

# Power

## Syllabus Scope

The concept of power in political science includes key ideas such as **hegemony**, **ideology**, and **legitimacy**. It forms the foundation for understanding how authority functions and is perceived.

## Meaning of Power

Let's talk about **power**—one of the most fascinating and essential concepts in political science. It's not just about force or authority; it's about **shaping lives, societies, and the very way we think**.

At its core, political science has been described as “**the study of shaping and sharing power**.” That means power isn't just about who rules—it's about **who influences, who decides, who gets heard—and who gets silenced**.

One of the most insightful frameworks was given by **Steven Lukes**, who introduced a **three-dimensional view of power**—each layer revealing how deep and subtle power can really be.

### 1. Power as Decision-Making

This is the most visible form.

It's about **getting your way**, even if others disagree. Think of it as **constitutional power**—the power given through institutions, laws, or elections.

This is closely linked to **liberal thought**, where **delegation** and **checks and balances** matter.

#### Example:

When Parliament passes a law even though the opposition resists, that's decision-making power.

### 2. Power as Agenda Setting

Now it gets deeper. This isn't about who wins the debate—but **who gets to choose what we even talk about**.

This idea has its roots in the **Marxist concept of base and superstructure**—where economic interests shape culture, media, education, and more.

#### Example:

When corporate media highlights celebrity news but ignores farmer suicides, they're **setting the agenda**—and that's power.

### 3. Power as Thought Control

This is the **most invisible** and **most dangerous** form.

It's not about stopping your voice—it's about shaping your thoughts **so you never even think of speaking up**.

Here, we enter the realm of **Gramsci** and **Foucault**:

- **Gramsci's hegemony:** Power is maintained not by coercion, but by shaping **common sense** through culture and ideology.
- **Foucault's discourse:** Power is everywhere—embedded in how we speak, think, and even define truth.

### Example:

If women are taught from childhood that leadership is "not for them," that's not a law—it's cultural conditioning.

That's power. Silent. Internalised. Yet deeply political.

## The Essence

Power isn't just what a Prime Minister does.

It's also what the **media tells you is important**, and even more dangerously, what **you've been conditioned not to question**.

That's why understanding **all three dimensions** is crucial—not just to resist domination, but to reclaim true **freedom and agency**.

## Forms of Power

Let's break down the **forms of power** in a way that makes each of them come alive in our everyday world!

### 1. Political Power

**Political power** is the **formal and informal** machinery that drives decisions and shapes society.

- **Formal organs** like the **legislature** (parliament) and **executive** (government) hold legal authority and have the official power to create and enforce laws.
- **Informal bodies** such as **political parties**, **pressure groups**, and **movements** also wield significant influence, pushing for change, advocating for rights, and mobilizing public opinion.

### Example:

- The **legislature** may pass a new law.
- But, **activists** pushing for climate action, **NGOs** fighting for refugees, or **political parties** shaping elections—they all use **informal political power** to sway public discourse and governmental action.

### Why It's Powerful:

Because political power is both **formal** (in the institutions) and **informal** (in the streets, boards, and digital platforms), it creates **dynamic interaction** between the established power structures and grassroots movements.

### 2. Economic Power

Now, let's talk about **economic power**. In modern society, **money** is the foundation of a lot of influence.

- **Economic power** is wielded through control of **mass media**, **financing elections**, and holding sway over **corporations**. It enables individuals or groups to shape public narratives, sway political campaigns, or even dictate policies through economic leverage.

#### Example:

- **Media corporations** that control the flow of information. They decide what you see and hear, thus shaping **public opinion**.
- The **financial backers** of a political campaign can control the narrative by funding the **advertisements** and **policies** that support their interests.

#### Why It's Powerful:

Economic power isn't just about **wealth**; it's about **manipulating the environment** in which decisions are made, whether it's through **advertising**, **lobbying**, or **media control**.

### 3. Ideological Power

**Ideological power** is the **subtle yet deeply ingrained** form of power that governs **belief systems**. It's the **idea** that people **believe in** and are **willing to fight for**—a system of beliefs that **legitimizes authority** and influences actions.

- This form of power often promotes **belief in certain governance systems**—whether it's capitalism, democracy, socialism, or authoritarianism.
- It creates **legitimacy** and **moral justification**, making people **willing to sacrifice** for a particular system or cause.

