

PYQ Vault

560

questions

50

days

10

years of PYQs

DAY 12

Western Political Thought · 8 questions

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

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2017 · 15 marks

Everywhere, inequality is a cause of revolution – Aristotle.
Comment.

● FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1 quote = heart of Aristotle's revolution theory → revolution = any change in constitution/rulers, big or small → root cause = injustice bred by inequality

R2 revolution defined broadly → among many causes, inequality the deepest → because it breeds a sense of injustice

Body flow

proportionate justice → injustice = equals treated unequally / unequals treated equally → felt mis-distribution of honour, office, wealth → discontent → rebellion → inequality real or imagined → relative deprivation → perceived injustice = most combustible material → Canevaro & Mantzouranis: clashing proportional-equality conceptions → roots of stasis / metabole → remedy: strong middle class + mixed polity → narrows gap, softens resentment

Counter-view

Aristotle narrow + status-quoist (revolution only political, seeks prevention) vs Marx → revolution as structural transformation, driving force of history

Conclusion routes

R1 claim powerful but limited → link between inequality and instability stays sharp

R2 perceived injustice, not poverty alone, is the real trigger → insight holds across regimes

"Everywhere, inequality is a cause of revolution." For Aristotle, this sits at the centre of his theory of revolution, where revolution means any change in the constitution or in the rulers, big or small. He traces such change to one deep root – the sense of injustice that inequality breeds.

The mechanism runs through his idea of proportionate justice. Injustice arises when equals are treated unequally, or unequals are treated equally. When citizens feel that honour, office or wealth is wrongly shared, discontent hardens into rebellion. This inequality may be real or imagined; relative deprivation matters as much as actual want. Perceived injustice, not poverty alone, becomes the most combustible material in politics. Mirko Canevaro and Kleanthis Mantzoumanis read clashing conceptions of proportional equality as the fundamental causes of stasis and metabole.

The remedy follows directly – a strong middle class & a mixed polity that narrow the gap & soften resentment.

The claim is powerful, yet limited. Aristotle sees revolution only as political change & seeks to prevent it. Karl Marx, by contrast treats it as structural transformation and the driving force of history. Even so, the link he draws between inequality & instability remains sharp.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2018 · 15 marks

Critically examine Machiavelli's views on religion and politics.

● **FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves**

Intro routes

R1 religious ordinances ruled state policy → Machiavelli reverses it → religion serves the state, not rules it

R2 not anti-religion → utilitarian stance → religion as instrument of statecraft

Body flow

admits utility (ordinances → greatness of commonwealths; neglect → devastation) → disciplinary force → order & stability → but refuses religion as foundation of politics → religion not above the state → opposes Church's command → separates religious authority from political power → Dunning → frees politics from vassalage of religion → modern age

Counter-view

Sabine → almost blind to religion's political role over the next two centuries → purely instrumental view underrates religion's force

Conclusion routes

R1 worth: founds secular, autonomous politics freed from Church control

R2 limit: reduces religion to a mere tool of the state, missing its deeper political power

Machiavelli wrote at a time when state policy was often decided by religious ordinances. His contribution was to reverse this relationship, making religion serve the state rather than rule over it. He was not against religion itself; he adopted a utilitarian approach, treating it as an instrument of statecraft.

Machiavelli admitted religion's value. The observance of religious ordinances, he held, contributed to the greatness of commonwealths, while their neglect led to devastation. Religion carried a disciplinary force that could maintain order and stability within the state.

Yet he refused to let religion become the foundation of political conduct. He opposed the Church's command over state affairs and sought to separate religious authority from political power. According to Dunning, Machiavelli ushered in the modern chase by separating politics from the vassalage of religion.

This instrumental view drew criticism. George H. Sabine argued that Machiavelli was almost blind to the role religion would play in politics over the next two centuries.

His real worth lies in founding a secular, autonomous politics freed from church control; his limits is in reducing religion to a mere tool of the state.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2019 · 20 marks

Explain Aristotle's critique of Plato's Idealism.

