

— PSIR OPTIONAL · UPSC CSE —

EDITION 2026

PYQ Vault

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questions

50
days

10
yrs
of PYQs

DAY 7

Power, Authority & Legitimacy · 9 questions

Every question carries a **Flow Snapshot** — and a handwritten model answer on the channel.
No PYQ will be unfamiliar.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2018 · 15 marks

Explain the relationship between power, authority and legitimacy.

FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1 Three not separate but one continuum → Authority = Power + Legitimacy

R2 Power = the fact of acting → authority = that fact accepted → legitimacy = the reason for acceptance

Body flow

Power is broadest (**MacIver**: command of compliance / **Weber**: will despite resistance) → may rest on force, coercion, reward, manipulation → force alone produces fear, not authority → legitimacy = rightfulness, belief of the governed → converts naked power into rightful authority (**Rousseau**: strength into right, obedience into duty) → authority = power + willing obedience from duty → **Weber**'s three types (traditional / charismatic / legal-rational) ground rightful rule → analytically distinct but practically intertwined → legitimacy lowers the cost of rule

Counter-view

Habermas: the process of legitimation matters → consent can be manufactured in capitalist democracies through party systems and welfare reforms

Conclusion routes

R1 All three indispensable → where legitimacy fails, authority decays back into naked force

R2 Power becomes stable authority only when clothed in legitimacy → a continuum, not separate compartments

Power, authority and legitimacy are the three most basic terms of political organisation and they are best understood not as separate things but as one continuum. The structuralist formula captures it simply: $\text{Authority} = \text{Power} + \text{Legitimacy}$. Power is the fact of getting others to act, authority is that fact accepted and legitimacy is the reason for the acceptance.

Power is the broadest of the three. According to Robert M. MacIver, power is the capacity in any relationship to command the service or compliance of others. Max Weber similarly sees it as the probability of realising one's will despite resistance. But power based only on force produces fear, and fear alone is neither authority nor a stable basis for rule.

Legitimacy is what transforms this raw power. It means rightfulness — the belief among the governed that a rule is just & beneficial. As Rousseau put it, "The strongest is never strong enough to be always the master unless he transforms strength into right and obedience into duty."

Authority is the result of this transformation : power that secures willing obedience out of duty rather than fear. Weber's traditional, charismatic and legal-rational types shows that different grounds on which such rightful rule rests.

Habermas, however, cautions that the process of legitimation itself matters, since consent in capitalist democracies can be manufactured through party systems and welfare reforms. Where legitimacy fails, authority decays back into naked force.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2020 · 15 marks

Examine the nature and meaning of power.

FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1 Power = central concept of politics ("money of economics") → meaning settled, nature contested
R2 Lasswell: shaping & sharing of power → politics = acquisition / exercise / resistance → meaning vs nature

Body flow

Meaning = capacity to produce intended effects → **Dahl + Weber** ("power over") → two presumptions: individual + domination → nature challenges both → **Coser's** two traditions (**Weber** domination / **Parsons** facility) → **Arendt**: acting in concert, enabling → structural loci: **Marx** (class) / feminists (patriarchy) / **Foucault** (discourse) → **Lukes'** three dimensions: decision-making → agenda-setting → thought-control (**Gramsci** hegemony) → least observable

Counter-view

Against the **Dahl-Weber** individual-and-domination reading: power as collective and enabling (**Arendt**), as structural (**Marx**, feminist, **Foucault**), and as hidden/ideological (**Lukes**, **Gramsci**)

Conclusion routes

R1 Power is many-sided: "over" and "to", visible and hidden — more than command
R2 Meaning stable (capacity for effects); nature plural and contested across agent, locus and visibility

Power is the central concept of political science - said to hold the place in politics that money holds in economics. Harold Lasswell treated the discipline as the study of the shaping & sharing of power and politics turns on its acquisition, exercise and resistance.

Robert Dahl put it sharply: "A has power over B to the extent that A can get B to do something which B would not otherwise do." Max Weber likewise saw it as the ability to carry out one's will despite resistance. Both rest on two presumptions - that power belongs to individuals and that it means domination.