#### Example:

- Think of the **American Dream** in capitalist societies—it tells people that **hard work and perseverance** lead to success, justifying the system of **capitalism**.
- **Religious ideologies** can also play a powerful role—people's belief in the divine justification for authority can lead them to accept authoritarian regimes or social hierarchies.

#### Why It's Powerful:

Because **ideological power** doesn't just tell you what's right or wrong; it makes you **believe** it with such force that you're willing to **act on it**, even if it means sacrifice. It's a **mind-control** of sorts, where **people themselves** uphold the system.

#### The Essence

- **Political power**: The structures that decide, organize, and enforce through formal and informal systems.
- **Economic power**: The control of resources, media, and finance that shapes public discourse and policy.
- **Ideological power**: The unseen force of beliefs that shape what people accept, value, and fight for.

Power isn't just **one** thing—it's **multifaceted** and **interconnected**. Every form of power plays off the others, so understanding how they interact helps us navigate and challenge the systems we live in.

## Elite Theory

At its core, **Elite Theory** divides society into two broad groups: the **elite** (those with the power and competence to lead) and the **ordinary** (those who follow and are governed). This idea of a "ruling class" or elite comes from ancient thinkers like **Plato** and **Aristotle**, who believed that society needs a small group of competent individuals to guide it. The rest of society, they argued, should be led by these capable, exceptional individuals.

**But, is this really how societies operate today?**

Let's dive into the thinkers who explored this idea in more depth:

### Vilfredo Pareto: Circulation of Elites

Vilfredo **Pareto** (1848–1923), in his work *The Mind and the Society*, famously introduced the idea of the **circulation of elites**. He argued that **history is the graveyard of aristocracies**, meaning that no elite stays in power forever.

- **Old elites** fall, but **new elites** rise to take their place.
- Pareto explained these elites in terms of two types:
  - **Foxes**: The cunning, intellectuals and strategists who use manipulation to maintain control.
  - **Lions**: The bold and forceful leaders who use power and aggression to command.

Pareto's theory emphasized that **power always shifts**, but the structure of elite dominance remains.

### Real-life Example:

Look at political power structures today: **traditional aristocracies** have fallen, but we see **corporate elites**, **politicians**, and **media moguls** holding sway, constantly influencing and reshaping society.

### Robert Michels: Iron Law of Oligarchy

Robert **Michels** (1876–1936) wrote *Political Parties*, where he famously articulated the **Iron Law of Oligarchy**. He said that **all organizations**, whether liberal or socialist, inevitably end up being governed by a small **elite**.

- Even in democracies and movements that start with egalitarian ideals, they will develop internal hierarchies where a small group holds the decision-making power.

The reason? **Efficiency**. As organizations grow, they need **structure and leadership**, which naturally leads to concentration of power in the hands of a few. Over time, this creates an **oligarchy** (rule by a few) within organizations that are meant to serve the people.

### Real-life Example:

Think of **political parties**: though parties may begin with grassroots participation, over time, power

gets concentrated in the hands of a few leaders, making the decisions. This happens not just in politics but also in **corporate boardrooms**, **trade unions**, and even **NGOs**.

### Gaetano Mosca: The Ruling Class

**Gaetano Mosca** (1858–1941), another key theorist, extended this idea with his focus on **organisational capacity**.

- **Mosca's** insight was that **leadership** often comes from the **grassroots**, but only those with the right **organisational skills** rise to power.
- He argued that **elite control** is not just about wealth or intelligence, but the **ability to organize and manage power** effectively.

In his view, every society has a **ruling class** that **organizes** its power and keeps it from the rest of the population. Even in democracies, where **elections** are held and leaders come from the people, **elite control** remains strong.

#### Real-life Example:

Consider the role of **professional politicians**—they may come from working-class backgrounds, but through **party machines**, **fundraising**, and **media strategies**, they gain control over society's decision-making. This is true in both democratic and authoritarian systems.

### C. Wright Mills: The Power Elite

**C. Wright Mills** (1916–1962) was one of the most influential American sociologists, and in his book *The Power Elite*, he studied the **concentration of power** in America.

- Mills examined the **interlocking positions of power** held by **federal politicians**, **military officials**, and **corporate leaders**, arguing that these groups formed a “**power elite**”—a small group that holds the real power in society.

#### Real-life Example:

Mills famously used the **Hiroshima decision** (the bombing of Japan) as an example of elite power: the decision was made not by the masses or through democratic processes, but by a small, unelected group of **military leaders** and **politicians** in power.