● **FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves**

Intro routes

R1 Coleridge's split: born either Platonist-idealist or Aristotelian-realist → critique grows from a single root

R2 Aristotle refuses ideas placed above matter → ideas inherent in matter → respects Plato, but truth dearer

Body flow

one metaphysical root (ideas in matter, not above it) → drives method: Plato deductive, general → particular, begins from conclusions vs Aristotle inductive, particular → general, reaches through analysis → drives politics: ideal state vs best possible state (secure, self-sufficient, not utopian) → Plato's complete unity vs Aristotle's unity in diversity (excess oneness destroys the state) → communism of wives/property rejected (what belongs to many gets least care → defends family + private property → producers keep fruits of labour) → philosopher king vs rule of law (collective wisdom of ages over the wisest single ruler)

Counter-view

critique corrects, does not discard → beneath it Aristotle stays Platonic: virtue realised through the state, ethics and politics one science → Foster: greatest of all Platonists

Conclusion routes

R1 realism completes idealism, not rejects it → Aristotle remains the greatest Platonist

R2 every political break traces to one metaphysical root — ideas in matter — so the quarrel is over ground and method, not moral purpose

The split between the two thinkers runs to the root of philosophy. Samuel Taylor Coleridge treats every mind as born either Platonic and idealist or Aristotelian and realist. Aristotle's whole critique grows from one source - he refuses Plato's elevation of ideas above matter & insists that ideas are inherent in matter itself. He deeply respects his teacher, but holds truth dearer.

This metaphysical break decides his method. Plato moves deductively, from the general to the particular, beginning already from his conclusions. Aristotle works inductively, from the particular to the general, reaching conclusions through observation and analysis. The political result is direct: Plato constructs the ideal state, while Aristotle searches for the best possible state, secure and self-sufficient rather than utopian.

The political quarrel follows the same line. Aristotle rejects Plato's communism of wives and property, since what belongs to many receives the least care and defends the family & private property so producers are not cut off from the fruits of their labour. Against the philosopher King he sets the rule of law: the collected wisdom of ages outweighs the judgement of even the wisest single ruler.

Yet the critique corrects rather than discards. Beneath it Aristotle remains Platonic. The life worthy of man is virtue realised through the state and ethics & politics stay one science. Michael B. Foster therefore calls him the greatest of all Platonists.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2020 · 10 marks

Comment on the Machiavelli's secularism in 150 words.

• **FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves**

Intro routes

R1 revolutionary break from medieval tradition → religion no longer the basis of the state → repudiates Aquinas's divine law

R2 secularism = the debate Machiavelli opened in Europe → state freed from religious determination → break from the medieval order

Body flow

emancipation of state from religion → state as autonomous institution → highest human association → supreme in worldly matters → driven by the aim of a strong state / national interest → complete secularisation of politics

Counter-view

secularism not a rejection of religion → religion as a social force/bond → harnessed for political obligation & unity → religion becomes an organ of state policy, not its guiding source

Conclusion routes

R1 separation of politics from religion's vassalage (Dunning) → entry into the modern age

R2 religion retained as the state's instrument, not its master → foundation of European secularism

Machiavelli's secularism was a revolutionary break from medieval tradition, and it began the debate on the subject in Europe. Unlike his predecessors, he did not accept religion as the basis of the state. He repudiated Thomas Aquinas, who held that man needs the guidance of divine law.

Machiavelli emancipated the state from the clutches of religion and made it an autonomous institution. As the state is the highest form of human association, he argued, it must be supreme in worldly matters. His aim was practical: to build a strong state that worked only in the national interest, which required the complete secularisation of politics.

Yet his secularism was not a rejection of religion. Aware of religion's force as a social bond, he used it to strengthen political obligation and unity. Religion thus became an organ of state policy rather than its guiding source. By separating politics from what Dunning called the vassalage of religion, Machiavelli ushered in the modern age and laid the foundations of European secularism.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2020 · 20 marks

Trace the evolution of western political thought from ancient to contemporary period.

● FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1 tradition = one shifting question → what is politics for + where does authority rest → each age reworks the last

R2 read as a swing between ideal and power → Plato's moral ideal → contemporary critique → continuity-in-change

Body flow

Plato (ideal moral order, justice as harmony, rule of knowledge → philosopher king) → Aristotle (empirical turn, political animal, state natural & prior, rule of law → polity as best practicable) → Machiavelli (autonomy of politics, ethics/religion split, Dunning: medieval-modern borderline, power over good life) → Hobbes (first modern, authority from fearful self-preserving individuals → social contract → absolute sovereign) → Mill (order → its limits: liberty, individuality, self-development → women's equality) → Gramsci (power beyond coercion → cultural hegemony → consent in civil society) → Arendt (against totalitarianism → politics as action → power as citizens acting together)

Counter-view

line not smooth → swings between ideal & real, authority & liberty → modern break (Machiavelli/Hobbes) disrupts the moral continuity Plato began

Conclusion routes

R1 one thread holds → from rule of knowledge → power as shared civic action → each age answers anew what politics is for

R2 evolution as continuity, not straight-line progress → same question (ends of politics, basis of authority) recast each age

Western political thought is one shifting answer to a single question : what is politics for and what does authority rest? Each age reworks the reply left by the last.

It begins with Plato, for whom politics pursues an ideal moral order. Justice is harmony, and rule belongs to Knowledge – the philosopher King, for whom no law is mightier than Knowledge. Aristotle keeps this moral purpose but turns empirical : man is by nature a political animal and the state is natural and prior to the individual, yet rule should rest on law and the polity, the best practicable state, not on philosopher Kings.

The modern break comes with Niccolo Machiavelli, who separates politics from ethics & religion. Standing, as Dunning notes, on the borderline between the medieval and modern ages, he makes power, not the good life, the question.

Thomas Hobbes, the first modern thinker, grounds authority not in a moral ideal but in fearful, self-preserving individuals who consent, through the social contract, to an absolute sovereign. With John Stuart Mill the concern shifts from order to its limits: liberty, individuality and self-development become the end of politics, extended to women's equality.

The contemporary age turns critical. Antonio Gramsci shows that power works not by coercion alone but through cultural hegemony - rule by consent within civil society. Hannah Arendt against totalitarianism, recovers politics as action: power as citizens acting together.

The line is not smooth; it swings between the ideal and the real, authority and liberty. Yet one thread holds - from the rule of knowledge to power as shared civic action, each age answers a new what politics is for.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2021 · 20 marks

Explain the Aristotelian view of politics. To what extent do you think it has contributed to the development of modern-day constitutional democracies?

● FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1 politics as master science → state for the good life → ethical foundation of constitutional govt, reach partial

R2 man a political animal (reason/speech) → ethics + justice inseparable from politics → foundation laid, but incomplete

Body flow

political animal via logos → politics inseparable from ethics, justice at core (Ebenstein: moral over legal sovereignty) → rule of law over personal will (law = reason without passion) → regimes judged by common good vs self-interest → polity / mixed constitution / middle class → contribution: rule of law → constitutionalism, mixed govt → checks & balances, middle class → stability, citizenship (rule & be ruled) → civic republicanism, common good → test of legitimacy → absorbed via Montesquieu / American balance of few & many

Counter-view

contribution foundational, not direct → slavery, exclusion of women & workers, small homogeneous polis → far from inclusive mass democracy

Conclusion routes

R1 Aristotle gives the grammar of constitutional govt (law, balance, civic virtue, common good), not its democratic substance

R2 influence deep in foundations, limited in extent

For Aristotle, politics is the master science, since it concerns the ends of human life. The state is a natural community, the highest association, which comes into being for life but continues for the good life. This ethical view of politics is one foundation of constitutional government, though its reach into modern democracy remains partial.

Man, for Aristotle, is by nature a political animal, set apart by reason & speech, through which he tells just from unjust and shares a common life. Politics is thus inseparable from ethics and justice is its core. According to William Ebenstein, Aristotle's state rests on moral rather than legal sovereignty.

The view turns constitutional in his theory of government. Aristotle judges regimes by whether rules serve the common good or private interest and prefers law to personal will, since law is reason without passion. His best practicable state is polity - a mixed constitution resting on the middle class.

Much of this passed into modern constitutional democracy. Rule of law shaped constitutionalism; mixed government anticipated checks & balances; the middle class explained stability; and citizenship as ruling and being ruled fed civic republican traditions. Common good became the test of legitimate rule. Later thinkers like Montesquieu and the American balance of few and many, absorbed it indirectly.

