

Concept of Power & Ideology

1. Introduction

The **concept of power** stands at the heart of political science and international relations. It is not merely about who rules, but about how rule is established, maintained, justified, and even challenged. Power is multifaceted—it encompasses **authority, influence, domination, coercion, consent, legitimacy**, and more subtly, the capacity to shape how people think, what they accept as normal, and what they resist or never imagine.

From **Max Weber's typology of authority** to **Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony**, from the materialist lens of **realism** to the discursive focus of **critical theory**, thinkers across the spectrum have emphasized that **understanding power is essential to understanding politics**—whether within the state or across the global system. It explains not only state behavior, but also the nature of compliance and resistance, of legitimacy and dissent, and of ideological control and contestation.

In today's **fragmented world order**, where the liberal hegemony is contested, where international institutions face crises of credibility, and where new power centres emerge with distinct ideological projects, the study of **power in all its dimensions—hegemony, ideology, and legitimacy—becomes indispensable**. These dimensions do not operate in isolation. Rather, they reinforce and reconfigure each other in ways that shape both domestic governance and global geopolitics.

2. What Is Power?

At its core, **power** refers to the **capacity of an individual, group, institution, or state to shape the behavior, choices, or actions of others** in accordance with its own preferences.

While traditional views often associated power with **coercion**—the ability to compel through force or threat—modern political theory acknowledges that **power also resides in more subtle forms**, such as **persuasion, cultural influence, institutional authority, and the control of information**.

In both domestic and international politics, **power operates through an intricate blend of material resources, normative influence, and symbolic authority.** For example, a nation's military might (hard power) is only part of the equation; its cultural exports, ideological leadership, and perceived legitimacy (soft power) often play a larger role in shaping global behavior.

Harold Lasswell famously defined politics as “who gets what, when, and how,” emphasizing **resource allocation and decision-making** as central to political life.

Hans Morgenthau, one of the key thinkers in classical realism, argued that international politics is governed by the pursuit of **national interest defined in terms of power**, making power the **currency of statecraft.**

Contemporary debates have only deepened this understanding, with scholars noting that power is not just about domination, but about **setting the agenda**, shaping discourse, and **legitimizing certain actions while delegitimizing others.**

2.1 Weber's Typology of Authority

The German sociologist **Max Weber** provided one of the most influential classifications of power in political and sociological thought. He distinguished **three “ideal types” of authority**, each representing a distinct way in which power is legitimized:

Traditional Authority

Traditional authority is grounded in **custom, age-old practices, and inherited status.** Power is exercised not because it is codified in law, but because it has always been so. Monarchies, feudal systems, and tribal leaderships often function under this model.

In such societies, obedience is owed to the person occupying a traditionally sanctioned position—such as a king, village elder, or religious leader. Even today, **the British monarchy** retains symbolic power based on tradition, though its political authority has waned.

Charismatic Authority

Charismatic authority arises from the **personal appeal, extraordinary qualities, or visionary leadership of an individual**. Such figures command obedience through emotional bonds rather than institutional legitimacy. Examples include **Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., or Nelson Mandela**, whose authority stemmed not from legal office but from their moral stature and ability to mobilize masses.

In contemporary times, leaders like **Volodymyr Zelenskyy** have cultivated charisma through crisis leadership and communication prowess, gaining both domestic and international moral authority.

However, Weber also cautioned that charismatic authority is inherently unstable—it must either **routinize** into bureaucratic forms or fade with the leader’s departure.

Legal-Rational Authority

This form of authority rests on **formal rules, laws, and procedures**. Power is exercised not by individuals based on personal merit or tradition, but by **offices or roles embedded within institutions**. Bureaucracies, parliaments, and legal systems embody this kind of authority.

Modern democratic states are structured predominantly on legal-rational foundations, where legitimacy comes from **rule-based governance** and adherence to constitutional norms.

Weber emphasized that **legitimacy**—the belief among the governed that the authority of their rulers is rightful—is what **transforms raw power into enduring authority**. Without legitimacy, even the most powerful regimes may face instability, resistance, or collapse.