In today's world, **billionaire business moguls** and **corporate CEOs** (like those in **big tech** or **media companies**) often work closely with politicians, shaping **policy** and **global narratives**, despite not being democratically elected.

### Why Does Elite Theory Matter Today?

Elite Theory offers a powerful lens for understanding the **structure** of power.

- It shows that even in **democracies**, **elite dominance** exists, whether it's in political parties, economic systems, or media institutions.
- It tells us that **true equality and democracy** are difficult to achieve when power is so concentrated in the hands of a few people or groups.

### The Essence

Elite theory is **not** about saying “there will always be elites,” but rather about helping us understand **how** and **why** power is concentrated, and **how** it circulates. From Pareto’s **circulation of elites**, to Michels’ **Iron Law of Oligarchy**, to Mills’ **power elite**, these thinkers show us that no matter how systems are designed, power inevitably gravitates toward a few.

This theory is **compelling** because it speaks to the hidden realities of how our world operates — how control shifts from **individual empowerment** to **elite domination** and how it shapes everything from **politics** to **economics** to **culture**.

## Pluralist Theory

**Pluralist theory** views power through a **group perspective**.

Pluralist Theory is all about **power not sitting in one chair**, but **spread across many tables** — the tables of **groups, associations, and pressure lobbies**.

Robert Dahl, in his famous work *Polyarchy*, takes direct aim at C. Wright Mills’ *Power Elite* idea. Mills says, “Look — Hiroshima, big military-industrial decisions — that’s elites pulling strings.” Dahl replies, “Hold on, those are rare exceptions. Day-to-day governance? That’s made by **associations of ordinary people, NGOs, unions, business groups, civic organisations**. Power isn’t locked in a vault; it’s **circulating among groups**.”

Dahl is also practical — he says **democracy** is the ideal, but what we actually get in real life is **polyarchy** — a system where **multiple groups** have influence, though not perfect equality.

But here comes the twist. **Modern “deformed” polyarchy** is like a democracy that’s been hacked — **corporate influence** starts tilting the playing field, which is exactly what Marxists warned about.

And if you go back to history, **Alexis de Tocqueville** gives a sharp insight: In **France**, before the Revolution, there were no strong **intermediary groups** between the people and the state. Result? Boom — Revolution. In contrast, the **US** had a thick web of civil society groups that acted as a **shock absorber** for democracy.

**Neo-pluralists** today say — yes, corporations dominate the **economy**, but they don’t have full grip over **politics**.

So, in short — pluralism paints a **more optimistic picture** than elite theory: it’s not one king or one boardroom ruling, but **many competing voices** keeping democracy alive... unless, of course, the corporates start singing the loudest song.

## Constructive View of Power

When most people hear the word **power**, their mind jumps to control, domination — the image of a ruler *over* subjects.

But here’s the shift — the **constructive view** asks us to stop thinking of power as “*power over*” and start seeing it as “*power to*”.

This is a transformation in mindset.

Instead of imagining power as a weapon in the hands of a few, think of it as a force that **empowers** the many.

It’s not about the king issuing orders; it’s about the community creating outcomes together.

**Hannah Arendt** captures it beautifully: Power belongs to the people, but only when they act in **concerted action**, in an **egalitarian public realm**.



This means power isn't some permanent possession — it exists only so long as people stand together for a shared purpose.

Now contrast that with **violence**. Violence is not the same as power. It's coercive, it's rooted in the **ruling class** and the **state**, and it forces compliance through fear, not agreement.

Then there's **authority** — this is different again. Authority is when a command–obedience relationship is **legitimate** because it is accepted by both sides.

**C.B. Macpherson** gives us two clear forms:

- **Developmental power** — power that develops human capacities, helping people grow and contribute.
- **Extractive power** — power that pulls out resources and energy for the benefit of the ruling elite.

And in our own history, **Mahatma Gandhi's Swaraj** stands as the perfect embodiment of *power to* the people. Gandhi wasn't fighting just to replace British rulers with Indian ones — he was fighting for a moral, participatory system where ordinary citizens were the true centre of governance.

This is why the constructive view is revolutionary — it's not simply about *who* holds power, but about *how* that power is used, and whether it **enables or enslaves**.

## Postmodernist View

When **Michel Foucault** walked into the debate on power, he did something radical — he turned our gaze **away from big, visible institutions** like the parliament or the military, and instead zoomed in on the everyday **fabric of society**.

