

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.