2.2 Sources of Power

Power is not monolithic; it can emanate from multiple sources. Understanding these **sources** is essential for analyzing both formal and informal power structures across political systems, institutions, and interpersonal relations. Social psychologists and political theorists have outlined various **typologies of power**, among which the **following six are particularly significant**:

1. Legitimate Power

Legitimate power is derived from a formal position or role within an established hierarchy. This includes political leaders, civil servants, judges, and military officers. The authority of an **election commissioner** or a **Supreme Court judge** in India, for instance, rests on legitimate power. It is sustainable as long as the **legal and constitutional framework** is respected by both the ruler and the ruled.

In international relations, **UN agencies**, though lacking coercive force, often operate with legitimate authority because of multilateral consent and legal charter.

2. Coercive Power

This refers to the **capacity to compel behavior through threats, punishment, or force**. It is the most overt and often the most short-lived form of power.

Authoritarian regimes and military dictatorships rely heavily on coercive power. So do global actors—**NATO's interventions**, or sanctions imposed by **the United States on Iran or Russia**, are examples of coercive power used in foreign policy.

However, coercion without legitimacy or ideological justification often results in resistance, insurgency, or collapse—highlighting its limits.

3. Reward Power

Reward power stems from the ability to provide **material or symbolic benefits**. In political settings, this could mean distributing cabinet positions, granting government contracts, or offering subsidies and welfare schemes. For instance, political parties in India or the US often use patronage networks to consolidate support. On the global stage, institutions like the **World Bank** use financial incentives and aid to influence policy decisions in developing countries.

Reward power is often combined with coercion to create complex systems of control.

4. Expert Power

This form of power comes from **specialized knowledge, skill, or competence**. In modern technocratic governance, bureaucrats, scientists, and professionals often wield considerable expert power. During the **COVID-19 pandemic**, epidemiologists and public health experts shaped global policy decisions despite not holding formal political office.

States and international bodies often rely on **technical expertise** to gain legitimacy and navigate complex challenges—such as climate change, nuclear regulation, or digital governance.

5. Referent Power

Referent power is derived from **admiration, identification, or emotional connection** with a leader or group. It is similar to charisma but more diffuse. Celebrities, activists, and even nations may enjoy referent power. For example, **Finland's reputation for education excellence** or **New Zealand's leadership during the pandemic** created positive associations that influenced other countries' policies.

Referent power is essential in cultural diplomacy, soft power projection, and public diplomacy.

6. Informational Power

This form of power is rooted in the **control over information, narrative framing, and agenda-setting**. It is especially critical in the digital age, where perception often shapes reality. Media houses, think tanks, social media influencers, and intelligence agencies all exercise informational power.

The **2020 US Presidential Election, Russia-Ukraine information war**, and India's ongoing battle against misinformation illustrate how **narrative warfare** and **disinformation campaigns** are central to political contestation today.

3. Ideology and Power

Ideology refers to a **systematic set of beliefs, values, and ideas** that explain how society should be organized, how authority should be exercised, and how individuals and groups relate to one another.

In the realm of political power, ideology plays a **dual role**:

- It **sustains existing power structures** by legitimizing the dominance of ruling groups or institutions.

- Simultaneously, it is **shaped and disseminated by those in power** to ensure compliance and prevent resistance.

In essence, ideology acts as both **a tool of governance** and **a terrain of contestation**.

3.1 Ideology as a tool of Social Control

In every political system, ideology serves to make power appear **natural, inevitable, and just**. The dominant ideology of any society—be it liberalism, conservatism, socialism, religious traditionalism, or nationalism—**frames the worldview of the ruling class** and **conditions public expectations**. This ideology is then internalized by the majority, thereby **masking inequalities and reinforcing consent**.

The Marxist View: Ideology as False Consciousness

In classical Marxist thought, ideology represents the **false consciousness** imposed by the ruling class to justify their economic and political dominance. The **bourgeoisie**, who control the means of production, also control the ideological apparatus—education, media, religion, and law—which ensures that the **working class sees their subordination as natural**. Thus, capitalism is sustained not just by economic coercion but by **ideological manipulation**.