He wasn't interested in just who sat in the palace — he wanted to know **how power flows through streets, classrooms, hospitals, and even our own minds**.

This is why we call it a **micro view** of power. Power isn't one-dimensional or just repressive — it's **multidimensional** and, surprisingly, **productive**. It doesn't just crush; it shapes.

In works like *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault makes a startling claim: **We are not just subject to power — we are also vehicles of it**. We both exercise it and carry it forward.

Now, in the **ancient world**, power was raw and coercive — think public executions, whips, and kings who could decide life and death in an instant.

But in the **modern world**, power operates in a more subtle way — through institutions like **prisons, schools, and asylums**.

He calls this **disciplinary power** — power that works by training, regulating, and normalising behaviour without necessarily lifting a sword.

Then comes **biopower** — this is about shaping not just behaviour but **bodies and minds**. It's the health campaigns that decide how we live, the beauty standards that dictate how we see ourselves, and the fitness regimes that silently set the “right” way to be.

Foucault's most famous metaphor for this is the **Panopticon** — a prison design where inmates can't see the guard, but know they *might* be watched at any moment.

The genius — or danger — here is that people begin to **self-discipline**. The watchtower doesn't need to act; the fear of surveillance is enough to keep order.

Finally, Foucault gives us **governmentality** — the art of governing not just through laws, but through **homogenisation, discipline, and discourse**. This is when states manage populations by shaping what is considered “normal” and acceptable, so people willingly follow the rules without force.

So in the postmodern view, **power is everywhere** — not because there’s one person controlling all of it, but because it’s woven into the very ways we live, think, and interact.

## Legitimacy

**Legitimacy** — this is not just some cold political term.

It’s the *heartbeat* of authority. Power alone can make you obey, but legitimacy makes you *want* to obey. That’s why we say:

**Authority = Power + Legitimacy.**

Rousseau was crystal clear — even the strongest man cannot rule forever by brute force; he needs *right*, not just might. That’s the difference between a tyrant and a respected leader.

Max Weber, in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, made a subtle but powerful point — legitimate power is deeply tied to social change. He saw the rise of the middle class, discipline, and a work ethic shaping modern capitalism. And unlike Marx’s single-track economic explanation, Weber gave us **three ideal types of authority**:

- **Traditional** — rooted in customs and heritage (think monarchies).
- **Rational-legal** — based on rules and law (modern bureaucracies).
- **Charismatic** — built on a leader’s personal magnetism.

How do you know legitimacy exists? Look for *signs*: peaceful law and order, people paying taxes willingly, citizens respecting national symbols, celebrating festivals with pride.

How do you *maintain* it? Through rights, a free press, an independent judiciary, fair elections, and welfare that shows the state cares.

But Habermas gave us a warning — the *legitimation crisis*. In welfare states, political promises raise people’s expectations, but economic capitalism pulls back welfare spending. That tension? It can spill into protests and distrust.

**Hegemony** — here, we shift gears from *consent* to *control of the mind*.

T.H. Green believed state authority must rest on the *will* of the people, not the *fear* of them.

Gramsci took this further — **hegemony** is the art of ruling without always using the stick. How? By controlling not just the state’s **political society** (its coercive apparatus — police, army, law), but also **civil society** (schools, churches, media) — the places where people’s worldviews are shaped.

Althusser sharpened this: the state works through **ideological state apparatuses** (family, media, education — where values are planted) and **repressive state apparatuses** (police, military — where force is applied). Through **interpellation**, we don’t just follow the ideology — we *become* the subjects it imagines. We internalise it, and think it’s our own free choice.



**In short:**

- Legitimacy is about *winning hearts for your power*.
- Hegemony is about *shaping those hearts so they beat in rhythm with your power*.

**PYQ**

1. Explain the relationship between power, authority and legitimacy. 15, 2018
2. Distinguish between Power and Authority. 15, 2015
3. Examine the conditions that are required for the maintenance of legitimacy in modern societies. 15, 2014
4. Examine the conditions that are required for the maintenance of legitimacy in modern societies. 30, 2011
5. Comment on: "Power flows throughout the system like blood in the capillaries of our body." (Foucault). 20, 2010
6. Comment on: Robert Dahls's concept of deformed polyarchy. 20, 2010
7. Comment on: Politics as a power concept. 20, 2008
8. Comment on: In so far as national events are decided, the power elite are those who decide them (C Wright Mills). 20, 2002
9. Comment on: Constitution as a power map. 20, 2001



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