The nature of power lies in challenging both. Lewis Coser named two traditions - Weber's power as domination (power over) & Talcott Parsons' power as a collective facility (power to). Hannah Arendt carries the second further, treating power as acting in concert. Others place it in structures - Karl Marx in class, feminists in patriarchy, Michel Foucault in dispersed practices & discourse.

Its nature shifts again with visibility. Steven Lukes' 3D view runs from open decision-making, to agenda setting that keeps issues off the table, to thought control that shapes what people prefer — as in Gramsci's hegemony. As Luke notes, "power is at its most effective when it is least observable."

Power, then, is many-sided. It spans coercion and consent, domination and enablement, the visible and the hidden, far more than simple command over others.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2021 · 10 marks

Comment on the Tools of legitimation of the State.

FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1 Legitimacy transforms naked power into rightful authority → obedience from duty, not fear

R2 Rousseau: turn strength into right, obedience into duty → state needs definite tools

Body flow

Legitimation = securing popular allegiance → internal tools: law & order + peace → rights + free press → participation + inclusive state-building → services + welfare → constitutionalism + public accountability as checks → external tool: mutual recognition → distinct political entity → indicators: taxes, national symbols, voting, acceptance → **Lipset** (Political Man): a condition for stable democracy

Counter-view

Tools not foolproof → **Habermas:** crisis tendencies when capitalist economy & democratic demands pull apart

Conclusion routes

R1 Tools = bridge converting power into willing obedience

R2 Legitimacy must be earned and renewed, not assumed

Legitimacy is what transforms naked power into rightful authority. Legitimation is the process through which the state secures popular allegiance, so that citizens obey out of duty rather than fear.

According to Rousseau, the strongest is never strong enough to rule unless he turns strength into right & obedience into duty. The state therefore depends on a definite set of tools to win and renew this allegiance.

The most basic is the maintenance of law & order and peace within society. To this the state adds the protection of rights & freedom of the press, public participation & state-building.

Delivery of services & welfare measures secure allegiance by meeting real needs. Constitutionalism & public accountability then place checks on power, reassuring citizens the authority will not be abused. Together these form internal legitimation.

Legitimacy is also sought beyond borders. Through external legitimation, states recognise one another, which allows each to stand as a distinct political entity.

That these tools are working shows in everyday conduct: citizens pay taxes, respect national symbols, vote and accept state authority. Seymour Lipset, in *Political Man*, treats such legitimacy as a condition for a stable democratic regime.

However, the tools are not foolproof. Habermas argues that welfare democracies face crisis tendencies when the demands of the capitalist economy and democratic politics pull apart. The tools of legitimation, then, convert power into willing obedience - and must be earned and renewed, not assumed.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2022 · 10 marks

Comment on the Bases of Power.

FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1 Bases = what power-holders control to shape behaviour → power is more than force
R2 Bases run visible → near-invisible → power rests on a widening set of supports

Body flow

Three basic bases: force / influence / authority → forms: coercive, reward, legitimate, expert, referent → individual base: **Dahl** ("A over B") + **Weber** (will despite resistance) = power over → structural bases: **Marx** (economic class controls state) → feminist (patriarchy, exclusion of women) → **Foucault** (institutions, knowledge, surveillance, normalisation → ideology/discourse = least visible base)

Counter-view

Arendt: "acting in concert" → collective, enabling base from civic participation, against power-as-domination

Conclusion routes

R1 Power rests on structure, knowledge and consent, not force alone
R2 Bases widen from coercion (visible) to ideology (invisible) → power is far broader than force

The bases of power are the resources a power holder controls in order to influence or manipulate the behaviour of others. They show that power rests on far more than force alone, drawing on a widening set of supports that run from the visible to the almost invisible.

At the simplest level, three basic bases operate: force, influence & authority. These take shape as coercive, reward, legitimate, expert and referent power. Force commands through threat, reward & legitimacy secure willing compliance & expertise and personal standing work through persuasion.

Robert Dahl held that "A has power over B to the extent that A can get B to do something which B would not otherwise do," while Max Weber saw power as the ability to realise one's will despite resistance. Both treat power as the domination of one person over another.

