

PYQ Vault

560

questions

50

days

10

years of PYQs

DAY 4

Equality · 11 questions

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

“No PYQ will be unfamiliar.”

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2016 · 10 marks

Comment on the affirmative action in around 150 words.

FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1 affirmative action as the instrument converting formal → substantive equality

R2 deliberate state measures for groups hit by historical discrimination + structural exclusion → India frame (reservation, Arts 15/16)

Body flow

meaning + Indian form → moral justification (**Rawls's** difference principle → **Ambedkar's** social democracy) → aim is fair conditions, not favour

Counter-view

Sowell: weakens merit, deepens division → reverse discrimination / creamy layer / stigma persist

Conclusion routes

R1 necessary for distributive justice

R2 valid only as targeted, reviewable measure — not a permanent entitlement

Affirmative action is the chief instrument for turning formal equality into substantive equality. It refers to deliberate measures by the state to support groups held back by historical discrimination and continuing structural exclusion. In India it works mainly through reservation in education, employment & legislatures, resting on Articles 15 and 16.

Its deeper justification is moral. John Rawls's difference principle defends priority for the least advantaged, while BR Ambedkar held that political democracy remains incomplete without social democracy, which removes inequalities of status and opportunity. The aim is not favour but fair conditions — moving from equal rules to a genuine level playing field.

Critics disagree. Thomas Sowell argues that group preference weakens merit and deepens social division and the problems of reverse discrimination, the creamy layer and stigma remain real.

On balance, affirmative action is necessary for distributive justice, but valid only as a targeted, reviewable measure, never a permanent entitlement.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2016 · 15 marks

Critically analyse John Rawl's argument for democratic equality.

FLOW SNAPSHOT – how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1 Rawls = most systematic liberal bid to join liberty + equality → democratic equality its core form
R2 justice as fairness via original position / veil of ignorance → contingencies neutralised → persons as ends

Body flow

original position + veil → anti-utilitarian (person as end, no sacrifice for aggregate) → first principle: equal basic liberties + lexical priority → second principle: fair equality of opportunity prior to difference principle → difference principle benefits least advantaged → three combine: freedom + equality, inequality constrained, weakest protected

Counter-view

Arneson: only mitigates contingencies, not truly egalitarian → **Sen**: resources not capabilities, equal resources ≠ equal real freedom

Conclusion routes

R1 strength = least advantaged shielded from utilitarian trade-offs
R2 limit = weighs means, not the real freedom to live a valued life

John Rawls offers the most systematic liberal attempt to hold liberty and equality together; democratic equality is its core form. His argument builds justice as fairness on the original position and the veil of ignorance, devices meant to neutralise the effects of natural and social contingencies. Each person is treated as an end with the moral powers needed for autonomy, so no individual or minority can be sacrificed for aggregate welfare.

Democratic equality combines three commitments. The first principle guarantees equal basic liberties, including political rights and holds lexical priority—these liberties cannot be traded for economic gain. The second principle adds fair equality of opportunity, which itself takes priority over the difference principle.

The difference principle then permits inequality only when it works to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged.

The argument draws strong criticism. Richard Arneson holds that the difference principle only mitigates contingencies, stopping short of real equality. Amartya Sen argues that Rawls's index measures resources rather than capabilities, and equal resources do not guarantee equal real freedom, since people differ in health, gender & circumstance.

Rawls's strength lies in shielding the least advantaged from utilitarian trade-offs, its limit is that it weighs means, not the freedom to live a valued life.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2018 · 15 marks

Equality means fair treatment rather than equal treatment. Comment.

FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1 equal moral worth, not sameness → **Aristotle**: equals equally, unequals unequally

R2 two readings of equality → same rule for all vs treatment by circumstance / need

Body flow

equal treatment = sameness in law (**Nozick** → redistribution as rights-violation) → but unequal starting points → Dalits / Blacks / women / disabled → identical rule entrenches advantage → **Tawney** pike-minnows → fair treatment corrects → differential treatment by need / disadvantage → **Rawls** difference principle → **Sen** resources vs functionings → protective discrimination / affirmative action

Counter-view

Nozick: differential treatment violates rights → answer: not arbitrary, bounded, only to protect the weakest

Conclusion routes

R1 identical treatment of unequals reproduces inequality → equality = fair treatment

R2 fair treatment secures equal worth in moral + material sense → distributive equality

Equality promises that all persons have equal moral worth. It does not promise sameness. Aristotle settled this long ago: justice means treating equals equally & unequals unequally. The real question is which reading honours that promise. Does equality demand the same rule for all, or treatment that responds to circumstance and need?

Equal treatment values sameness in law and procedure. Robert Nozick defends it, and treats redistribution as a violation of holdings and rights. But people do not begin from the same social position.

Historical discrimination against Dalits, Blacks, women & the disabled means an identical rule preserves the advantage of the already advantaged. As Richard Henry Tawney put it, "Freedom for the pike is death for the minnows."

Fair treatment corrects this. It gives differential treatment by circumstance, need and past disadvantage and connects equality with distributive justice. John Rawls allows inequalities only where they benefit the least advantaged.

Amartya Sen shows that equal resources still leave people unequal, since they differ in converting resources into functionings. Protective discrimination and affirmative action follow from this logic.

Such treatment is not arbitrary. It is justified only to protect the weakest. Equality is therefore realised as fair treatment - securing equal worth in both moral and material terms.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2019 · 15 marks

Compare negative and positive concepts of liberty.

FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1 both senses answer “what is freedom?” → **Berlin** frames both → contrast sets up the state’s role
R2 liberty splits into freedom-from vs freedom-to → divide tracks classical vs modern liberalism

Body flow

negative = freedom from restraint → rational agent, state must not fix ends → **Hobbes** (impediments) → **Hayek** (absence of coercion) → state as necessary evil → positive = freedom to act / realise potential → exercise concept (ability to use opportunity) → **Green** (power to do what is worth doing; hinder the hindrances) → **Tawney** (poor’s liberty needs restraint of rich) → **Sen** (capabilities)

Counter-view

MacCallum → no simple dichotomy → freedom as triadic relation (agent-constraints-goal)

Conclusion routes

R1 negative secures the space, positive supplies the power to use it → complementary, not rival
R2 the meaning of liberty decides the state’s role → the divide is about the state as much as about freedom

Negative and positive liberty answer one question differently: what does it mean to be free? Isaiah Berlin frames both senses, and the contrast shapes how each sees state.

Negative liberty means freedom from external restraint. It belongs to classical liberalism, treats the individual as a rational agent who knows his own interest and holds the state must not decide his ends.

Thomas Hobbes defines liberty as the absence of impediments to action. According to Friedrich Hayek, liberty is the absence of coercion by the arbitrary will of another. The state is a necessary evil, confined to non-interference.

Positive liberty means the freedom to act, develop & realise one's potential. It belongs to modern liberalism and is an exercise concept: not merely having an opportunity but being able to use it.

Thomas Hill Green sees liberty as the ability to do what is worth doing, so the state must hinder the hindrances.

Richard Henry Tawney adds that the liberty of the poor depends on restraining the rich and Amartya Sen ties real freedom to capabilities.

The two need not be rivals. Gerald MacCallum argues there is no simple dichotomy: freedom is a triadic relation between an agent, conditions that prevent action and what the agent seeks. Negative liberty secures the space; positive liberty supplies the power to use it.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2020 · 10 marks

Comment on the equality of opportunity in about 150 words.

FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1 fair chances to develop ability + compete → liberal idea of initial conditions, not outcomes → level playing field

R2 equality of opportunity = non-discrimination in access → but meaning splits between formal and substantive

Body flow

competitive form: equal start → positions by ability → meritocracy, unequal outcomes accepted if fair → limit: assumes level field where none exists → **Roemer's** non-discrimination vs level-playing-field principle → non-competitive form linked with justice → **Rawls** (fair equality of opportunity + difference principle) → **Sen** (equal resources ≠ real access)

Counter-view

competitive meritocracy treats fair competition as enough vs justice-based view that unequal starting conditions must be corrected first

Conclusion routes

R1 real equality of opportunity must remove social, economic and cultural barriers

R2 move from equal rules to fair conditions; opportunity completed only when access is substantive

Equality of opportunity means that persons should have fair chances to develop their abilities and compete for social positions, free from discrimination based on a pre-existing social hierarchy. It is a liberal conception concerned with initial conditions rather than outcomes, captured in the image of a level playing field.

In its competitive form, all persons receive equal opportunity and positions are distributed by ability. This produces a meritocratic society in which unequal outcomes are accepted, provided the competition was fair.

But formal non-discrimination assumes a level playing field where none exists. John Roemer separates the non-discrimination principle from a level playing field principle that asks society to reduce unequal formative conditions.

The deeper, non-competitive form links opportunity with justice. John Rawls adds fair equality of opportunity and the difference principle.

Amartya Sen's capability approach shows that equal resources do not guarantee real access. Genuine equality of opportunity must therefore correct the social, economic and cultural barriers that block fair competition.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2021 · 10 marks

Comment on affirmative action.

FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1 most contested instrument of substantive equality → deliberate support for historically disadvantaged groups

R2 India = reservation in education / employment / legislatures → Articles 15 & 16

Body flow

equal rules → fair conditions → past injustice + structural exclusion → **Rawls** (difference principle, least advantaged) → **Ambedkar** (political democracy needs social democracy) → **Sowell** (reverse discrimination, merit, division) → creamy layer + self-perpetuation → counter: merit socially produced + right, not charity

Counter-view

reverse discrimination, merit erosion, social division, creamy layer ↔ rights / socially-produced merit / inclusion

Conclusion routes

R1 necessary for distributive justice → must stay calibrated (evolving criteria, creamy-layer exclusion, review)

R2 Ram Singh, 2015 → continuous review so deserving benefit

Affirmative action is the most contested instrument of substantive equality. It refers to deliberate policies that support historically disadvantaged groups; in India its main form is reservation in education, employment & legislatures, resting on Article 15 and 16.

It seeks to move from equal rules to fair conditions, redressing past injustice and continuing structural exclusion. John Rawls difference principle justifies priority to the least advantaged.

B.R. Ambedkar argued that political democracy needs social democracy to remove inequalities of status and opportunity.

Critics such as Thomas Sowell see it as reverse discrimination that weakens merit and deepens social division. Problems of creamy layer and self-perpetuation are real. Yet merit itself is socially produced and inclusion is a right not charity.

Affirmative action thus remains necessary for distributive justice. It must stay calibrated – using evolving criteria, creamy layer exclusion and periodic review as the Ram Singh case, 2015 affirmed.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2021 · 10 marks

Comment on the Equality of outcome as political idea in around 150 words.

FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1 fairness judged by results, not chances → equal distribution of income / wealth → most radical egalitarianism

R2 focus shifts from starting point to end result → distributive equality → fairness measured at the finish

Body flow

concept (results over chances) → socialist / substantive defence → Marxist abolition of classes → **Rousseau** (inequality enslaves poor, corrupts rich) → libertarian critique → **Hayek** (rule of law vs material equality) → **Nozick** (just steps) → **Sen** (capabilities redirect)

Counter-view

coercion + conflict with equality before law + self-ownership vs dignity and substantive equality

Conclusion routes

R1 targets real deprivation, but best realised as substantive freedom, not enforced sameness

R2 **Sen's** capability shift reframes outcome equality as real freedom rather than identical results

Equality of outcome judges fairness by final results rather than starting chances, demanding an equal distribution of income, wealth and living conditions. This makes it the most radical and contested form of egalitarianism.