For example, ideas like **individual merit, market efficiency, or trickle-down prosperity** are not politically neutral—they serve to justify existing inequalities by framing them as the result of natural differences rather than structural exploitation.

Gramsci's Hegemony: Consent Through Ideology

Italian Marxist **Antonio Gramsci** took this further by arguing that **hegemony** is achieved not simply through coercion, but through the ability of the ruling class to **manufacture consent** by making their worldview **appear universal and commonsensical**. Through institutions like schools, media, and religious organizations, the ruling ideology becomes deeply embedded in everyday life.

In this sense, **ideology becomes invisible**—its greatest power lies in its normalization. People come to accept the status quo not because they are forced to, but because they believe it is right or natural.

Contemporary Example: Global Capitalism and Consumerism

The ideology of global capitalism promotes values such as **competition, consumer choice, innovation, and individual success**, which have become normalized across societies. Transnational corporations, media conglomerates, and tech platforms reinforce this ideology, shaping aspirations and behavior across national boundaries. For instance, **the gig economy** is framed as freedom and flexibility rather than precarious labor, thereby obscuring the power imbalances it produces.

3.2 Ideology and the State

The **modern state** often presents itself as ideologically neutral, especially in liberal democracies. However, it is deeply ideological in the way it **prioritizes certain values over others**—for example, national security over privacy, economic growth over environmental protection, or unity over diversity.

Policy and Ideology

Public policies are rarely technical or neutral; they are expressions of ideological preferences. A government that subsidizes fossil fuels over renewable energy reveals an ideological tilt toward industrial capitalism rather than ecological sustainability. Similarly, laws on **citizenship, language, dress, or food** often reflect the **cultural and religious ideologies** of dominant political coalitions.

In countries like **India**, ideological tensions play out in debates over secularism, caste-based reservations, nationalism, and minority rights. Each political party attempts to **redefine the ideological core of the nation** to suit its vision of power.

3.3 Ideology and International Organizations (IOs)

In global politics, **international organizations** (such as the **United Nations, World Health Organization, World Bank, or IMF**) are not just technical bodies—they are also **ideological actors**. Their perceived legitimacy depends heavily on the **alignment between their normative positions and the ideologies of member states or populations**.

Public Perception and Ideological Filters

Recent research underscores that citizens evaluate the legitimacy of IOs based on how closely these institutions reflect their **own ideological leanings**. For instance:

- A **liberal** citizen may trust the **UN Human Rights Council** more if it promotes gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights.
- A **conservative** may view the same organization with suspicion, perceiving it as ideologically biased.

This ideological lens influences **state behavior** too. Governments withdraw from or defund institutions they see as ideologically misaligned. For example, the **United States' withdrawal from the WHO** during the Trump administration reflected ideological disagreements over the organization's handling of the pandemic and its perceived favorability toward China.

Contestation of IOs' Ideological Profiles

International organizations increasingly face **contestation over their normative orientations**:

- **IMF loan conditions** are criticized for imposing a **neoliberal ideology** that promotes austerity, deregulation, and privatization, often hurting the poor.
- **WTO rules** are seen as favoring **global North economies**, embedding a capitalist worldview that ignores developmental justice.
- Climate institutions are accused of **pushing green conditionalities** on Global South countries without recognizing their historical energy deprivation.

In response, rising powers like **China, India, Brazil, and South Africa** seek to reshape these institutions or create alternatives (like **BRICS Bank**) that **better reflect their ideological priorities**.

3.4 Digital Media, Ideology, and Power

In the **digital age**, ideology spreads not only through state institutions but also through **algorithmic platforms**, influencers, and AI-generated content. These platforms **curate ideological ecosystems**, often reinforcing **confirmation bias** and radicalizing public opinion.

Ideological Polarization

Across democracies, ideological polarization has deepened due to **filter bubbles**, where **individuals are exposed only to views that align with their existing beliefs**. This has major implications for political legitimacy, electoral behavior, and the erosion of **shared truth**.

Fake news, ideological echo chambers, and viral propaganda are not just communication issues—they are **new forms of ideological warfare**, altering how power is maintained or contested.