Later theorists located the deeper bases in structures. Karl Marx traced power to economic class, where the dominant class controls the state. Michel Foucault dispensed it across institutions, knowledge, surveillance & normalisation, where control over ideology & discourse becomes its least visible base.

Against this, Hannah Arendt treated power as "acting in concert" a collective and enabling base that arises from civic participation. Power, then, rests not on force alone but on structure, knowledge and consent.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2023 · 10 marks

Comment on Foucault's concept of power.

FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1 Dominant view = sovereign, top-down, repressive → **Foucault** overturns it

R2 **Foucault**'s core claim = power dispersed, productive, capillary → "comes from everywhere"

Body flow

Break from sovereign/juridico-legal power → not from one centre → capillary / micro-physics → productive, not repressive → produces subjects, identity, norms, knowledge → power/knowledge → truth shaped by power → regimes of truth → works via discourse, discipline, surveillance → *Discipline and Punish*: torture → disciplinary power (schools, prisons, hospitals) → Panopticon → self-surveillance → normalisation replaces force → power presupposes freedom → resistance internal to power

Counter-view

Habermas: no normative ground to judge injustice → **Lukes**: neglects class and economic structures

Conclusion routes

R1 Power moves from a thing possessed to a relation that produces us

R2 Despite the critiques, **Foucault** reset how power is studied — knowledge, surveillance, identity

Michel Foucault offers one of the most influential rethinkings of power in modern political theory. He rejects the sovereign, juridico-legal view, in which power belongs to the state, flows top-down and works mainly by repression and command. For Foucault, power does not emanate from one centre. He describes power flowing like blood through capillaries - its micro physics and holds that it is everywhere "because it comes from everywhere."

This power is also productive, not merely repressive. It produces subjects, identities, norms and above all knowledge. Through power knowledge, Foucault shows that knowledge is never neutral: what counts as truth is shaped by power and such regimes of truth organise society.

Power thus works less through open coercion than through discourse, discipline & surveillance. In *Discipline and Punish*, he traces the shift from public torture to disciplinary power exercised through schools, prisons and hospitals.

Foucault insists that power presupposes freedom; hence "where there is power, there is resistance." Habermas finds in him no normative ground for judging injustice, while Steven Lukes argues that he neglects class and economic structures. Even so, Foucault decisively moved power from a thing possessed to a relation that produces us.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2024 · 10 marks

Write on the Linkage between Power and Hegemony.

FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1 Power not only coercion → also works through consent → that consensual face is hegemony

R2 **Dahl's** overt "power over" → but the deepest power shapes consent → **Gramsci** names this hegemony

Body flow

Gramsci links power & hegemony → supremacy in two modes: domination + intellectual and moral leadership
→ political society = coercion / civil society = consent → ruling-class worldview becomes common sense →
unequal order seems just → power exercised with consent = hegemony → matches **Lukes'** third dimension
(shapes beliefs, not just actions) → most durable, explains why unequal order survives

Counter-view

Hegemony never complete → must be constantly renewed → contestable through a slow war of position

Conclusion routes

R1 Hegemony is power's deepest, most durable face → rule rests on belief, not force

R2 Power as hegemony = domination so secure it no longer needs coercion

Power is the capacity to control behaviour. Robert Dahl captured its overt form : A has power over B when A can get B to do what B would otherwise not do. Yet power is not only command backed by force. It also works through consent and here lies its linkage with hegemony. Hegemony is dominance maintained not merely through coercion but through consent.

Antonio Gramsci built this connection. For Gramsci, the supremacy of a social group shows itself in two ways – as domination and as intellectual and moral leadership. Domination rests on coercion of political society : government, law, police and army.

Hegemony rests on the consent secured by civil society – family, school, church, media and culture. Through these, the ruling class makes its own worldview appear natural, moral and common sense, so that even an unequal order seems just. When power is apparently exercised with the consent of its subjects, it becomes hegemony.

This shows hegemony as the deepest form of power. It matches Steven Lukes' third dimension, where power shapes the very beliefs and preferences of the ruled rather than only overriding their actions. Such power is also the most durable. It explains why unequal societies continue without open revolt, for rule now rests on belief rather than force.