Socialists defend it as substantive equality, since human dignity cannot be secured through formal opportunity alone, and Marxist-Leninist thought links equality with the abolition of classes. Jean-Jacques Rousseau feared that material inequality would enslave the poor and corrupt the rich.

Critics see coercion. Friedrich A. Hayek held that "equality before the law and material equality are in conflict", since equalising results means treating people differently. Robert Nozick added that "whatever arises from a just situation by just steps is itself just."

Amartya Sen shifts the focus from identical outcomes to capabilities - the freedom "to live a life we have reason to value", not resource wealth. It rightly targets deprivation, but works best as substantive freedom, not enforced sameness.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2022 · 15 marks

“Equality of estates caused equality of power, and equality of power is liberty.” Comment.

FLOW SNAPSHOT – how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1 locate line in **Harrington** → property–power–liberty chain → stake: necessary, not complete

R2 republican claim that economic structure underpins freedom → strong but partial

Body flow

estates = wide diffusion of property → blocks concentration of power → dispersed power = liberty survives → gross wealth → influence / patronage / domination → **Harrington** verbatim → modern form: civic independence + **Rawls** (fair value of political liberty) → land reform / progressive tax / anti-trust as checks

Counter-view

estates not sufficient (courts, free media, constitutional safeguards) → caste / gender / race hierarchies survive property reform → **Hayek**: forced material equality → totalitarian power

Conclusion routes

R1 important but not exclusive foundation of liberty

R2 economic equality one pillar; liberty rests on property and institutions together

The line belongs to James Harrington, who ties political liberty to the distribution of property. His claim is a sharp republican insight, but it states a necessary condition of freedom, not a complete one.

Harrington's reasoning moves in a chain. Equality of estates means a wide diffusion of property. This prevents property, and with it political power, from gathering in few hands. where power is dispersed, no single group can dominate and liberty survives.

Gross inequality of wealth, by contrast, turns money into influence, patronage and domination. As Harrington writes, "Where there is equality of estates, there must be equality of power and where there is equality of power, there can be no monarchy."

John Rawls holds that the fair value of political liberty needs a distribution that benefits the least advantaged. Land reform, progressive taxation and anti-trust law act as present day checks on concentrated power.

Yet equality of estates is not enough. Liberty also needs independent courts, a free media and constitutional safeguards; caste, gender and race hierarchies can survive property reform. Friedrich A. Hayek cautions that forced material equality may require a totalitarian state.

Harrington's chain is best read as an important, though not exclusive, foundation of liberty.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2023 · 15 marks

Affirmative Action Policies draw as much strong criticism as strong support. Analyze this statement in the context of equality.

FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1 AA contested because support and criticism rest on rival conceptions of equality

R2 the real divide is equal treatment (formal) vs fair treatment (substantive)

Body flow

support turns formal into substantive equality → **Rawls** (difference principle / fair opportunity) → **Dworkin** (brute luck, not choice) → **Sen** (capabilities / remove actual injustice) → **Indira Sawhney** (Art 16(4) as restatement of equality) → critics work from equal treatment → **Nozick** (rights) → **Sowell** (merit + division) → reverse discrimination cluster (creamy layer / stigma / self-perpetuation)

Counter-view

equal treatment + merit + rights vs fair treatment + historical disadvantage

Conclusion routes

R1 statement holds because both sides defend a genuine idea of equality

R2 calibrated AA (temporary, targeted, reviewed) delivers substantive equality without sacrificing fairness

Affirmative action divides opinion because supporters and critics begin from different ideas of equality. The dispute is really between equal treatment, which adjusts for circumstance and historical disadvantage. Behind it lies the gap between formal and substantive equality.

Supporters defend affirmative action as the means of turning formal equality into substantive equality. John Rawls's difference principle and fair equality of opportunity justify favouring the least advantaged. Ronald Dworkin adds that people deserve correction for brute luck, such as birth into a deprived group, not for the choices they make.

Amartya Sen shifts the test to capabilities, arguing that justice should remove actual injustice rather than only define a perfect order. In India Sawhney, the Supreme Court treated reservation under Article 16(4) not as exception to equality but as its restatement.