The contribution, however, is foundational, not direct. His polis defends slavery, bars women and workers from citizenship & assumes a small homogeneous community far from today's inclusive mass democracy. Aristotle supplies the grammar of constitutional government - law, balance, civic virtue and the common good - but not its democratic substance. His influence runs deep in foundations, limited in extent.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2024 · 15 marks

Critically examine Plato's theory of Forms.

● **FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves**

Intro routes

R1 theory of Forms at centre of Plato's philosophy → two worlds: material copies vs eternal archetypes (justice, beauty, goodness, ideal state)

R2 both strength and weakness flow from one move → the split between changing matter and unchanging Forms

Body flow

separation drives knowledge: senses = opinion, reason = knowledge of Forms → Cave + divided line = ascent from shadows to sunlight → Idea of Good at the top → metaphysics turns political → only philosopher who knows the Good rules → philosopher-king → Plato both idealist and realist

Counter-view

same separation attacked → Aristotle: form within the object / hylomorphism, can't explain change, physical world not illusion → Russell & Ayer: metaphysical Forms lack empirical proof

Conclusion routes

R1 theory survives the attacks → raises the lasting question: do justice, truth, goodness need stable standards beyond appearances?

R2 the separation is its fault line, but also its lasting strength → the demand for fixed standards beyond shifting appearances keeps it the live question

Plato's theory of Forms sits at the centre of his philosophy, and both its strength and its weakness follow from a single move: the split between a changing material world and an eternal world of Forms. The things we see are imperfect copies; the real lies in perfect, unchanging archetypes such as justice, beauty, goodness and the ideal state.

This separation drives his theory of knowledge. The senses give only opinion, while reason alone reaches knowledge of Forms. The allegory of the Cave and the divided line trace this ascent. At the top stands the idea of good, the source of all value. Here metaphysics turns political: only the philosopher who knows the good can rule justly, so Plato makes him King. The doctrine is both idealist and realist - the real is ideal, while Forms exist independently.

The same separation invites attack. Aristotle rejects a transcendent realm and argues that form lives within the object itself, throughhylomorphism; he asks how detached Forms explains change and denies the physical world is illusion. Bertrand Russell and A.J. Ayer later question such entities for lacking empirical proof.

Yet the theory survives, because it raises a lasting question—whether justice, truth and goodness need stable standards beyond appearances.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2025 · 15 marks

Karl Popper presents a defence of the open society against its enemies. Elaborate.

● FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1 open society defended in *The Open Society and Its Enemies* → opposite of closed / tribal / totalitarian order

R2 core principle first → no ruler / theory / ideology above questioning → freedom, criticism, tolerance, constitutionalism

Body flow

open society = freedom + criticism + tolerance + limited govt + civic equality + constitutionalism → free thought & expression → fallibilism (beliefs tentative, no final orthodoxy) → persuasion not coercion → respect for individuals as rational beings → conflict via discussion & institutions → transparency + error-correction → *piecemeal social engineering* vs total reconstruction

Counter-view

enemies = dogma + group-think + historicism (fixed laws of history) → Plato, Hegel, Marx privilege total schemes over open criticism → heaven-on-earth ends in hell

Conclusion routes

R1 open society never perfect → strength = self-correction + peaceful change

R2 not a final design → continuous improvement that closed orders deny

Karl Popper build his defence of the open society in *The Open Society and its Enemies*. For him the open society is the opposite of a closed, tribal and totalitarian order. It rests on freedom, criticism, tolerance, limited government, civic equality and constitutionalism. Its defence turns on one principle: no ruler, theory, religion or ideology should stand above questioning.

Popper holds that people must be free to think boldly and express every opinion. Beliefs and theories should remain tentative until tested and no orthodoxy can be treated as final.

Persuasion is legitimate, but coercion is not, because individuals deserve respect as free and rational beings. Conflict is managed through discussion and institutions, supported by transparency and a shared commitment to correcting error.

Reform should come through piecemeal social engineering - limited & revisable - rather than total reconstruction.

The enemies are dogma, group-think and the doctrine of historicism - the belief that history follows fixed laws toward a settled end. Plato, Hegel and Marx fall here, since each privileges a total scheme over open criticism. Popper opines that every attempt to build heaven on earth ends in producing hell.

The open society is never perfect. Its strength lies not in any final design but in self-correction, peaceful change and the steady improvement that closed orders deny their people.

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