Hegemony, however, is never complete. It must be constantly renewed and can be contested through a slow war of position. Power as hegemony, then, is rule so secure that it no longer needs force.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2024 · 20 marks

Legitimacy adds positive value to political authority and obligation.
Discuss.

FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1 Legitimacy = rightfulness → transforms naked power into rightful authority → this transformation is the positive value (to authority + obligation)

R2 Power merely obeyed vs power accepted as right → legitimacy turns the first into the second → strengthens both ruler's authority and citizens' obligation

Body flow

Value to authority: fear-based power ≠ authority → Authority = Power + Legitimacy → **Weber's** three types (rule becomes accepted) → state's monopoly stable only if treated as rightful → **Arendt** (no legitimacy → coercion → cannot last) → legitimacy lowers cost of rule → value to obligation: duty to obey → ground shifts from fear/punishment to "just & fair" → **Rousseau** (strength → right, obedience → duty) → **Locke** (consent + life/liberty/property; failure dissolves obligation) → **Hobbes** (obey to escape insecurity; disorder weakens both) → condition: **Beetham** (rules + shared beliefs + consent)

Counter-view

Radical tradition: is the value truly positive? → **Gramsci** (will for state manufactured via hegemony, not spontaneous) → **Habermas** (process of legitimation matters; consent manufactured via party systems, welfare) → legitimacy may stabilise without justifying

Conclusion routes

R1 Yes, positive value: power → durable authority, fear → duty, obedience voluntary

R2 Value genuine only with real consent → manufactured legitimacy secures rule without securing justice

legitimacy means rightfulness; it transforms naked power into rightful authority. The claim rests on this transformation: by turning power that is merely obeyed into power accepted as right, legitimacy strengthens both the authority of the ruler and the obligation of the ruled.

Power by itself secures compliance only through fear, & fear does not make a ruler an authority. Authority is power recognised as rightful and legitimacy supplies that recognition - the relation $\text{Authority} = \text{Power} + \text{Legitimacy}$ captures it.

Max Weber's 3 types of authority - traditional, charismatic and legal-rational, show how rule comes to be accepted; a state's monopoly of force is stable only when citizens treat it as rightful. Hannah Arendt adds: without legitimacy, authority falls back on coercion, and coercion alone cannot hold rule for long. Legitimacy lowers the cost of rule.

Rousseau states it plainly - "The strongest is never strong enough to be always the master unless he transforms strength into right and obedience into duty."

John Locke ties the same duty to consent and the protection of life, liberty and property; a state that fails here dissolves obligation. Hobbes adds that obedience is accepted to escape insecurity, so disorder weakens legitimacy & obligation together.

David Beetham, in the Legitimation of power, holds that power is legitimate only when exercised according to accepted rules, justified by shared beliefs and supported by demonstrable consent.

Gramsci argues that the will for the state is not spontaneous but manufactured through hegemony, while Habermas points out that the process of legitimation itself matters, since consent can be manufactured through party systems & welfare reforms.

Legitimacy does add positive value: it converts power into durable authority and fear into duty, making obedience voluntary. But that value is real only when consent is genuine; where it is manufactured, legitimacy secures rule without securing justice.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2025 · 10 marks

Explain Macpherson's view on power.

FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1 Power located in liberalism's own foundations, not command over others → possessive individualism as starting point

R2 Individual as self-owner → freedom tied to property → limited liberal freedom, sets up the argument

Body flow

Possessive individualism (self-ownership, freedom = property, state guards property/market) → extractive power (control of others' productive capacities; legitimised by possessive individualism; capitalist-market inequality; owners command non-owners) → developmental power (higher human capacities; ethical, not descriptive; needs welfare; opposes extractive) → real democracy must centre self-development + cut extractive power → but liberal capitalist democracies let the powerful convert extractive into their own developmental power

Counter-view

Nancy Fraser → wealth inequality + social hierarchy + historical legacies shape power and development (checks **Macpherson's** optimism)

Conclusion routes

R1 Power redefined: from control over others → conditions for human self-development

R2 Genuine democracy = maximising developmental power, minimising extractive power

Macpherson approaches power not as simple command over others but through the foundations of liberal society itself. His starting point is possessive individualism, the idea that individuals are owners of themselves, their bodies and their capacities.