Critics work from equal treatment. Robert Nozick sees redistribution as a violation of rights, while Thomas Sowell argues that group preference weakens merit & deepens social division.

The statement holds because each side defends a real conception of equality. The defensible position is calibrated affirmative action — temporary, targeted and reviewed — that realises substantive equality without abandoning fairness.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2024 · 15 marks

The nature of relationship between equality of democratic citizenship and liberty of citizens is influenced by economic equality. Comment.

FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1 equal citizenship + equal liberty look paired on paper → real value depends on the spread of economic resources

R2 democratic citizenship gives equal status → economic inequality decides who is actually heard → relationship is conditional, not fixed

Body flow

formal equality insufficient when wealth controls participation → patronage / policy capture / poor hold unusable rights → **Laski** (basic needs, no exploitation) → **Rawls** (difference principle → fair value of political liberty) → **Sen** (capability → substantive freedom) → economic equality makes the two complementary

Counter-view

Tocqueville: extreme inequality → new aristocracy within democracy ↔ **Hayek**: state-forced material equality → threat to liberty

Conclusion routes

R1 economic equality is the deciding variable → security makes citizenship + liberty mutually supporting

R2 neither fixed conflict nor automatic harmony → balance of basic economic security with protection of freedom

Democratic citizenship promises every person an equal vote and equal standing before the state; liberty promises the freedom to think, act and share in public life. On paper the two move together, but whether they actually reinforce each other turns on how economic resources are spread.

Harold Laski argued that liberty means nothing until basic needs are met and exploitation removed. John Rawls sharpened this – political liberties stay hollow unless inequalities benefit the least advantaged, which alone gives citizenship its fair value.

For Amartya Sen, economic disadvantage shrinks capabilities that participation and personal liberty rest on; formal equality must become substantive. Economic equality turns equal citizenship and liberty from paper into reality.

The opposite danger is real too. Alexis de Tocqueville saw that extreme economic inequality breeds a new aristocracy within democracy, while Friedrich Hayek held that forcing material equality through the state would itself threaten liberty.

The relationship, then, is set by economic equality. A measure of economic security lets equal citizenship & liberty support each other, its absence - or its coercive over-pursuit - turns them into rivals.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2025 · 10 marks

Write a note on the relation between equality and liberty from the multi-cultural perspective in about 150 words.

FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1 liberal baseline = universal individual rights → multiculturalism adds group identity

R2 migration / decolonisation / indigenous claims → diversity links equality and liberty through recognition

Body flow

universal-rights baseline → equality reframed: neutrality hides majority → special rights → recognition + inclusion → liberty reframed: free to choose / express / revise → autonomy needs cultural context → **Kymlicka**: liberalism + multiculturalism coexist, minority rights protect autonomy → synthesis: recognition gives the ground for real choice

Counter-view

group recognition may itself suppress individual liberty → the balancing problem

Conclusion routes

R1 equality and liberty complementary, not opposed → recognition makes freedom real

R2 standing challenge: protect group recognition without suppressing individual liberty

Liberal democracies begin with universal individual rights, treating equality & liberty as belonging to the individual alone. Multiculturalism examines both ideas through cultural diversity, which grew with migration, decolonisation and the recognition of indigenous peoples. It adds recognition of group-based identities and treats equality & liberty as linked through that recognition.

This reshapes equality. State neutrality often hides the majority culture, so minority cultures may need special rights; recognition addresses historical injustice. Equality here becomes recognition plus inclusion.

It also reshapes liberty. Individuals must be free to choose, express and revise their cultural identity and such autonomy requires a cultural context. Will Kymlicka argues that liberalism and multiculturalism can coexist, since minority rights may protect autonomy rather than destroy it.

Equality and Liberty thus support each other : recognition gives the secure cultural ground on which real choices rests. The lasting challenge is protecting group recognition without suppressing individual liberty.

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