy**, where power is spread across many groups and none is wholly sovereign - a realistic picture in an age of federalism, the United Nations and human rights.

The weakness is that groups are unequal. Wealthy and business interests command greater access, and C. Wright Mills points to a convergence of ruling elites. But pluralism keeps its value: liberty is safer when no single centre can close the political field.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2025 · 20 marks

What is the Marxist and liberal approach towards the state? On what grounds are the theoretical differences between them premised? Explain.

FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

- R1** both ask what the state is and whom it serves → opposite starting points: individual vs class
- R2** liberalism from individual + consent → Marxism from class + mode of production → one root divide

Body flow

liberal: individual moral unit → consent, neutral umpire, rule of law → **Locke** (rights, property) → **Rawls / Sen / Dworkin** (opportunity) → Marxist: class not individual → state from private property + class division → Manifesto “committee of the bourgeoisie” → **Lenin** “organ of class rule” → **Miliband** instrumentalist vs **Poulantzas** relative autonomy → **Gramsci** hegemony (consent + coercion)

Counter-view

neither places the state above class → liberal neutral umpire vs Marxist class-domination → no neutral ground, premises do not meet

Conclusion routes

- R1** difference is over where analysis begins → individual + neutral order vs class power + production
- R2** contemporary tests (inequality, 2008 rescue, limits of welfare) keep both alive → umpire or guardian of the propertied order

The liberal and Marxist approaches both ask what the state is and whom it serves, but reach opposite answers because they start from opposite points: liberalism from the individual, Marxism from class and the mode of production. Almost every disagreement follows from this divide.

For liberal theory, the individual is the primary moral unit, and the state is created by consent to protect liberty, rights and property. John Locke grounds this in natural rights – “Government has no other end but the preservation of property” and modern liberals widen its role toward fair opportunity.

Marxist theory replaces the individual with class. Marx and Engels see the state as neither natural nor neutral: it appears with private property and class division, protecting the owners of production. In The Communist Manifesto they call it “a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie,” and V.I. Lenin calls it “an organ of class rule.”

Within this frame, Ralph Miliband holds the dominant class staffs the state, Nicos Poulantzas grants it relative autonomy while securing capitalist rule, and Antonio Gramsci stresses rule through consent as much as coercion.

The two finally part on where analysis begins: the free individual and a neutral order, or class power and the conditions of production.

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