From this base he develops the idea of extractive power. It is the ability to control others' productive capacities for one's own purposes, by drawing part of that control to oneself. Possessive individualism legitimises such power. **Those who own property thereby command the labour & capacities of those who do not.**

Against this, Macpherson sets developmental power. It is the capacity to develop one's higher human powers - rational understanding, moral judgement, aesthetic creation and the bonds of friendship, love & religious experience. **Developmental power is an ethical idea, not merely a description; it requires welfare conditions and supports creative freedom, and it stands opposed to extractive power.**

For Macpherson, a genuine theory of democracy must place self-development at its centre and reduce extractive power. Yet in existing liberal capitalist democracies, those wielding extractive power convert it into enriched developmental power for themselves.

Nancy Fraser questions this, stressing how wealth inequality, social hierarchy and historical legacies shape both power and development. Macpherson thus shifts power from control over others to the conditions for human freedom.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2025 · 15 marks

Do you think that legitimacy acquired by consent or manufactured by indoctrination is an essential element in maintenance of political rule? Justify your answer with relevant examples.

FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1 Legitimacy = rightfulness → turns naked power into authority → force alone never lasts (**Rousseau**: obedience must rest on duty, not fear) → stake line: by consent or by manufacture, legitimacy is essential to rule
R2 Question pairs two routes — consent vs indoctrination → both aim at one thing, voluntary obedience → thesis: legitimacy, however secured, is the essential condition of stable rule

Body flow

Consent-based legitimacy: authority seen as beneficial, obedience voluntary, coercion backgrounded → constitutional democracy, elections, rights, welfare → but legitimacy is often manufactured → **Gramsci**'s hegemony: domination + intellectual & moral leadership → civil society (family, school, church, media) makes ruling worldview common sense → **Althusser**'s ISA mould obedient subjects → **Marcuse**'s consumer culture → false needs, false consciousness → divine right as older manufactured belief → both routes sustain rule → **Arendt**: without legitimacy authority falls back on coercion, which cannot last → absence → resistance, protest, governability crisis

Counter-view

Manufactured legitimacy is fragile → **Habermas**: capitalist economy vs democratic demands → legitimation crisis → engineered consent cannot mask contradictions for long → Soviet collapse = manufactured consent cracking

Conclusion routes

R1 Legitimacy essential to maintaining rule → but only genuine, openly reasoned consent makes it durable → indoctrination buys time, not permanence
R2 Legitimacy, by consent or by manufacture, is indispensable → naked force without it is short-lived → lasting rule rests on freely given consent, not engineered belief

Legitimacy means rightfulness, and it turns naked power into rightful authority. No regime survives on force alone. Rousseau argued that force by itself can never make a lasting master; obedience must rest on a sense of duty and right not on fear.

Rulers secure such obedience either by winning genuine consent or by manufacturing it from above, and by either route legitimacy is essential to the maintenance of political rule.

Consent based legitimacy rests on citizens treating authority as beneficial and obeying voluntarily, so coercion stays in the background.

But legitimacy is often manufactured. Gramsci showed that a ruling class holds power not only through domination but through intellectual and moral leadership: civil society, namely family, school, church and media, shapes consent until the ruling worldview becomes common sense and injustice appears as justice.

Althusser added that ideological state apparatuses mould obedient subjects, while Herbert Marcuse showed how consumer culture creates false needs and false consciousness.

Whether freely given or engineered, legitimacy is what sustains rule. Hannah Arendt held that without it authority falls back on coercion, which cannot last; its absence invites resistance, protest and a crisis of governability.

Habermas argued that when a capitalist economy clashes with democratic demands, a legitimisation crisis follows; engineered consent cannot indefinitely hide such contradictions, and rule holds only when the process of legitimisation stays open and rational.

The Soviet collapse showed manufactured consent finally cracking. Legitimacy is therefore essential to maintaining rule, but only genuine, openly reasoned consent makes it durable; indoctrination buys time, not permanence.

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